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# "You Ain't Got No Blueprint on It": How Discovery Channel's Moonshiners Re-Presents and Revises Southern Appalachian Cultural Memory

Kelly Vines

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“YOU AIN’T GOT NO BLUEPRINT ON IT”:  
HOW DISCOVERY CHANNEL’S *MOONSHINERS* RE-PRESENTS AND REVISES  
SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN CULTURAL MEMORY

by

KELLY VINES

Under the Direction of Dr. Gina Caison

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how performers on the television show *Moonshiners* challenge essentialist characterizations of the Appalachian South as a counterpoint to American nationalism. While many may believe that *Moonshiners*’ producers merely exploit regional identity to attract audiences, the performers claim a southern Appalachian heritage while redefining what it means to be a southern Appalachian person in the present moment. Furthermore, while the show relies on an imagined past South to create a genealogy that renders performers the authentic inheritors of moonshining’s cultural history, performers present a modern-day Appalachian South that participates in the national economy. Ultimately, my thesis explores how characters on the show use reality television to revise their audiences’ understanding of southern Appalachian people as “pre- or anti-modern,” encouraging audiences to recognize that while southern Appalachians still revere their cultural history, they adapt that cultural history to each new context.

INDEX WORDS: American Studies, Southern studies, Cultural studies, Performance studies, Reality television, Appalachian studies, Discovery Channel, *Moonshiners*, moonshine

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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## **Dedication**

To my partner, William Burhenn, who introduced me to the show and patiently listened to me as I talked endlessly about this project; thank you for all of your love and support. To Douglas Vines, my grandfather, whose generosity was only surpassed by his profound love: “and whatever is done / by only me is your doing.” To my family: Becky Vines, James Fee, Casey Vines, Tyler Fee, Georgia Vines, and Scott Watkins, and all of the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends who have helped me grow. This project is also dedicated to everyone who has shared their stories with me. This thesis was shaped by many more hands than my own.

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## 1 Introduction

Premiering in 2011 on the Discovery Channel, *Moonshiners* follows contemporary southern Appalachian moonshiners as they set up their equipment, procure ingredients, brew, and sell moonshine. While the show might seem like another trivial reality television show, my thesis argues that reality television—and *Moonshiners* in particular—serves an important cultural function. The show celebrates Appalachia (and the U.S. South by extension) as an anti-authoritarian region—a position demonstrated through the subversive act of moonshine production. However, by featuring one of the main characters “going legal,” *Moonshiners* also challenges the essentialist stereotypes about southern Appalachian people and the region’s unofficial economies. While the show’s subjects depend on representations of stereotypical moonshiners for authenticity (and, occasionally reinforce those stereotypes with their actions), they also challenge existing stereotypes about southern Appalachians in general, and moonshiners in particular. By performing in front of television cameras, the moonshiners on the show also redefine the act of moonshining.

*Moonshiners*, then, imagines and re-presents signs of a past South in order to modify those signs. When moonshiners create liquor in the daylight, literally speaking, that liquor cannot be moonshine. Legally produced moonshine challenges the very definition of moonshine as “smuggled or illicitly produced alcoholic liquor,” (OED) but the product still signifies the countercultural economic system that historically produced it. My thesis investigates how the television show, by depicting “legal moonshine,” both upholds and challenges an essentialist notion of Appalachia as a counterpoint to American nationalism—“a land ‘in but not of’ America, an ‘internal other,’ dependent on the patriarchal rescuing of the federal state [...] a place that is lawless, backward, and somehow pre- or anti-modern” (Peine and Schafft). I

investigate how *Moonshiners* relies on the signs of an imagined past South, but presents a contemporary South that embraces modernity. While the show may depict present-day southern Appalachians who are characterized by their obsession with heritage and who obsessively re-perform inherited identity<sup>1</sup>, the show's performers often challenge essentialist characterizations. Ultimately, the show envisions present-day Appalachia as a place where heritage is important, but not a place where global issues are irrelevant. The ability of reality television stars to challenge long-held beliefs about southern Appalachian people and their unofficial economies demonstrates the capability of popular television to modify public perceptions of regional identities.

While contemporary scholars have recently reimagined what might constitute a canon of southern literature, few have turned a critical eye toward newer forms of media. Because the production of *Moonshiners* involves “authentic” southern Appalachian men engaging in a cultural ritual while simultaneously producing new products to sell in different venues, my thesis embraces interdisciplinary methods. My thesis incorporates many interdisciplinary studies to thoroughly analyze how the producers of *Moonshiners* interpolate history, economics, and culture, and what that interpolation might mean to contemporary audiences. By studying *Moonshiners* as a southern text, my thesis investigates how popular television shows featuring distinctly southern subjects might challenge established essentialist notions about the U.S. South. Theodor Adorno, and, more recently, Jon Smith and Donald Pease, outline the type of cultural study that this thesis undertakes. Adorno and his contemporaries explore how a subversive movement loses authenticity after becoming mainstream. Pease examines the ideological and

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<sup>1</sup> By “inherited identity,” I am referring to the set of behavioral characteristics and customs that have been “passed down” or learned from previous generations. The term is related to Richard Schechner’s “twice-behaved behavior,” (36) and Diana Taylor’s performances that “function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (2).

cultural shifts that contributed to contemporary U.S. national identity. Smith investigates how contemporary southern realities challenge antiquated fantasies of the South as a pre-modern utopia. Through analyzing new representations of cultural identities (such as the ones rendered in reality television), scholars might better understand how popular artistic products facilitate a dialogue between its subjects and its audiences that can shape southern identities.

In terms of cultural studies, this project has numerous antecedents. For instance, Tara McPherson's *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Karen Cox's *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*, and the essays collected in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* examine the impact of popular culture representations of the South and southerners on the perception of southerners inside and outside of the South. Scott Romine's books, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* and *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, along with his essays examining the narrative nature of southern identity add to the current conversation analyzing the South from a cultural studies perspective. Essays by Barbara Ladd, Jon Smith, and Scott Romine, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith and published in *South to a New Place: Religion, Literature, Culture*, examine the complexities of developing a southern identity in a postmodern society. These texts underlie my analysis of *Moonshiners*, and my thesis expands their work by combining the sociological impact of the South in popular culture with a closer examination of the interaction between cultural reproduction and economic activity as it applies to moonshining.

Many scholars have contributed to current discourse analyzing economics in the South, specifically investigating the impact of globalization on southern culture. *Globalization and the American South*, edited by James Cobb and William Stueck, features essays by scholars who

investigate the impact of globalization on the South's economic systems. Wilma Dunaway analyzes southern economics from a historical perspective, challenging the notion that the South adopted capitalism fairly recently. Instead, she argues that capitalism was a prevalent system in the South earlier than previously recognized. *The American South in a Global World*, edited by James Peacock and Carrie Matthews, presents several essays exploring the many complicated effects of globalization on the South. James Peacock's book, *Grounded Globalism*, builds on prior economic analyses of the South by explaining how many southern companies have successfully grown into large international corporations and analyzing the regional and international effects of that growth. Melanie Benson Taylor's book, *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912-2002*, combines literary studies with economic analysis by examining references to economics in southern literature. Taylor's titular "calculations" are disturbing because, in colonialism and capitalism, the identity of many southerners depends greatly on their economic status. Taken together, these articles and books provide valuable information about economics in the U.S. South and facilitate my understanding of moonshining as a distinctly southern economic activity. My thesis expands existing southern economic analyses to understand the ramifications of legally produced and widely distributed moonshine.

Studying moonshiners necessitates understanding the heritage of moonshining, or the history that gave rise to modern-day moonshine production. Wilbur R. Miller integrates an understanding of economics in the U.S. South with a study of moonshining in the region, and investigates how economic circumstances necessitated side-stepping legal code. His analysis combined with Emelie K. Peine and Kai A. Schafft's article, "Moonshine, Mountaineers, and Modernity: Distilling Cultural History in the Southern Appalachian Mountains," follows the

history of moonshining, tracing its subversive ideology from its roots in Scotland through the current iteration of the process in the U.S. South. These texts discuss the political contexts of historical moonshiners, demonstrating that moonshining was an expression of individualism that worked to undermine the authority of collective governments and legal systems. Understanding moonshining's history allows me to understand how the process changed over time and how historical changes gave rise to the practice of moonshining in the U.S. South today.

Although reality television is a fairly new genre, a few scholars have investigated the nuances of the category. Studying *Moonshiners* as a text necessitates understanding the nature of reality television. Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs's article, "Reality Television and Class," relates economics and class to reality television. Their analysis explores the demographics of people who watch reality television and will help me understand the show's cultural impact. Wood and Skeggs's research allows me to understand how audiences perceive reality television and process cultural information presented therein. Other important texts reflecting on the cultural impact of reality television include Jennifer L. Pozner's *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Trough about Guilty Pleasure TV* and Michael Essany's *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV*. Laurie Ouellette and James Hay's assertion that reality television functions as a purveyor of cultural knowledge where audiences can participate in and not merely consume television productions is central to my argument and enables me to perform an analysis of the way that reality television, and *Moonshiners* in particular, can affect social change (224). Amir Hetsroni's edited collection, *Reality Television: Merging the Global and the Local* includes several essays by cultural critics who examine the impact of reality television on many different societies. Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender's edited collection, *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives* also includes the perspectives of many

cultural critics who examine global and local effects of reality television. Together, these texts provide a myriad of scholarly perspectives on the significance of reality television in contemporary culture.

While ultimately a cultural studies project, my thesis combines theoretical frameworks from many different critical schools. Initially, my thesis historicizes the act of moonshining, investigating the historical precedent for contemporary moonshiners depicted on the show. Then, I explore the show applying theoretical frameworks from Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Guy Debord to demonstrate how moonshiners in the show re-present subversive signs out of context to help the performers remember old boundaries and claim an exceptionalism due to their geography. Marxist cultural critics provide a rich vocabulary for differentiating the signifier from the process of moonshining. By using key ideas from the above critics, I will demonstrate how *Moonshiners* challenges the subversive ideology associated with moonshining, and imbues the word with new meaning.

