Holler-ing Back: Cultural (mis)representations of Appalachia in the Shadow of 2016

Thesis Submitted to The University of Nottingham

for the Degree of Masters of Research in American Studies

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Defining the indefinable: The politicised geography of race, poverty and privilege in the mountains

"Appalachian poverty has seldom been portrayed simply as poverty, but as the expression and symbol of something larger."[1] Though Roger Lohman made this observation in 1990, it feels particularly pertinent today as the US grapples with the new normal of a Trump presidency and pundits, journalists and academics continue to rake over the cultural circumstances that lead to it. It is in these ruminations that Appalachia regularly comes to the fore. Both in the lead up to the 2016 election and in the aftermath, a narrative emerged, perpetuated by politicians and journalists on both sides of the aisle, that Appalachia was ground zero'[2] of 'Trump country' and that if there was any explanation for how or why President Trump came to be, it lay somewhere with the people and culture of this region. This thesis is not intended to probe the validity of that narrative *too* deeply, though cogent literature certainly exists to dispel it and will certainly be engaged with when relevant. It will instead seek to explore what the cultural and political curiosity with Appalachia that has arisen as a result of this consensus has to tell us about wider issues of class, race and culture in the contemporary US and how these issues intersect and manifest themselves in different forms of cultural representation.

Cultural curiosity with Appalachia is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, in her book *What you are getting wrong about Appalachia,* Elizabeth Catte outlines the storied history of the wider US's fickle fascination with the region, believing it to be cyclical in nature. She identifies The Great Depression and President Johnson's War on Poverty and the associated photojournalism of the likes of Walker Evans and *Life* magazine respectively, as two key eras

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[1] Roger Lohman*A Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, Vol. 2, Transformation of life and labour in Appalachia (1990)

[2] Elizabeth Catte *What you're getting wrong about Appalachia (*Cleveland:Belt, 2018), Kindle edition

where preoccupation with Appalachia previously reached fever pitch. Whether with the intention of garnering sympathy or indulging in mockery, all of these periods of national focus, including the present one we are witnessing, have portrayed the region as extremely poor and, crucially, predominantly white. Of course, there is certainly some truth to these portrayals. 85% of the 353 most persistently poor—defined as having had a poverty rate above 20 percent in each of the past three decades—counties in the United States are rural and they tend to fall in four distinct clusters. In 2014 Trip Gabriel defined them as:

> Indian reservations in the West; Hispanic communities in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas; a band across the Deep South and along the Mississippi Delta with a majority black population; and Appalachia, largely white, which has supplied some of America's iconic imagery of rural poverty since the Depression-era photos of Walker Evans.[3]

But white rural poverty is not confined to Appalachia, nor is Appalachia solely white, poor or rural. Yet it has been largely synonymous with 'white rural poverty' for much of the 20th century and into the 21st. Certainly, at the outset of this project I too worked from the premise that Appalachia was both predominantly white and widely impoverished. It was only in the process of my own research that I began to question the validity and unpack the toxicity of this unchecked assumption. West Virginia and Kentucky, both quintessentially Appalachian states with 100% and 45% Appalachian counties respectively, *are* two of the whitest states in the country.[4] But they are both still considerably less white than the likes of Maine and Vermont, largely rural but *affluent* New England states. Similarly, taking Appalachian Kentucky at face value as 'white', ignores the culture and history of places like Harlan county—a 'waystation' in the Great Migration from the South to points north and west, home to a strong population of African American coal miners in the industry's boom

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[3] Trip Gabriel "50 years into the war on poverty, hardship hits back." *The New York Times,* April 20 2014 https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/us/50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-hardship-hits-back.html.

[4] "Whitest states 2019" *World Population review,* Accessed 5 August 2019 http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/whitest-states/.

years and still home to many of their descendants.[5] It also erases the rich 'Affrilacian' culture of the region, a term coined by Frank X Walker to "illustrate the face of Appalachia"[6] to include people like Henry Louis Gates, Nina Simone, August Wilson, Nikki Giovanni, John Edgar Wideman, Kathleen Battle, Bill Withers, Booker T Washington, and Carter G. Woodson, the omission of whom from the conventional definition of the region Walker believed to be "almost criminal"[7].