After investigating the representational meaning of moonshining, I analyze the performers' actions in conjunction with Diana Taylor's performance theory to explore how the show's performers challenge popular misconceptions about southern Appalachian people while also creating an archive that documents moonshining in the region. I combine Taylor's work with traditional economic analysis to explore how the show confronts the long-held consensus that the Appalachian South is an impoverished economic wasteland by following southern Appalachian entrepreneurs who engage in culturally significant economic activities. The show also repudiates the historical narrative that casts the southern Appalachian moonshiner as someone who *sets out* to break the law by detailing the extensive barriers to entry that keep southern moonshiners out of the official economy.

For example, in season two, Tim Smith, one of the show's main characters, decides to "go legal." He travels out of his native city and becomes an ambassador for moonshining by introducing the practice into a legally-sanctioned economy. When Tim "goes legal," he takes the cultural memory of moonshining with him, and leverages his heritage as a marketing point to sell his legally produced liquor. In addition to Tim's "going legal" story arc, all of the characters in *Moonshiners* produce a perfectly legal show and not a barrel of illegal liquor. Because they are not participating in an illegal activity, their actions lack the subversive agenda that characterized the actions of their fathers and grandfathers. As my thesis will demonstrate, these and other elements of the show alter the political meaning of moonshining and challenge established essentialist notions about what it means to be a southern Appalachian person.

By combining Marxist criticism with performance studies, I analyze how performers on the show embody and transmit cultural memory. Because the performers on the show do not produce illegal liquor and do not risk imprisonment, they lack the subversive political agenda of their forefathers. The circumstances surrounding the moonshiners' performances has changed. *Moonshiners* depicts what Frederic Jameson deems "pastiche" or "the imitation of a peculiar or unique idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. [...] But it is the neutral practice of such mimicry, without [...] ulterior motives" (17). In other words, without the "ulterior" or subversive motives that historically framed moonshining, the practice becomes pastiche. *Moonshiners* continually re-presents the subversive actions of historical moonshiners, but because performers on the show do not create potable liquor, they only reenact the process without successfully recreating the political environment that originally surrounded it. However, while Jameson views pastiche negatively, my thesis explores how representations that may be viewed as pastiche can allow performers to revise popular stereotypes about regional

identities. Taylor's work, then, allows me to analyze the show as a new and augmented performance of embodied cultural memory. Specifically, Taylor's understanding of the archive and the repertoire as two distinct forms of preserving cultural memory and passing it down to future generations allows me to understand the show's rhetorical position as a formative archive, recording the repertoire of significant moonshiners to preserve the history of the cultural practice. *Moonshiners* casts its performers as patriotic, individualistic, community-oriented, and rugged by creating an archetype of the ideal southern Appalachian moonshiner and providing a space for the performers to demonstrate those ideals. The show frequently references heritage to create a sense of legitimacy or authenticity in the show, and provides images of featured moonshiners demonstrating southern Appalachian ideals. These performances allow native southern Appalachian performers to claim an authentic identity derived from their moonshining ancestors. Then, the moonshiners can work to challenge existing stereotypes about southern Appalachian people by performing the identity differently on film.

To provide a context for my analysis, I begin by outlining the history of moonshining in Appalachia. I analyze the historical elements that led to the popularity of moonshining in the region, which include anti-establishment settler attitudes, geographic isolation, and a lack of economic opportunities. This brief overview of moonshining's history provides context for analyzing moments in which the television show references the heritage of the show's performers to demonstrate their legitimacy or authenticity. Allusions to the age-old art of crafting moonshine in Appalachia on *Moonshiners* indicate that the performers both represent and embody the cultural memory of their ancestors.

After providing a brief cultural history of moonshining, I use Marxist criticism to explore the show, examining how the performance of moonshining has changed due to the change in



context. Then, I examine how the show creates an archetype of the ideal southern Appalachian moonshiner by depicting characters outside of the still-site. By featuring scenes of a moonshiner, Mark, walking alone in the woods, firing his gun, and lying on his belly to drink from a creek, the editors of the show present the ideal moonshiner as a rugged outdoorsman. Similarly, the show's creators demonstrate the ideal moonshiner's community-mindedness by sharing that moonshiner Tim serves as the volunteer fire chief for Climax, Virginia and occasionally must leave his still-site to answer an emergency call. Scenes such as these clearly establish the exceptional qualities of the average moonshiner. These scenes establish the moonshiner archetype and attempt to prove that the show's characters represent the average moonshiner.

In the same chapter, I then analyze how the show's characters, after establishing their authenticity, challenge an essentialist notion of Appalachia as a counterpoint to America. In this chapter, I examine aspects of the show that challenge commonly held beliefs about moonshiners and revise moonshining's representational attributes. Dwight B. Billings's work proves particularly helpful for this section. *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* written by Billings and Kathleen M. Blee, along with *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, edited by Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, are key texts in which Appalachian scholars discuss and respond to negative stereotypes of Appalachian people. The third chapter of my thesis combines these works with Taylor's performance theory to demonstrate how the show's performers re-contextualize moonshining in the twenty-first century.

Throughout this thesis, I examine how moonshining, as a representative act for southern Appalachian people, becomes redefined when the context of the performance changes. Specifically, moonshine's movement into the official economy via the show and Tim's legal

product, allows me to examine the value of moonshine that derives from its cultural history. By referring to his legal product as “moonshine,” Tim hopes to evoke a nostalgia for a past South in the minds of investors and future imbibers, despite the fact that the product cannot be “moonshine” because it is legally produced. The category of moonshine becomes an empty signifier of a subversive ideology that its legalization eradicates. My thesis explores how the show revises the signifier of moonshining, demonstrating how the South has evolved and challenging stereotypes about the region and its economy.

When performers from the region imagine and re-present signs of a past South, they still claim the heritage that produced them and perpetuate the region’s claim to exceptionalism through their performances. Those who believe that *Moonshiners*’ producers merely exploit regional identity to attract viewers might view the show negatively. However, performers themselves, specifically Tim Smith, a native of Virginia, can claim a southern heritage while redefining what it means to be a southern Appalachian person in the present moment. Through performing the act of moonshining and using his heritage to sell a product, Tim further challenges the essentialist notion of Appalachia as a counterpoint to America by demonstrating his entrepreneurial acumen. While relying on an imagined past South to make his point, he presents a modern-day South that embraces modernity and participates in (or, at least, wants to participate in) legally-sanctioned economic activities. Ultimately, my thesis explores how characters on the show use reality television to revise their audiences’ understanding of southern Appalachian people as “pre- or anti-modern,” encouraging audiences to recognize that while southern Appalachians still revere their cultural history, that cultural history changes with each new context.

## 2 A Brief History of Moonshining in Appalachia

Studying *Moonshiners* necessitates understanding the heritage of moonshining or the history that gave rise to modern-day moonshine production. Performers in *Moonshiners* claim a legitimacy based on the historical presence of their ancestors. Performers in the show often openly discuss how their fathers and grandfathers taught them how to build a still, mix the ingredients and ferment the mash. Many historians view moonshining as an expression of individualism that worked to undermine the authority of collective governments and legal systems. Understanding the history of moonshining will allow us to understand how the process changed over time into the practice of moonshining in Appalachia today. Understanding the history of moonshining and poverty in Appalachia contextualizes the show's many references to heritage and history.

Until recently, the South's participation in a "globalized" world meant, for many southerners, exploitation from business savvy outsiders. While skepticism about the intentions of outsiders has contributed to poverty in the South, southerners have legitimate reasons for choosing to isolate themselves that are often forgotten or deliberately left out of popular narratives about the region. The archetypal moonshiner, who only sells the liquor produced in his secret distillery with "insiders" to avoid arrest and who not only evades taxes but questions the authority of the federal government to levy them has become an emblem of southern backwardness and isolation. However, understanding the poverty that drove many moonshiners to their stills, the exploitation that many moonshiners experienced firsthand, and the empty promises made by many philanthropists and politicians to help southern people allows us to rethink southern "backwardness" and recognize that, when the choices are isolation or exploitation, perhaps isolation is the best decision. In this chapter, I will explore the political and

economic history of southern Appalachia, investigating the varied reasons that many poor southern Appalachian farmers decided to pursue moonshining, and challenging the region's characterization as backward or anti-modern.

The many conflicts between revenuers and moonshiners has contributed to southern Appalachia's reputation as an anti-authoritarian and "backward" region. Moonshining is, by its very definition the illegal production of liquor. The manufacture of liquor is not, by itself, illegal. However, when manufacturers refuse to pay taxes on the liquor that they manufacture and sell, they commit tax evasion. As Emelie K. Peine and Kai A. Schafft argue via Carson and Massey, "Moonshiners' resistance to the federal whiskey tax and their persistence in the face of persecution, imprisonment, and significant risk of physical harm has contributed to the image of Appalachia as a strange, wild place of gun-toting, cousin-slaying, cock-fighting, impoverished white men and their largely invisible and burdened (or, alternately, hyper-sexualized) wives" (94). Skirmishes between revenuers and moonshiners made both occupations rather dangerous, but the ideological significance of tax-collection to the government's legitimacy and the extreme poverty that drove many moonshiners to their stills sustained the perpetual war. As Wilbur R. Miller explains, "If a government is to be effective, able to extend its authority throughout its territory, then it must efficiently collect its taxes" (5). He continues by stating that "one person's resistance to taxation is a test of national authority that must be contained before it encourages other people to believe they can also get away with evasion" (5). Moonshining is, politically, an anti-authoritarian activity because the tax evasion committed by moonshiners challenges the authority of the national government to collect taxes. Economic and political factors keep the moonshiner in perpetual conflict with the revenuer, and the violence caused by those conflicts contributes to the "image of Appalachia as a strange, wild place."

Miller begins his book by providing a brief history of excise taxes in the United States. He begins by discussing the Whiskey Rebellion, the widespread 1794 revolt prompted by the levying of an excise tax in 1791 and resulting in a temporary repeal of the excise tax (5). According to Miller, the government levied temporary “war” taxes on liquor and other products during War of 1812 and the Civil War, many of which were repealed after the war, but “those on liquor and tobacco have remained to this day” (5). Many Appalachian people believed that excise taxes on liquor and tobacco unfairly targeted them, with many petitioners arguing that “such an internal tax posed a threat to liberty and to their local economies” (Slaughter 109). Despite a lack of popularity among moonshiners and farmers, the excise taxes persisted because those who made moonshine were never able to organize effectively to bring about political change (i.e. abolishing the whiskey tax) after the Whiskey Rebellion.