Furthermore, one of the most affluent states in the entire country is the state of Virginia despite 26% of its counties being classed as Appalachian.[8] How do these nuances square with the persistent narrative of Appalachia as unambiguously poor and white? Interrogating this enduring portrayal, Meredith McCarroll explains: "Appalachia resides in the American imagination at the intersections of race and class. There is a deep historical investment in seeing the region as 'pure white stock' and as deeply impoverished and backward." Certainly, disparaging terms such as 'white trash', 'redneck' and, in particular, 'hillbilly' either trace their roots to Appalachia or have been used with regularity to describe its inhabitants.[9] Compounding (yet occasionally also contradicting) these stereotypes is what Elizabeth Catte calls the 'myth'of the 'Scots-Irish'.[10] This is the idea that not only is Appalachia homogeneously white but also largely ethnically uniform, populated overwhelmingly by those of 'Scots-Irish' descent. Razib Khan explains the Scots-Irish, or 'Ulster-Scots', as an ethnic group as those who:

> emigrated to the New World from Ireland and the border region between Scotland and England in the middle of the 1700s. These were not Catholic Irish, or Gaelic speaking

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[5] Peter Kurlya "Black in Appalachia: Author explains how ideas of home have shaped overlooked population" *Knox news* October 13 2018 https://eu.knoxnews.com/story/life/2018/10/13/black-appalachia-karida-brown-explores-overlooked-population/1578633002/

[6] Virginia Rosenberg "What is Affrilacia? An interview with Frank X Walker" virginiarosenberg.com Sept 15 2016 https://readwritepoetry.blogspot.com/2014/06/an-interview-with-frank-x-walker.html.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Casey Leins "The 10 wealthiest states" *US News,* 16 May 2019 https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/10-wealthiest-states-in-america.

[9] Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400 year untold history of Class in America* (New York: Penguin, 2016) Kindle edition

[10] Elizabeth Catte, *What You're Getting Wrong About Appalachia,* (Cleveland: Belt, 2018).

> Highlanders. Rather, they were tough Presbyterian Protestants, whose cousins still remain committed to their distinctive identity in Ulster in Northern Ireland.[11]

He adds that they "arrived to the port of Philadelphia, and spread south via the spine of the Appalachians."[12] But Catte believes that both their influence and presence has been greatly overstated. She cites modern historian Wilma Dunaway as just one Appalachian scholar who has set about disproving this myth of the "ethnic homogeneity thesis" using primary sources from the Appalachian frontier and archaeological evidence to show that 18th century Appalachia was a diverse mix of various European ethnic groups in addition to considerable numbers of those of African and indigenous descent.[13]

The enduring myth of a shared white ethnicity in Appalachia is dangerous because it is used as, somewhat paradoxically, both an excuse for racism that emanates from the region and prejudice that is directed towards it. In *Dear Appalachia* Emily Satterwhite argues that the idea of Appalachia as ethnically distinct "has served to reassure white Americans of the persistence of an indigenous, white national culture."[14] Despite the aforementioned efforts to disprove it, the idea of a shared ethnic heritage among white Appalachians is a tenacious one in the public imagination and popular culture. It recurs with regularity, from both left- and right-wing perspectives, in many of the primary texts referred to in the following chapters of this thesis. Indeed, Catte takes aim at the perpetuation of the myth in *Hillbilly Elegy*, the highly popular and controversial memoir by self-professed 'Hillbilly' and Yale Law graduate JD Vance that features as one of the key source materials examined more thoroughly in chapter 1 below and recurs often throughout this thesis.[15] But it can also be found as defining

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[11] Razib Khan "The Scots-Irish as Indigenous People" *The Unz Review: An Alternative Media Selection,* July 22 2012 http://www.unz.com/gnxp/the-scots-irish-as-indigenous-people/.
[12] *ibid*
[13] Wilma Dunaway "The legacy of social Darwinism in Appalachian Scholarship" Online archive for Southern Laboring Women: The Gendered Boundaries of Race, Ethnicity, https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/faculty_archives/appalachian_women/ethnicit.htm
[14] Emily Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia: Readers, identity and popular fiction since 1978* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011)
[15] Catte, *What you're getting wrong* 64

trope in Joe Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from American's Class War.*[16] Bageant's work predates *Hillbilly Elegy* by nine years and is rooted firmly in the midst of the George W Bush/Iraq war era, but is something of a precursor to *Elegy* as both books' primary function was to 'explain' their demographic to the urban dwelling middle classes. However, the two tomes differ vastly in their political stance with Joe Bageant's approach to his Appalachian hometown largely sympathetic, laying the blame for the poverty and dysfunction squarely at the feet of neoliberalism and the military industrial complex while Vance's memoir employs many right-wing tropes about the people he grew up with and credits his joining the US marines with saving him from a similar feckless, dysfunctional fate. Nevertheless, both texts rely heavily on the notion of a shared Scots-Irish ethnicity to underpin many of their arguments, demonstrating that the myth serves rhetorical purposes for both conservatives and liberals.