While Miller traces the conflict between moonshiners and government representatives back to the whiskey rebellion in 1794, Peine and Schafft assert that moonshining began long before the United States gained independence. The two argue that Appalachian moonshiners inherited their techniques and their anti-authoritarian views from their Scottish highland ancestors: “the relationship of moonshiners to the federal state and the role of that relationship in the construction of the Appalachian ideal can be traced back as far as the *usquebaugh* (spirits distilled from grain) of the Scottish highlands” (96). Whiskey “became synonymous with individual freedom and autonomy from the authority of the state” when distillers in Scotland started to sell their liquor on the black market after the English Parliament instituted an excise tax in the 1610s (Peine and Schafft 96-97). Due to “repressive trade laws, spiking land costs, and agricultural failures,” “Ulstermen,” or Scotch-Irish moonshiners, immigrated en masse to the North American continent in the early 1700s, eventually making their way into eastern

Tennessee and western North Carolina. According to Peine and Schafft, individual states (namely, Pennsylvania) eventually began to charge settlers rent in order to compensate Native Americans who had been dispossessed of their land by settlers. As a result, “[w]hite settlers pushed further into the wilderness, in part to escape government control” (Peine and Schafft 97). Peine and Schafft further assert that the “anti-government sentiment attributed to, and claimed by Appalachian people has been constructed over time and through the unique historical processes of political repression in Europe and the early formation of the United States” (97). After the reinstatement of the whiskey tax in 1862, some Appalachians continued to express their anti-establishment sentiments through producing and consuming illegal and un-taxed liquor, a trade inherited from their Scotch-Irish ancestors. After the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919 outlawed making and selling liquor, moonshining enjoyed national popularity, and moonshiners with business savvy profited from “a greatly expanded market” (Miller 8). However, as Miller states, “The excise tax had always been at the outer margin of many Americans’ tolerance for centralized government; prohibition was a giant step too far” (188). The Volstead Act was eventually repealed, and moonshining “once again became the domain of southern mountaineers” (Peine and Schafft 98). The cultural tradition of moonshining goes back at least a few hundred years, and moonshiners have continually resisted the authority of the federal state to tax their products.

Historically, moonshining and Appalachia are inseparable, but the prevalence of moonshining in Appalachia is due to more than just anti-establishment settler attitudes. Economically, many Appalachian communities relied on moonshine and other unofficial economies for survival, as poor roadways, isolated homesteads, and limited economic opportunities prompted farmers to save money by converting corn into liquor. Moonshining

prevented farmers from losing money by allowing them to “transport more value in smaller volume,” as farmers “could transport much more value in corn if it was first converted to whiskey. One horse could haul ten times more value on its back in whiskey than in corn,” (Peine and Schafft 99). Although many farmers who became moonshiners might have been “victims of mountain isolation,” others turned to distilling illegal liquor for other reasons. When mining and lumbering became popular in Appalachia, many entrepreneurs turned to moonshining because of potential profits. As Miller argues, “Moonshiners [...] were quick to take advantage of expanding markets in camps and company towns and gained new recruits from farmers needing cash for specific purchases or payments or tempted by the profits from mountain dew” (38). While many moonshiners may have entered the illegal liquor business for profits, their ranks also included the farmers who were moonlighting at the still to save up cash for “specific purchases or payments.” Other moonshiners were simply fascinated with the process of distilling homemade alcohol. Despite being portrayed in popular culture as a homogenous group of rebellious Appalachians, moonshiners were a diverse group of people, and their reasons for becoming moonshiners were complex.

Excise taxes and the complex requirements for “going legal” reinforced Appalachian anti-establishment attitudes by forcing citizens to perform a major economic activity in secrecy and under cover of darkness. One anonymous *Moonshiners* performer sums up this relationship in the opening credits: “Moonshine is a part of our history. It exists, but it doesn’t—almost like a myth,” (“Moonshine Season Starts”). Describing moonshining as a “myth” accurately captures how the activity was depicted outside of southern Appalachia, but emphasizing that the myth is “part of our history” begins to convey some of the difficulties inherent in having a “mythic” history. According to Peine and Schafft, when “local economies are to a large extent dependent

upon illegal activities, it is not difficult to see how a close-knit community and a suspicion of outsiders can develop” (103). Isolation and a lack of economic opportunities drove Appalachian people to distill illegal liquor, which has, in turn, contributed to the essentialist view of Appalachia as anti-establishment, backward, isolated, and poor.

While excise taxes, as Miller stated, “had always been at the outer margin of many Americans’ tolerance for centralized government,” moonshining’s illegality and the consequent secrecy involved contributed to the persistence of excise taxes. Miller highlights the inability of moonshiners to organize and collectively lobby against the excise tax by comparing it to the white supremacy movement in an anecdote about Amos Owens from Rutherford County, North Carolina. Owens “resisted the national government’s intrusion into [his] way of life after the Civil War,” and “responded to these two forms of Yankee oppression by joining the Ku Klux Klan and becoming a celebrated moonshiner” (1). The Klan and other organizations were able to organize politically in reaction to the perceived government intrusion into their private lives. However, due to the secretive nature of moonshining, blockaders were “never able to organize politically as white supremacists most effectively did” because “moonshiners usually did not have the backing of the local elites” (12). Miller explains that “during the later nineteenth century, the town-based middle class began to look down on rural mountaineers, and part of their efforts to bring order to their communities included opposition to moonshining” (12-13). Despite support from local politicians who frequently condoned moonshining, moonshiners were unable to assemble collectively and protest excise taxes because the illegal nature of their work mandated secrecy. In short, “criticism [of the excise tax] never congealed into a systematic attack on the entire revenue system or a national movement to abolish the whiskey tax” (Miller 12). The relative success of white supremacy organizers highlights by contrast the inability of



moonshiners to organize and campaign against the excise tax: after the Civil War, radical racism was more socially acceptable than moonshining.

Meanwhile, novelists and journalists increasingly depicted the moonshiner as an embodiment of “all that made Appalachia different from the rest of the nation” (Miller 15). The moonshiner was “a standard literary character representing the outlaw as a rugged individualist or victim of historical processes beyond his comprehension or control” (Miller 15). John Solomon Otto demonstrates some of the venues that perpetuated the moonshiner stereotype of “ill-kempt, ill-educated, and poverty-stricken farmers-cum-moonshiners who lived a static and unchanging life in the isolated Appalachian Mountains” (28). In particular, he highlights two comic strips: *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp, which debuted in 1934, and *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* by Billy De Beck, which debuted in 1919. Both strips rely on well-established hillbilly stereotypes, featuring dim-witted and easily fooled “hick” characters, including moonshiners Hairless Joe and Lonesome Polecat (*Li'l Abner*) and Snuffy Smith (*Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*).<sup>2</sup> Miller argues that depictions of moonshiners in popular culture after the Civil War were “outlaws but only because a distant central government ‘criminalized’ part of their way of life by imposing a tax on home-distilled whiskey they had produced for generations” (15). Billings and Blee suggest that “early documentary accounts of the region [...] contributed to the highly selective interpretations of a preindustrial Appalachian life that shaped a discourse about the mountains that continues to influence our current thinking. They helped to create the enduring image of Appalachia as a region apart, an *other* in the heart of America” (9). The moonshiner

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<sup>2</sup> For more examples of moonshiners in American popular culture, see David C. Hsiung’s *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

stereotype was neatly packaged in news articles and popular novels as an emblem that upheld many essentialist ideas about the South.

Embracing the popular romantic depiction of moonshiners negates the diverse reasons that Appalachian moonshiners had for entering the moonshine business. Furthermore, the pathetic image of the moonshiner as a “victim of historical process beyond his comprehension or control” denies both the innovative entrepreneurial characteristics of many successful moonshiners and the larger system of exploitation and poverty that, in many cases, necessitated turning to illegal liquor for revenue. Wilma Dunaway argues that the “popular rural-industrial continuum erroneously portrays Appalachia as a region that has been homogenous in economic pursuits, in culture, in ethnic composition, and in distribution of wealth” (7). She continues to suggest that this rural-industrial dichotomy “leav[es] too many Appalachians ‘without history,’” and, as a result of the fact that discourse about Appalachia “has emanated from the dominant culture, much of the resultant research is steeped in an erroneous image of the region as a deviant subculture” (7). Dunaway also presents retrospective remarks about the exploitative history of Appalachia: “Agrarian economies have not ‘failed to develop.’ Rather, that development—however inequitable, haphazard, or uneven—has derived from the cyclical expansions and contractions of the capitalist world economy” (5). The popular romantic image of Appalachia constructs the region as an entity (at best) loosely tied to the global economy, but Dunaway links many of the region’s problems to its capitalistic exploitation.

Many other scholars from a wide variety of disciplines also reflect on the history of exploitation in the South, a position that is supported by many government documents. For example, sociologist Ada F. Haynes argues that “distinct relations of production” have “made possible an above average rate of exploitation of the Appalachian people and their

impoverishment” (69). Her claims are backed by a 1938 report by the National Emergency Council presented a report to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on economic conditions in the South. Members of the council link economic exploitation to poverty in the South, echoing the sentiment that economic problems in the South stemmed from too much capitalism, not too little:

The paradox of the South is that while it is blessed by Nature with immense wealth, its people as a whole are the poorest in the country. Lacking industries of its own, the South has been forced to trade the richness of its soil, its minerals and forests, and the labor of its people for goods manufactured elsewhere. If the South received such goods in sufficient quantity to meet its needs, it might consider itself adequately paid. (National Emergency Council 6)

The report continues to discuss how “the South has been forced to borrow from outside financiers, who have reaped a rich harvest in the form of interest and dividends. At the same time it has had to hand over the control of much of its businesses and industry to wealthier sections” simply because the South lacks the capital “to develop its natural resources for the benefit of its own citizens” (49). The council members note that “people who have lost in the gamble of one-crop share farming” end up working long hours for low wages as unskilled industrial workers, accepting “low wages in preference to destitution at home” (37). Those low wages, in turn, tempt workers to “return to the farm for another try” (37). The council clearly blames capitalist entrepreneurs for poverty wages in southern industrial mills, stating that “Earnings on the investment in the southern mills, as indicated by the figures for the 1933-34, are considerably higher than those in the North, but the wages paid as reported from 1919 to 1933 are considerably less” (57). Furthermore, “Wage differentials become in fact differentials in health and life; poor health, in turn, affects wages” (29). In the post-Civil War South, industrialism only

provided destitute farming families (including women and children) with the opportunity to earn poverty wages in exchange for long hours of back-breaking labor in mills with little or no safety standards. While the report was heavily influenced by 1930s New Deal politics, it represents the government's interest in solving the problem of poverty in the South, a problem that has persisted throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries despite many political officials dedicating themselves to solving it.

Exploitation and poverty wages also contributed to isolationist practices in the South, and, as globalization paid dividends to "open" regions and countries, those isolationist practices worked to keep the South impoverished. Miller clearly links isolationist practices to exploitation from outsiders, explaining how "farmers, who kept a large portion of their land uncultivated, met the speculators or their agents as pleasant strangers who stopped by for a chat and suggested buying the unused land they had already spotted as valuable" (23-24). The farmers, without realizing the land's mineral wealth, "sold for very little money or granted rights to the land below the surface without understanding how disruptive the use of it would be" (24). After farmers realized that speculators were often cheating them and their neighbors out of valuable land, speculators could no longer simply purchase land from Appalachian farmers. Conflicts between farmers who mistrusted outsiders and speculators who still wanted more Appalachian land for logging or extraction escalated. Mountaineers resisted by "attacking surveying parties," and speculators "resorted to complicated legal maneuvers," occasionally "burn[ing] out a recalcitrant farmer" (Miller 24). Many Appalachians grew to mistrust outsiders after so many farmers and landowners in the South experienced exploitation at the hands of land speculators.

Ironically, after exploitation drove many southern Appalachians deeper and deeper into poverty and exploitative speculators encouraged greater isolation, outsiders often focused on

isolationist practices as another curious trait of the “backward” South, blaming the growing problem of poverty in the region on southern Appalachians themselves. William G. Frost labeled many Appalachians “Appalachian Americans,” attributed their “presumptive backwardness” to “the region’s geographical, sociocultural, and economic isolation,” and encouraged northern philanthropists to participate in the “charitable and educational uplift efforts that institutions such as Berea College [presided over by Frost] were prepared to offer” (Billings and Blee 8-9). Many publications “linked Appalachian poverty and violence to cultural isolation and, at the same time, promoted the efforts of educational institutions like Berea College to modernize the Appalachian region” (9). According to many authors at the time, educating the “savage” mountaineer provided a way to lift Appalachians out of poverty. These authors ignored the exploitative capitalistic practices that contributed to pervasive Appalachian poverty in the first place, viewing the “modernization” of Appalachia as the goal instead of a factor contributing to the “problem.” Ignoring exploitation as the root cause of the South’s isolationist customs resulted in extremely ironic programs funded by philanthropists from the North to help “civilize” or “modernize” the South.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, politicians and philanthropists have vowed to reduce poverty in Appalachia. David E. Whisnant cites three speeches that echo the same sentiments. First, he cites William G. Frost’s 1921 speech addressing southern mountain workers: “Let us resolve here and now that we will [...] by nineteen hundred and forty-one [...] abolish all the excess of poverty [...] in these mountains and bring people up to the full average of American opportunity” (qtd. in Whisnant 92). Whisnant also cites Herbert Hoover’s speech accepting the Republican Presidential nomination in 1928, and Lyndon B. Johnson’s State of the Union in 1964. Each speech vows to reduce poverty; Johnson goes so far as to declare a “war on poverty

in America” (qtd. in Whisnant 92). Johnson’s war on poverty is largely viewed as a failure, serving only to teach “a new generation of young people [...] the Machiavellian skills necessary to survive in and turn toward their own purposes the labyrinthine complexities and Byzantine politics of a large bureaucracy” (Whisnant 93). As Myles Horton termed it, the Office of Economic Opportunity that resulted from Johnson’s “war on poverty” provided many southerners with an “education in disillusionment” (qtd. in Whisnant 93). Despite philanthropic and political efforts to address the problem of poverty in Appalachia, most of the region’s inhabitants have yet to experience economic prosperity.

While many journalists and authors created a fictional representation of the moonshiner, making him the literary token of “all that made Appalachia different from the rest of the nation,” the circumstances driving poor southern Appalachian farmers to distill moonshine were diverse. Understanding the real economic climate in the South provides us with the tools to challenge the one-dimensional representations of moonshiners in popular culture and also understand how the television show relies on those representations. Because many of *Moonshiners*’ viewers only recognize the moonshiner stereotypes presented in popular culture, the show must align its “authentic” performers with more stereotypical moonshiners in order to prove their legitimacy. In the next chapter, I discuss how the show interpolates the real and the popular narrative in providing a space for its performers to reshape the cultural significance of moonshining.

### 3 *Moonshiners* as Simulation: Real Moonshiners, the Historical Narrative, and the Television Show

*Moonshiners* relies on myths and stereotypes about southern Appalachian people, specifically the archetype of the moonshiner. Although those myths and stereotypes are based on real moonshiners, the representations that appear in popular culture are often one-dimensional stereotypes. As Miller explains, “Local-color novelists and journalists” made the moonshiner into a character that “seemed to typify all that made Appalachia different from the rest of the nation. He became a standard literary character representing the outlaw as a rugged individualist or victim of historical processes beyond his comprehension or control” (15). Authors and journalists appealed to the post-Civil War stereotypes about southerners as “primitive rebels” and “social bandits,” repackaging the moonshiner as a caricature that validated those stereotypes (Miller 15). *Moonshiners* appeals to this historical narrative of moonshining created in post-Civil War popular culture, promising to take its viewers “deep within the hollows of a forgotten corner of America” to reveal the primitive moonshiner in his own milieu (“Moonshine Season Starts”). These sensational myths about moonshiners are at least one step removed from the real history of moonshining in the region.

Jean Baudrillard’s concept of *simulacra*, and Frederic Jameson’s *pastiche*, provide cultural critics with a useful vocabulary for understanding the relationship between real moonshiners, representations of moonshiners in popular culture, and the reality television show *Moonshiners*. Baudrillard describes the simulacrum by inverting Borges’s fable about cartographers. The fable describes cartographers who “drew up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly” and after the Empire falls, the map falls “into ruins, though some

shreds are still discernible in the deserts” (*Simulacra 1*). Baudrillard then turns the fable on its head, arguing:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin in reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory--*precession of simulacra*--that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.* (*Simulacra 1*)

Applying Baudrillard’s metaphor to moonshining delineates the relationship between the real, the historical narrative, and the show. In the inversion of Borges’s fable, the historical narrative is the map, and the reality is the “territory whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours” (*Simulacra 1*). *Moonshiners* is another simulation, a “mode[l] of the real without an origin in reality” that replicates the desert: a retelling of the historical narrative that contains pieces of the worn reality. As the title of this thesis suggests, moonshiners do not have a physical blueprint for their actions because the only physical documentation of the craft is in court documents and historical narratives created by those outside of the region. On the other hand, the show relies on popular narratives about stereotypical moonshiners when appealing to its audience, a group of people that are, by and large, only familiar with moonshiners in popular narratives.

The Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) denies that moonshiners on the show actually produce potable liquor. Kathleen Shaw, a spokesperson for the Virginia



ABC told reporters that the show was a “dramatization,” stating that law enforcement officers “would have taken action” if the show’s performers were producing illegal liquor. Because the show’s performers are only producing a reality television show, not illegal liquor, the show represents the subversive actions of historical moonshiners out of the original context that made those actions subversive. Jameson might describe the performance as pastiche, or an imitation without the political agenda of the original. Jameson defines pastiche in opposition to the more politically-charged parody, or “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (17). However, without “parody’s ulterior motives,” pastiche is “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (17). When performers on the show re-enact the productive actions of their ancestors without actually breaking the law and making the same political statement that their ancestors made, their actions are a pastiche. While Jameson is a staunch critic of contemporary culture, and views pastiche negatively, I believe that analyzing *Moonshiners* as pastiche can allow us to understand how the show’s performers challenge essentialist stereotypes about their cultural identity.

Jameson further elaborates on pastiche, imbuing the term simulacrum with an economic meaning: “The culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced” (18). He then quotes Guy Debord, saying that the pastiche thrives in an environment where “the image has become the final form of commodity reification” (qtd. in Jameson 18). Jameson’s and Debord’s description of pastiche is useful for my purposes because it allows us to understand *Moonshiners* as a commodification of Appalachian culture. Those creating and producing *Moonshiners* undermine the economically subversive ideology behind moonshining as an act, or what Jameson would call its “use value,” and instead profit from moonshine production as a

performance, thereby embracing its “exchange value.” Moonshiners also rely on what Baudrillard would call the “sign value” of moonshine, or its value in relation to other signifiers of cultural value (*Symbolic Exchange* 50-51). Particularly when “moonshine” is legally distilled and cannot technically be moonshine, marketers rely on the sign value of the product to distinguish it from other nearly identical liquors to potential buyers: labeling the liquor “moonshine” distinguishes it as “authentically southern” and marks the purchaser as an authentic southerner. When the consumer buys the product, he or she is also purchasing access to the cultural history that produced it.

Jameson’s metaphor comparing pastiche to speech in a dead language is particularly useful in understanding how *Moonshiners* leverages the cultural heritage of southern Appalachia to authenticate performers. Tim, JT, Tickle, Mark, and other moonshiners from the show recreate the actions of their dead fathers in order to claim a sense of Appalachian legitimacy or authenticity. That authenticity depends on the somewhat fictional historical narrative that constructs Appalachia as a counterpoint to America, challenging the government’s authority to control the region’s economic activities. However, the show’s performers do not produce illegal liquor, and they cannot recreate the subversive context of their father’s actions. Without context, the show’s performers merely re-create simulacra, or more fictional representations of a past Appalachian South. In other words, moonshiners on the show only demonstrate their ability to perform the same behavior as their ancestors without making the political statement that defined their ancestor’s actions. The show presents the subversive signs of Appalachian moonshining without re-creating the context that imbued those signs with meaning. As presented in the show, moonshining is an empty signifier to help the performers remember old boundaries and claim a geographic exceptionalism. The show functions as Jameson’s “statue with dead eyeballs,” in that

it re-presents the endeavors of a past South without the political circumstances or the point-of-view that fostered the statue's creation.