But if Appalachia is not the whitest part of the country, nor the site of some preserved historically homogenous white ethnicity, what explains wider white America's enduring preoccupation with the region? If we cannot say that Appalachia is the whitest or necessarily the poorest part of the US what we perhaps *can* say is that it is the poorest, whitest part. And it is this distinction that has allowed it to be something of a lightning rod for wider political and social anxieties throughout the 20th century and reprise the role again in this current cycle of national focus. As various schools of thought on the causes and solutions of poverty meandered in and out of intellectual fashion during the 20th century, one unifying factor was a fixation on the Appalachian region. As previously touched upon, Johnson's War on Poverty had a heavy focus on Appalachia and the war was even 'declared' from the front porch of a home in Martin County, Kentucky, with an accompanying iconic photo opportunity. This

[16] Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007) Kindle Edition

also loosely coincided with the release of Michael Harrington's seminal monograph *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) which drew American's attention to the poverty in largely black urban areas and largely white rural areas, including many in Appalachia. In this post war, suburban boom era of unprecedented affluence , John R Burch believes, "Appalachia thus came to symbolize the failure of the American dream."[17] But depictions of Appalachian poverty also served a racialised purpose in the era, giving Johnson's War on Poverty a palatable white face while some of the enterprises actually focussed on improving the lot of impoverished black Americans.

Yet while white Appalachian poverty may have been viewed more sympathetically than black urban poverty among wider white America, victim-blaming theories to explain its existence also abounded and took hold. In 1959 Oscar Lewis' anthropological theory of a 'culture of poverty'[18] gained traction in academic circles. Despite common misconceptions today, its focus was not initially the Appalachian region but actually Mexican slum dwellers. But it eventually found itself regularly applied to the Appalachian region as an explanation of how and why its inhabitants were ill-equipped to deal with the forces of modernisation. By the late 1970s, Helen Lewis and Edward Knipe counter-argued that the region was actually a victim of 'internal colonialism, a term first used to describe 1950s South Africa. The connotations of 'colonialism', while damning, arguably implied that the geographically isolated area was a relic of the British empire and all the US had sought to free itself from. [19]The crux of Lewis' argument, however, was that colonialism was being perpetuated from within and the area had developed unevenly as a result of deliberate exploitation from successive governments, both on the national and, crucially, local level, indicting an insular

[17] John R Burch Jr, *Owsley County Kentucky, and the Perpetuation of Poverty* (McFarland &Co: Jefferson, 2008) 4

[18] "Culture of Poverty". In Moynihan, Daniel P. (ed.). *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. New York: Basic Books

[19] Helen Lewis, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone: Appalachian State University press. 1978).

power structure of corrupt local elites that plundered the region's vast natural resources and exploited the working class. This explanation firmly rebuked the idea of an inherent deficiency in the people there or a 'culture of poverty'. Despite the ensuing half century, incarnations of both these theories still largely dominate the discourse about poverty in Appalachia today and shape much of the analysis of the issues raised in this larger thesis. After its publication in 2016, *Hillbilly Elegy* was accused by many of dealing in hackneyed culture-of-poverty tropes to explain the region to rubbernecking outsiders.[20] Conversely, the left-wing populist and West Virginia politician Richard Ojeda clearly invoked the language of internal colonialism when he ran for congress in 2018, saying of West Virginia 'we're not a state, we're a colony' in a live social media video as part of his campaign.[21]

If the 1960s War on Poverty was the previous climacteric for Appalachia's role as a national lightning rod for anxieties about class and race, there is strong evidence that the seeds of the current fixation were sown during the escalating opioid crisis over the last two decades, an epidemic that has now left virtually no corner of the continental United States untouched, but that by most reckonings can be traced to central Appalachia in the late 1990s.[22] Indeed, many journalists have since made somewhat clumsy analogies and links between the analgesic effect of opiates and that of Donald Trump's rhetoric for certain Appalachian communities. But crucially, Catte like many others believes the present resurgence of interest in the region grew to a crescendo in the 2016 election season when the media "cast Appalachia as a uniquely tragic and toxic region."[23] In the lead up to polling day, she argues that journalists searching for 'Trump Country regularly ran features on Appalachia, castigating American liberals for living in a 'bubble', urging them to look