To reiterate, Baudrillard's simulacrum combined with Jameson's pastiche creates a useful framework for understanding *Moonshiners*. By appealing to the historical narrative of moonshining as an anti-authoritarian activity, the show adds another layer of representation on top of the representation of real moonshiners in the historical narrative. Real moonshiners rejected the authority of the government to regulate economic activities, but they did not reject capitalism. In fact, moonshining was created by entrepreneurs who tried to maximize their profits given certain logistical limitations detailed in earlier chapters. The show becomes a pastiche because the actors set out to simulate their forefathers' productive actions, but simulating those actions involves "feign[ing] to have what one doesn't have" (Baudrillard 3).

By presenting native Appalachian re-enactors with familial ties to historically relevant moonshiners, *Moonshiners* grants a certain authority to the performers, enabling them to revise and redefine the political ideology behind the act of moonshining. Creators and performers work to redefine moonshining, and incorporate it into the officially sanctioned economy, an institution that moonshiners systematically have sought to undermine. Ideologically, the show's production initiates moonshining's incorporation into the official economy by featuring moonshiners who only produce the television show—a perfectly legal product fully within the sanctions of the federal economy—instead of moonshine—which, in addition to the word's literal denotation, carries a connotation that refers to the product's existence outside of the light of authority. More interestingly, however, the characters' actions in the show eventually transcend the pastiche and fill the hollowed-out signifier of moonshining with new meaning.

For example, Tim Smith's "going legal" story arc that begins in season two also demonstrates moonshining's incorporation into the legally sanctioned national economy. By establishing Tim's as moonshining's embodied cultural memory and removing the subversive political commentary of actually producing moonshine, Tim's actions become an empty husk that can be re-filled with new political meaning. He becomes a representative of not just Appalachian moonshiners, but moonshining itself, and his actions have the power to redefine the act of moonshining. When Tim goes legal, he takes the cultural memory of moonshining with him. At the beginning of season two, Tim's scenes take on a new tone. Instead of distilling moonshine in the woods, he starts building a legal distillery in his own backyard. He explains, "Normally at this time of the year, I'd be out scoutin' around, looking for locations to set up a new still site. This year, I'm going to do the same thing, except in a legal fashion," explains Tim ("Rise 'n Shine"). He moves moonshine production from secret, camouflaged lean-tos in the middle of the wilderness to an obvious, sophisticated structure in his well-manicured backyard. Instead of producing liquor at night, he builds during the day.

Episode ten of season two follows Tim as he travels out of Climax, Virginia to search for the sixty-year-old remains of a bootlegger's car at the bottom of a lake ("Moonshine Treasure Hunt"). In attempting to realize his goal of opening a legal distillery, Tim also travels to Atlanta to meet with a potential investor later in the season; his voiceover provides narration: "I just arrived in Atlanta, Georgia. I got a phone call from a guy who is very interested in my moonshine brand," ("Last Shiner Standing"). He continues, "...a lot of years, I've been searching for the right people to make it happen. If everything fits good, this could be the day," ("Last Shiner Standing"). By traveling out of his native city, Tim acts as a moonshine ambassador, introducing and integrating moonshining into the national economy, represented in

the series by Atlanta, the “big city” of the South. He also dresses differently on these excursions. Up until this point in the series, Tim is usually depicted wearing overalls with no shirt underneath, but on his trip to Atlanta he wears jeans with a tee-shirt that features his brand’s logo. Throughout season two, Tim challenges the essential stereotypes about where moonshine is produced and who produces it. His actions further work to integrate moonshining into the federally governed national economy, and represent an evolution of Debord’s theory, suggesting a *transactional* relationship between a re-presented image and the culture in which it is re-presented. While Tim’s transforms “the image” of moonshining into “the highest form of commodity reification” by using the cultural memory of moonshining to market his goods, the signifier also becomes redefined through its interaction with a new context (Debord qtd. in Jameson 18).

According to the show’s narrator, “moonshine gets its name from how it’s made. The safest time to make it is by the light of the moon, free from the prying eyes of the law,” (“Moonshine Season Starts”). The product’s name refers literally to the time it is produced, but also figuratively alludes to the political circumstances of its production: outside the “light” of the legally sanctioned economy.<sup>3</sup> Bringing moonshine production into the “daylight” by producing it legally necessarily alters its subversive meaning. By referring to his product as “moonshine,” Tim hopes to evoke nostalgia for a past South in the minds of investors and future imbibers. However, the “moonshine” that Tim legally produces cannot be moonshine at all. Despite its legality, Tim relies on the sign value of moonshine to attract investors and consumers to a simulacrum of moonshine. Likewise, moonshine’s cultural significance attracts viewers to a

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<sup>3</sup> Although many distilleries now market legal liquors as “moonshine,” Pam Sutton, the widow of Marvin “Popcorn” Sutton, asserts that she “can’t legally call” the taxed version of Popcorn’s liquor “moonshine.” Instead, she continues, “we have to call it ‘Tennessee White Whiskey’” (“A Moonshiner’s Farewell”). Her experience demonstrates that moonshine is, by definition, illegal, although that definition might be changing,

show in which no moonshine is produced. The sign value of moonshine, or its ability to attract audiences and imbibers, has eclipsed the product's use value. While moonshine represents Appalachia's critique of American consumerism, Tim and producers of the show use it as a way to baptize its production into the national economy that it has historically subverted.

*Moonshiners*, then, presents its viewers with two conflicting viewpoints. It celebrates anti-authoritarian Appalachians and their historically subversive creation of moonshining while also suggesting that the region is no longer characterized by the presence of "authentic" moonshiners and incorporating the act of moonshining into the national economy. While Josh, Bill, Tickle, and Tim authenticate themselves as Appalachian and legitimize the essential identity of Appalachians by performing as moonshiners, they also redefine the act of moonshining. As I discuss in more detail later, performers on the show demonstrate how their identity differs from the one depicted in the popular narrative, challenging the authenticity of that narrative. Their actions, then, redefine what it means to be Appalachian and work to integrate the region and its economy into the national whole.

By continually referencing historical ancestors, *Moonshiners* creates an essentialist definition of Appalachia and Appalachian moonshiners. The show and its characters seek to represent a past South. Featured performers derive legitimacy and authenticity from their familial connections to dead moonshiners and leverage that authenticity in interesting ways. Because performers on Discovery Channel's *Moonshiners* do not produce, sell, or consume illegal liquor and the show relies on the myth of moonshining only to attract viewers, *Moonshiners* exemplifies simulacrum as defined by Baudrillard and pastiche as defined by Jameson. However, after the show strips a subversive agenda away from moonshining, *Moonshiners* and its performers redefine moonshine in the context of a global society and challenge Appalachia's

power to subvert the government's authority to regulate economic activities. By calling the show *Moonshiners*, despite confirmation that performers do not produce moonshine, the show embraces moonshine's sign value in lieu of its use value. By calling his product "moonshine" despite its legality, Tim Smith leverages his heritage as a marketing point and eradicates moonshine's use value as a signifier of Appalachian people subverting the authority of the federal government, replacing it with moonshine's sign value that causes consumers to yearn for a past South and, subsequently, buy a product to satiate that yearning.

The show imagines and re-presents a past South in order to modify signs associated with that imagined South. The signifier of moonshining is not dead, it still signifies *something*, but what it signifies has changed. When performers from the region attempt to re-present those signs to a changing world, they still claim the heritage that produced them and perpetuate the region's claim to exceptionalism through their performances. *Moonshiners'* producers may be viewed negatively by those who think that they merely exploit regional authenticity in order to attract viewers, but performers themselves, specifically Tim Smith, who is a native of Virginia, can claim this heritage while redefining what it means to be southern in the present moment. In other words, Tim uses his "individual agency" as he "enacts embodied memory," transforming the meaning of the performance (Taylor 20). Through performing the act of moonshining and using his heritage to sell a product, Tim challenges the essentialist notion of Appalachia as a counterpoint to America, "a land 'in but not of' America, an 'internal other,' dependent on the patriarchal rescuing of the federal state," and a "place that is lawless, backward, and somehow pre- or anti-modern" (Peine and Schafft 93-94). While relying on an imagined past Appalachian South to make his point, he presents a modern-day Appalachian South that embraces modernity and participates in the federally regulated economy. Tim and the show's performers challenge

essentialist notions of Appalachia by demonstrating that their traditions and actions must change due to changing circumstances.



#### 4 “We Don’t Want a Dying History”: Moonshining as Archive and Repertoire

While performers on the show might not be making a political statement in the same way that their moonshining ancestors did, their performances are still imbued with political meaning. The way that performers on the show adapt to changing circumstances reflects the fact that the cultural history of moonshining does not proceed unmediated into the future, but that each time the cultural memory is passed down, a subsequent generation transforms that cultural memory, adapting the knowledge of its ancestors to its new environment. For its audience, *Moonshiners* “makes visible [...] that which is always already there,” and challenges preconceptions about who moonshiners are, what they do, and why they do it (Taylor 143). By featuring several moonshiners performing their identity in many different ways, the show challenges any one-dimensional characterization of moonshiners. This chapter explores how the show situates itself in relation to real moonshiners and representations of moonshiners in popular culture.

Because this chapter heavily references scenes from the show, I would like to briefly discuss when each of the show’s moonshiners enters the series. The first season of *Moonshiners* follows the moonshining team of Tim and Tickle almost exclusively. Aside from two or three segments that follow Don, a moonshiner on a bootlegging run, Tim and Tickle are the only living moonshiners featured in the first season. The second season includes many more moonshiners, introducing Jeff and Mark, a set of brothers-in-law who are both moonshiners and mountain men, Josh and Bill, two “rookie” moonshiners who are attempting to build a still underneath an outdoor stage used for local music festivals, Moonshiner X, an anonymous moonshiner from Johnston County, North Carolina, and Mike and Tweedy, two moonshiners who are trying to raise money for Mike’s ill brother. The third season continues to follow most of the

aforementioned moonshiners while also introducing Darlene, a horse trainer and moonshiner in Mississippi, and Mike and Shot, another moonshining team in Mississippi.

In this chapter, I use Diana Taylor's performance theory to analyze the relationship between *Moonshiners*' performers, their heritage, and their agency to shape how the Appalachian South is perceived. Analyzing the show's many references to history and heritage using Taylor's performance theory reveals how the show functions as a formative archive for moonshine production by committing to film the repertoire of its subjects and preserving the previously undocumented rituals involved in making moonshine. As Taylor explains, performance is "a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" that allows cultural critics to "expand what [they] understand by 'knowledge'" (16). Taylor explains how "writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment" (16). She explains how, when "the friars arrived in the New World, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, [...] they claimed that the indigenous peoples' past--and the 'lives they lived'--had disappeared because they had no writing" (16). Taylor differentiates the archive from the repertoire, terms which can be applied to moonshining's history. Archival memory, as explained by Taylor, "exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change" (19). Archival memory "works in tandem" with the enacted embodied memories that create the repertoire (Taylor 20). Applying Taylor's theoretical framework to moonshining, a tradition that remains virtually undocumented due to its illegality, reveals the tension between written and embodied culture in the region. Her theoretical framework is particularly useful in analyzing moments where performers express a desire to create an archive while simultaneously lamenting the tradition's inability to exist solely in the archive. Furthermore, using performance theory allows cultural critics to analyze how the show's

moonshiners challenge the current and historical essentialist categorizations of southern Appalachian people and the unofficial economies in southern Appalachia, specifically the market for moonshine.

In order for the show's performers to challenge stereotypes about moonshiners, they must first align themselves with more stereotypical moonshiners to create a genealogy that renders them the authentic inheritors of moonshining's cultural history. Each of the show's moonshiners refers to their heritage to link their contemporary endeavors to the historical lineage of moonshiners. Tim and Tickle, Josh and Bill, and Jeff and Mark do not look like legendary moonshiners: they are not old men with long, grey beards who wear flannel shirts and overalls and play the banjo or blow into empty jugs around a campfire. However, the producers of the show legitimize performers by placing them in the lineage of famous moonshiners who do fit the stereotype. For instance, Tim refers to his forty years of moonshining experience and refers to his father and Popcorn Sutton in the first five minutes of the series premier:

I've been a moonshiner for at least 40 of my 45 years.... Moonshining in these parts, and probably in most of the southern United States, is a kind of tradition thing.... It's in the family. My father did it. My family tree goes back to the Irish people 200 years.... Moonshining is a family thing, and my Dad and Popcorn Sutton, they've been making moonshine all their life, and they recently both passed away, and I'd like to go ahead and pass it on to my son before I pass away.  
 ("Moonshine Season Starts")

Throughout the first episode, Tim continues to reference his father, and the narrator refers to Tim as "a third generation moonshiner: a living legend" ("Bootleg Hustle"). Editors of the show continue to build Tim's ethos by alternating between clips of Tim and clips taken from Neil

Hutcheson's *This Is the Last Dam Run of Likker I'll Ever Make*, a 2002 biopic about famous moonshiner Marvin "Popcorn" Sutton. For instance, the narrator explains that both Popcorn and Tim believe in the "artisanal" method of making moonshine: using the highest quality ingredients available to produce high quality moonshine. The show then cuts to Tim drinking from a potential water source and explaining to his son why cold water is important in the moonshine-making process. Immediately after Tim's explanation, editors cut to a scene of Popcorn sticking his hand in a creek and explaining the importance of cold water to the camera ("Moonshine Season Starts"). In two similarly edited segments, footage of Tim and Popcorn "proofing" liquor by shaking a mason jar and celebrating after finishing their respective first runs appears together ("The Law Comes Knockin'" "Outlaw Brotherhood"). Popcorn serves as an authenticating figure, and by closely aligning Tim's actions with Popcorn's, producers of the show demonstrate to viewers that although Tim may not look like the traditional moonshiner, he is part of the same cultural tradition as Popcorn.

Popcorn also serves as an authenticating figure for Don, the other moonshiner featured in season one. Don has a portrait of Popcorn tattooed on his forearm, and he proudly displays his tattoo to the camera. Chuck Miller, the only legal moonshiner depicted in season one is also closely aligned with Popcorn. As the narrator explains, "[Chuck] was carrying on a tradition passed on to him by his grandfather, also a legend in his own time. Some compared him to Popcorn Sutton" ("Outlaw Brotherhood"). The show continually references Popcorn's life, explaining in the season one finale how he committed suicide after being convicted of several federal offenses related to moonshining ("A Moonshiner's Farewell"). *Moonshiners'* narrator describes Popcorn as "The most notorious moonshiner that has ever lived" ("Moonshine Season Starts"). Ideologically, Popcorn represents a fallen soldier, a victim of the conflict between the

unofficial economies created by regional cultural practices and federal liquor laws. While he was still alive, Popcorn commissioned the footstone that now adorns his grave. It reads, “Popcorn Sutton Says Fuck You,” and allows him to defy authority and to express an extreme Appalachian individualism even after his death.

To establish ethos, other moonshiners featured in later seasons of the show also rely on their relationships with moonshiners who more closely resemble the stereotype. For instance during their scenes, Josh and Bill often refer to their mentor, Barney Barnwell, who died shortly before they began filming. In the second episode of the second season, Josh explains that he and Bill are building an underground still as a “tribute to their late friend, moonshining mentor Barney Barnwell,” because Barney always wanted an underground still (“Moonshine Goldmine”). Josh tells the audience that “keeping Barney’s dream alive” outweighs the risk of going to jail. Even after facing substantial hardships while building the underground still, the narrator emphasizes that “their loyalty to Barney keeps them going to meet their ultimate goal: to complete their underground still site and brew moonshine” (“Moonshine Goldmine”). Similarly, Mark and Jeff derive their authenticity from Jim Tom, who is oldest living moonshiner featured on the show and is closely aligned with Mark and Jeff for most of season two. Jim Tom accompanies Mark and Jeff to their still site multiple times and offers the team advice about how to brew the best moonshine. The narrator also emphasizes that both Jeff and Mark come from a long line of moonshiners (“Rise ‘n Shine”). The show effectively highlights the credibility of featured moonshiners by demonstrating their ties to more stereotypical and historical moonshiners.

Promotional materials for the show also emphasize the importance of heritage to contemporary moonshiners. The show's website indicates how highly moonshiners value heritage, using the following lines as an advertising hook for the show:

Think the days of bootleggers, backwoods stills and "white lightning" are over? Not a chance! It's a multi-million dollar industry. But perhaps more importantly to moonshiners, it's a tradition dating back hundreds of years, passed down to them from their forefathers. It's part of their history and culture. ("About the Show")

The same quote appears as the show's description on many websites that sell digital versions to potential viewers. Creators and promoters of the show advertise it as a documentary detailing the age-old art of brewing moonshine in Appalachia. As I mentioned earlier, the opening credits also feature the voice of an anonymous moonshiner: "Moonshining is a part of our history. It exists, but it doesn't: kind of like a myth." This opening quote further emphasizes how important tradition and heritage are to contemporary moonshiners and performers on the show.

After establishing themselves as contemporary southern Appalachian moonshiners, many of the show's performers express anxiety about losing the cultural traditions associated with moonshining due to a lack of archival memory. As Taylor asserts, many privilege the archive over the repertoire. Despite passing down stories orally, many moonshiners rightly fear that what is not recorded will be forgotten, and with fewer and fewer southerners deciding to distill illegally, without an archive, the cultural tradition may be soon forgotten. Popcorn Sutton expresses this anxiety in a clip from *This Is the Last Dam Run of Likker I'll Ever Make*, describing himself as the last bastion of a dying cultural tradition. He states, "Most people has never seen this, never will. It's a lost art. When I'm gone, it's over with" ("The Law Comes

Knockin’”). Popcorn also wonders if “Maybe somebody will appreciate someday what I’m doing, you know?” (“Moonshine Season Starts”). Tickle also refers to moonshiners as a “dying breed,” lamenting what he sees as the disappearance of southern Appalachians who carry on the tradition.

Similarly, Tim frequently articulates the same anxiety that Popcorn’s and Tickle’s respective statements express. After explaining to his son, JT, how a moonshiner finds the perfect location for a still, Tim tells viewers why he wants his son to learn how to make moonshine: “I want to show my son the art of making moonshine because it was passed down to me, and it was passed down by my father and his father It’s important to know where it came from, ‘cause if we lose that—I don’t know if you go another 50 years, maybe no one’ll know anything about moonshining” (“Moonshine Season Starts”). When, at the end of the first season, Tim has the opportunity to “go legal,” he openly wonders if historical moonshiners would have gone legal if they were given the same opportunity:

I’m worried about the family, if I’m making the right decision or not. I think about my dad, the other moonshiners behind me, you know? What would they do in this position? I’m in the middle. I’ve always been a moonshiner. My family has been connected to moonshining, trying to keep the tradition alive and carry everything with me. What am I gonna do? We’ll find out when we get there. (“A Moonshiner’s Farewell”)

Tim’s worries demonstrate his dialogue with the historical tradition that came before him. Other moonshiners express a similar concern about preserving their heritage. In “Secret Summit: Part One,” executive producer, Matthew Ostrum, facilitates a roundtable discussion with the three main pairs of moonshiners. When asked why he lets the show’s cameramen film him, Bill

responds, “To carry on the craft. To preserve the knowledge and pass it along.” Tim joins in, emphasizing the importance of the docudrama: “And it’s a serious thing, ‘cause if we do lose this, you know, again, it’s just gonna be part of history then. This is a working history, really. We don’t want a dying history” (“Secret Summit: Part One”). Tim’s comments, along with the comments made by Popcorn Sutton and the other performers on the show, indicate that the series seeks to create an archive by reproducing embodied memory on film while the tradition still exists in the repertoire. However, as the Appalachian South sees an increase in the number of legal economic alternatives to making moonshine, fewer and fewer potential moonshiners will make the decision to distill, and while having fewer Appalachian southerners involved in illegal activities may seem like a desirable goal, it also means losing an important facet of Appalachian southern cultural memory.

In scenes that give credence to Tim’s, Tickle’s, and Popcorn’s fears about losing the cultural traditions associated with moonshining, season two of *Moonshiners* also features performers notably failing to produce moonshine. For instance, Josh and Bill, two rookie moonshiners who apprenticed under Barney Barnwell, a famous moonshining ancestor, invest months of work into building an underground bunker, but discover toxic mold in the space before they fire up the still (“Tickle Goes Rogue,” and “Troubled Waters”). After building an above-ground still, the duo overheats the mash, making their “moonshine” unpalatable (“Moonshine Treasure Hunt”). Despite visiting Barney’s grave multiple times and insisting that they are “fulfilling his dream,” Josh and Bill continue to demonstrate their impuissance throughout season two. Their failures demonstrate a loss of frontier knowledge and an inability to re-enact the productive actions of real moonshiners. Despite their persistence, Josh and Bill’s failures highlight the inability of newcomers to access the cultural memories of their ancestors. If



Josh and Bill cannot make moonshine due to some error in transmitting cultural memory, then it is also quite possible that others in subsequent generations of moonshiners will fail to produce moonshine, expediting the extinction of this important cultural tradition.

Performers do not only believe that the archive *does not* represent the cultural history of moonshining accurately, but many of their comments indicate that the archive *cannot* accurately represent the cultural memory. In the first episode of the series, Tim states: “Moonshining is a special art. It’s something kind of hard to learn from reading a book. It’s kind of hard to learn on the internet. People talk about mixing different ingredients and this and that, but you do need to know how to do it. You can make a product that’s very dangerous, and you could wind up killing someone” (“Moonshine Season Starts”). In the same episode, Tim again alludes to the inability of the archive to transfer embodied memories accurately. He asserts that he was “born a mechanic,” so he doesn’t “have to go get a book sometimes to read and learn how to build something or fix something.” He continues, “I can look at it, and I can fix things, because I’m just made that way. Moonshining is kind of the same way.” Tim’s dialogue continues to emphasize the inability of archival materials to capture moonshining techniques. In the second season, Jeff also expresses the inadequacy of the archive to convey the cultural memory of moonshiners: “Building the still is by memory. You ain’t got no blueprint on it. You can just figure out what size you want it and put it together” (“Moonshine Goldmine”). The narrator also expresses the same sentiments: “Constructing this type of still relies on knowledge that has been passed down for generations” (“Moonshine Goldmine”). The still-building scene highlights how many moonshining skills are passed from generation to generation by word-of-mouth, and moonshiner apprentices perfect their craft through constant practice. In “Secret Summit: Part One,” Jeff continues to emphasize the importance of embodied memories to moonshining: “Me

and Mark both, we come from a long line of moonshiners. I think it has more to being in your blood than anything. I believe it was bred into me down through the years to be a moonshiner.” Jeff’s discussion of moonshining somehow “being in your blood,” and his use of the word “bred,” convey his association of moonshining skills with embodied memories, a belief held by many of the moonshiners on the show.

In addition to reaffirming that moonshining exists outside of archival memory, Jeff’s comments reflect Taylor’s belief that both archive and repertoire “work in tandem,” “both exceeding the limitations of the other” (21). Even if Jeff’s blueprint did exist, it would not provide enough information to teach would-be moonshiners all of the secrets of the trade. Even as performers attempt to create an archive by re-enacting the lived experiences of moonshiners in front of television cameras, they insist on the importance of the repertoire, the embodied knowledge of cultural inheritors, the “intangible heritage,” to the continued survival of important cultural memories.

The show’s narrator also refers to Tim Smith, Jim Tom, as “living legends” and Chuck Miller’s grandfather as a “legend” in his time (“Bootleg Hustle,” “Rise ‘n Shine,” and “Outlaw Brotherhood”). The term “living legend,” when taken literally indicates that the three men physically embody the cultural memories of their ancestors. The phrase also highlights the importance of people—both dead and alive—to the continued life of cultural memories. The words and actions of the show’s moonshiners overwhelmingly suggest that keeping the history “alive” is extremely important to them, or, as Tim might say, to maintain the “working history” of moonshine and prevent it from becoming a “dying history.” Featured moonshiners are also trying to re-create their ancestor’s actions as accurately as they can in front of television cameras in order to create an archive that reflects their embodied cultural memories. The show depicts

characters who produce knowledge using embodied performances while capturing that knowledge in the archive.

By casting contemporary moonshiners as the embodied memories of a bygone era, *Moonshiners* allows its performers to not only re-enact, but physically embody the memories of their ancestors. However, while the embodied expressions of moonshiners “continue[s] to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting,” understanding performers on the show as re-enactors of embodied cultural memory also provides them with the ability to change that memory. Performers on the show represent what Taylor calls “Intermediaries,” which she describes a person who “contemplates what she knows and how she knows it” and because she “looks to [their] bod[ies] as the receptor, storehouse, and transmitter of knowledge” facilitating the circulation of information (81-82). Like the Intermediary that Taylor theorizes, performers on the show have the ability to challenge “the impression that the individual or the group is somehow a stable entity, an unchanging conduit for receiving and transmitting the swirl of events around them” (Taylor 86). After deriving authenticity from historical (and more stereotypical) moonshiners, performers on the show can revise what the cultural memory means in a new context. Furthermore, Tim’s anxiety about going legal, and his careful consideration of what “the other moonshiners behind [him]” would do in his situation demonstrates that he is aware of his capacity to change the cultural memory of moonshining with his on-screen actions.

After building their ethos by aligning themselves with ancestral moonshiners, performers on the show (together with producers and editors) revise the image of the moonshiner in popular culture, both accepting and rejecting aspects of the stereotype as the performers see fit. *Moonshiners* on the show convey, at different points, that the ideal Appalachian man is a self-

made moonshiner who is hardworking and patriotic. He provides for his family, breaking laws only to earn a living and teach his children about their heritage. The show does depict unscrupulous moonshiners “cutting” (or mixing) moonshine with bleach, but the show characterizes those people as true criminals whose actions do not represent the typical moonshiner. National laws take a backseat to cultural memory, but performers in the show carefully explain that moonshiners are not lawless men; they simply believe in a more individualistic moral code. Their moral code does not necessarily consider legality as synonymous with morality. They rationalize their illegal actions by adopting a more libertarian ideology: if it does not directly harm another individual, then it is not morally wrong. Tickle elaborates on the identity of Appalachian moonshiners:

A lot of moonshiners like Tim get misconstrued as somebody that just wants to break the law, and that’s not how it is. We care about carrying on a tradition. We want other people to know that this is part of American heritage. Moonshiners and bootleggers, they helped found and fund the Declaration of Independence... and if you really love your country you’re gonna have to love moonshine. (“Moonshine Season Starts”)

As demonstrated by Tickle’s quotes (the last line of which opens each episode in the series), the ideal Appalachian moonshiner possesses a patriotism that stems from a common belief in economic individualism. However, moonshiners do not depend on their government, as one anonymous moonshiner states in the opening credits (“Moonshine Season Starts”). Later in the first episode, moonshiner Tim characterizes both the anti-authoritarian ideology behind moonshining and the community-oriented mindset of an ideal moonshiner:

Everybody makes money all the way around. Good business all the way around. It helps the community out and makes everybody happy.... I think they need us to help the government in another way, because the government ain't running its business too good. Our business is booming. ("Moonshine Season Starts")

Tim's statement highlights the dilemma created by the region's dependency on the unofficial, unsanctioned market for moonshine, but he also conveys a genuine desire to help his community. Tim further aligns the moonshiner with community service by revealing to the audience his role as the volunteer fire chief for Climax, Virginia. The show's editors juxtapose scenes of Tim at his still answering a phone call and him at the local firehouse to demonstrate that Tim's identity as a moonshiner can be interrupted by his desire to serve his community, and his actions challenge the characterization of moonshiners as a ne'er-do-wells who profit off of the their neighbor's addictions.

The moonshiner's knowledge of the land and his wilderness acumen, while also associated with moonshiner stereotypes, is also embraced by moonshiners on the show. For instance, Tim tells his son and apprentice, JT, that moonshiners do not carry guns to confront ABC agents, but to defend themselves against the natural perils—such as snakes and other wild animals—that they must confront because they work in the woods ("Moonshine Season Starts"). Tim's statement to his son scripts the moonshiner as a rugged conqueror of untamed environments. Beyond his words, Tim demonstrates his hunting skills by stopping his truck to shoot a rabbit from the driver's seat. After retrieving the dead rabbit, he immediately skins it and places it in a cooler ("Outlaw Brotherhood"). After he and Tickle return to their camp, Tim cooks the rabbit on a makeshift grill ("Outlaw Brotherhood"). In "Bootleg Hustle," Tim stops his vehicle again to pick up a dead rabbit which he loads into his car to cook later. Tim's words and

actions highlight the moonshiner's savviness in the wilderness. Mark also emphasizes the overlap between mountain men and moonshiners, detailing how the ideal moonshiner is well-equipped to survive in the wilderness:

NARRATOR: Deep in the heart of Graham County, North Carolina, reside two men who are the last of their kind—men who live off the land and make moonshine like their fathers did. Mark is a fourth-generation moonshiner, mountain man, and an expert marksman who spent his whole life in these backwoods.

MARK: I'm Mark. I love to hunt and fish, and love to make liquor. If this whole world turns to shit, right in here [the woods] is where I'll be. There ain't no mountain men around. I'm the last one you're looking at—right here. All my people, they was raised on this creek, and I was raised on it. I go around in camouflage all the time and hunt and fish, but I think that's what this stuff's put here for—to kill and eat. (“Rise ‘n Shine”)

As the audience hears the narrator and Mark, they see clips of Mark walking alone in the woods, firing his gun, and laying on his belly to drink from a creek. Immediately after Mark establishes himself as a rugged outdoorsman, the editors cut to a scene in which he talks about moonshining: “I got a family to provide for, and as long as I'm able and can breathe, I'm gonna make a little liquor” (“Rise ‘n Shine”). The combination of Mark's voiceover and his actions on film establish the moonshiner as a rugged outdoorsman. Even Jesse Tate, the Alcohol and Beverage Commission officer that producers follow in the first season, admits that moonshiners are skilled outdoorsmen: “A lot of times, they're experienced woodsman; they're hunters” (“Moonshine Season Starts”) Jesse continues, “If you think you're just dealing with a bunch of silly country

boys, you'll get your hat handed to you because they are very good at what they do. That's how they've been getting away with it for hundreds of years." After authenticating themselves as legitimate moonshiners, demonstrating their ties to the cultural history, the show provides a space for moonshiners on the show to perform their identity as they see it. While some of the performers' actions may align with stereotypical attributes, their actions can also revise the moonshiner stereotype and encourage their audience to rethink their own stereotypes about southern people. Reading *Moonshiners* in the context of Taylor's performance theory allows cultural critics to understand how the show revises essentialist stereotypes about moonshiners and southern Appalachian people.

In addition to challenging stereotypes about southern Appalachian people, *Moonshiners* presents the history of moonshining in a way that challenges stereotypes about unofficial southern economies. For instance, scenes featuring Chuck Miller demonstrate the many barriers (including, but not limited to taxation) that prevent moonshiners from producing liquor legally. Chuck describes how every tool used in his legal distillery, including the rake he uses to mix the mash, must be approved by the USDA ("Outlaw Brotherhood"). Chuck also tells Tim that every legal distiller must be bonded, and, in order to obtain a bond, the moonshiner must pay a significant portion of the \$200,000 bond value up front ("Outlaw Brotherhood"). By detailing the many barriers to entry that prevent moonshiners from entering the legal market for liquor, Chuck elicits sympathy for the moonshiner from the audience, casting the government as an antagonist that punishes moonshiners without providing a way for them to carry on their businesses legally.

When combined with the trauma that Tim and Chuck have both endured as the children of moonshiners, the barriers to entry that keep moonshiners illegal seem particularly unfair. Tim describes how he "can still remember the first time [his family's] house was raided," by agents

who told his father to “stay in the kitchen” while they searched the house for illegal liquor (“Outlaw Brotherhood”). The narrator explains that the police “not only arrested his father, but “also got his older brother, Troy” causing “great hardship in the family and a strain Tim feels to this day” (“Outlaw Brotherhood”). Later in the same episode, Chuck discusses how, when he was a child, revenuers “raided the house one day,” physically attacking his grandfather and inflicting such serious wounds that his wife called in the priest to give him last rites (“Outlaw Brotherhood”). Together the barriers to entry that prevent moonshiners from going legal and the traumatic raids on illegal distilleries challenge the characterization of moonshiners as “primitive rebels” and “social bandits” (Miller 15). Using Taylor’s framework helps us understand why moonshiners are so hostile toward revenuers. According to many southern Appalachian people, the federal government is not only causing significant financial and legal hardships for moonshiners, they are actively attacking an important part of Appalachian cultural memory. Each moonshiner who leaves the business because, as Popcorn puts it, “too many goddamned, nosey sons-of-bitches [are] after [them],” threatens the successful transference of important cultural memories to the next generation.

*Moonshiners* “tap[s] into public fantasies and leave[s] a trace, reproducing and at times altering cultural repertoires” (Taylor 25). By featuring authenticated moonshiners who perform their embodied cultural memories in front of television cameras, the show challenges how the moonshiner has been depicted in popular culture. Slowly revealing the many barriers that keep moonshiners out of the market for legal liquor prompts audience members to question the historical narrative that casts moonshiners as outlaws and savages. Finally, *Moonshiners* demonstrates that the Appalachian South is not “stuck in the past,” but has been moving forward in time, merging its cultural heritage with the changing circumstances of a globalized world.



To briefly return to my earlier examination of *Moonshiners* in the context of Baudrillard's simulacrum, I would like to note that while the show must appeal to the prevalent stereotypical representations of moonshining in popular culture because the simulacrum precedes the show, the show is not simply another manifestation of the simulacrum because it attempts to highlight the differences between the simulacrum (i.e. representations of moonshining in popular culture) and the real (i.e. the work performed by authentic moonshiners in southern Appalachia). The intentional effort to create an archive that depicts the real differentiates the show from other representations of moonshiners in popular culture. In other words, instead of embracing the hyperreal, *Moonshiners* challenges it, exposing viewers to more authentic performances of the moonshiner archetype.

## 5 Conclusions

While many stereotypes about southern Appalachian people may sometimes be accurate, those stereotypes have a long and complex history. Southern Appalachian people developed many stereotypically “backward” traits due to extensive exploitation and poverty in the region. Some combination of heritage, poverty, and exploitation contribute to the persistence of moonshining in the region. While *Moonshiners* relies on its audience’s knowledge of moonshiner stereotypes, the show encourages viewers to rethink current and historical categorizations of southern Appalachian people and southern Appalachian economies. Analyzing *Moonshiners* using Taylor’s performance theory allows us to see how the show’s performers challenge stereotypes about the South, explaining why many moonshiners in the region have no choice but to remain illegal. Although *Moonshiners* relies on archetypes that are, in many ways, essentialist and anachronistic, performers on the show transcend one-dimensional stereotypes and present a contemporary South where heritage is still important, but also where national issues are not irrelevant.

On a speculative note, I believe Tim’s anxiety (discussed in an earlier chapter) might reflect his greater concern about being a well-known representative of a historically marginalized group. When Tim decides to go legal, he verbalizes his anxiety about staying true to his moonshining ancestors while also pursuing legal opportunities. One might wonder if his anxiety stems from his knowledge that his fame has provided him with opportunities that other moonshiners in the Appalachian South may not have. Perhaps he is concerned that his decision to “go legal” will cause viewers to negatively judge moonshiners who continue to operate outside of the official economy. Or, perhaps his anxiety derives from his knowledge that his actions will represent the actions of moonshiners all over the Appalachian South, and he is

anxious about performing the identity of the “moonshiner” in a way that is not authentic and does not accurately represent moonshiners across the region. In addition to the show’s capability to *preserve* the repertoire of featured moonshiners, it also *represents* the practice of moonshining to many of the show’s viewers who will never experience the practice firsthand. Tim’s anxiety might also reflect his desire to give up individual autonomy and provide viewers with an authentic representation of all moonshiners in the Appalachian South.

While the first two seasons of *Moonshiners* seemed to transcend its reality television genre, the show has since regressed in its depiction of Appalachian southerners, increasingly focusing on the misadventures of Tickle and promoting an online series called “Tickle’s Takes” where Tickle responds to questions fielded by the producers. His antics on the show and his short “takes” seemingly poke fun at his hillbilly characteristics. “Tickle’s Takes” were popular with viewers, and Tickle now has his own reality television show that also airs on the Discovery Channel. In later seasons, producers also devote more air time to Jim Tom, a “raconteur” of sorts who entertains the audience with his often implausible stories that reaffirm stereotypes about southern Appalachians. This turn back to stereotypical depictions of southern Appalachians as hicks and hillbillies might demonstrate Jennifer Pozner’s assertion that reality television exists to turn a profit, to simply entertain viewers without forcing them to confront situations that challenge their worldview. However, the first two seasons of the show revealed the show’s capacity to challenge stereotypes about the Appalachian South and southern Appalachians, and with an audience of over two million viewers, the show’s social message was widely disseminated. Why did *Moonshiners* regress back toward one-dimensional representations of Appalachian southerners, and does that turn undermine the politically progressive message of the first two seasons? As reality television becomes more and more popular, and as reality television

shows increasingly focus on “marginalized” people and cultures, perhaps we should consider what’s at stake in the representational practices of reality television.

Furthermore, in many of “Tickle’s Takes,” it also seems as if Tickle is clearly “playing the part” of a hillbilly for the camera, which also calls into question the performers’ motives for agreeing to participate in a reality television project. In several recent newspaper articles, many journalists examine reality television, and question whether or not the show’s performers “play the stereotype” for financial gain (Goodman). Specifically, many articles about the TLC show, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* question whether or not the featured family is in on the joke, fully understanding “the wink-wink that TLC is giving the country [...] the green light to laugh at rednecks and fat people” (Goodman). Goodman asserts that when the characters know that they are the target of ridicule, they “become annoying because now they’ve taken the power we had over them—laughing at their pathetic lives—and are turning it into cash.” If June Shannon (“Mama June” in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*) and other reality television performers understand that their performances are lucrative because they are stereotypical and perform the stereotype to attract viewers, what wider implications might that have on the cultural impact of reality television? Their knowledge seems to challenge the stereotypes that they perform on television. Furthermore, compensating reality television stars for performing stereotypes seems to create another commodification of culture where representatives of a marginalized group sell stereotypes about their regional culture to viewers who readily pay for the schadenfreude that “prov[es] their own superiority” (Morrissey).

Other journalists argue that reality television “depicts and humanizes a national reality that too often gets ignored on TV” (Yarrow). “For many Americans,” Yarrow argues, specifically discussing *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, “poverty, obesity, teen pregnancy and

unemployment are facts of life, just as they are for the Thompsons/Shannons.” In this sense, reality television shows might confront its viewers with “an America that exists” which “may not [be] an America that you like” (Morrissey). Morrissey continues to argue that many reality television shows allowed “young viewers to connect, empathize, and identify” with “dozens of openly gay, bisexual, and transgender people.” Journalists like Morrissey advocate for a closer analysis of popular television’s impact on cultural transmission.

As I have argued, the first two seasons of *Moonshiners* features southern Appalachian people who more accurately represent regional identities and challenge more stereotypical depictions of moonshiners prevalent in popular culture prior to its release. While the debate regarding whether reality television performers “play the stereotype” as many believe, or are their “authentic selves,” confronting viewers with social issues and effecting social change with their performances, may not have a clear answer, it is clear that reality television cannot be dismissed as “trash.” Instead, reality television provides cultural critics with a way to investigate how people interact with popular culture and how those interactions might inform our perceptions of ourselves and others. While this thesis investigates the work that *Moonshiners*’ producers and performers do to challenge stereotypes, future investigations of reality television might also investigate how audiences react to messages that challenge widely held beliefs about other regions and cultures. Our growing ability to measure how audiences react to reality television might allow future scholars to better understand the way that it can influence popular opinion about collective identities.

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