[20] Anthony Harkins & Meredith Carroll, *Appalachian Reckoning: A region responds to Hillbilly Elegy (*Morganton: West Virginia University Press, 2019).
[21] Richard Ojeda's Facebook page. Accessed November, 2018.https://www.facebook.com/RichardOjeda2020/.
[22] Nadja Popovich, "A Deadly Crisis:Mapping the spread of America's drug overdose epidemic" *The Guardian ,* May 25 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/society/ng-interactive/2016/may/25/opioid-epidemic-overdose-deaths-map.
[23] Catte, What You're Getting Wrong.

beyond it for the elusive 'real America' and listen to the grievances emanating from there. [24]The trend was so ubiquitous that it spawned a new genre of journalism, that of the 'Trump Country' piece. Many more such pieces will appear as primary sources chapter 3, but as an example here is a segment from an ominous pre-election 'Trump country' piece that ran in Politico in 2016:

> Donald Trump's road to the White House begins here: on a four-lane highway, just east of Pittsburgh, past the roadside taverns, burned-out gas stations, and parking lots choked with weeds, up into the dark fingers of the Allegheny Mountains, and then down into the valley that was once home to steelworkers, coal miners and party-line Democrats.[25]

The piece goes on to interview many residents of the area who proffer somewhat on-the-nose soundbites such as "when we talk about the white working class in the United States, this is the place that could be described as the face of that demographic."[26]

What's particularly compelling about the pre-election Trump country genre is that the sympathetic portrayals largely emanated from traditionally 'liberal' publications whereas those with a more paternalistic, admonishing tone stemmed largely from conservative journalists. One particularly vicious pre-election piece by anti-Trump conservative Kevin Williamson exemplified this attitude well:

> The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs … The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin.[27]

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Keith O'Brien "Uprising in the Rust Belt" *Politico* June 24 2016 https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/coal-country-democrats-donald-trump-2016-213988.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Kevin Williamson, "The Father- Furher" *National Review,* March 28 2016 https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2016/03/28/father-f-hrer/.

But post-election, the liberal tone abruptly shifted in some quarters. Shocked and clearly angered by the result, liberals penned a spate of rejoinder pieces lambasting 'Trump country' and fellow liberals who had erroneously pitied them. In early 2017, in a *New York Magazine* piece entitled 'No more sympathy for the Hillbilly', liberal columnist Frank Rich reprimanded his fellow progressives for engaging in 'hillbilly chic'.[28] Similarly, in December 2016, The Daily Kos ran an uncredited piece telling liberals: "Don't weep for these coal miners, now abandoned by their GOP patrons. They are getting exactly the government that they voted for. Democrats can no longer offer unrequited love and cover for them."[29] Conservatives, meanwhile, were content to gloat that the Democrats had lost the election because they had focussed on identity issues at the expense of 'real America'. But many liberals appeared to concur with this assessment,[30] rendering the post-election op-ed landscape largely uniform in its scorn. Despite virtually no Appalachian voices being allowed into the fray, the 2016 post mortem that played out on the op-ed pages for months afterwards used Appalachia as its stage.

What is 'Appalachia'?

We have already seen that the very idea of Appalachia as a region, distinct from other areas of the country, homogenous in ethnicity, socio-economics, cultural values and voting patterns is deeply problematic. But it also confused by the very concept of Appalachia itself. Despite being the third oldest geographical place name in North America, "Appalachia has become a catchphrase to describe a particular region of the country with little thought given

[28] Frank Rich, "No More sympathy for the hillbilly" *Intelligencer* March 2017 http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/frank-rich-no-sympathy-for-the-hillbilly.html.

[29] "Be happy for coal miners losing their health insurance they're getting exactly what they voted for" *Daily Kos* December 12 2016 https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2016/12/12/1610198/-Be-happy-for-coal-miners-losing-their-health-insurance-They-re-getting-exactly-what-they-voted-for .

[30] Mark Lila "The end of Identity Liberalism" *The New York Times* November 18 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html.

as to how broad of a place such a term incorporates."[31] Exploring the notion Michael Bradshaw said, "in the minds of most geographers, Appalachia is a physical entity."[32] He was referring of course, to the mountain range from which it takes its name, stretching from Southern New York State to Northern Alabama and Mississippi. But as a cultural entity, the region is not always as easily defined. For one thing, unlike other regions in the United States such as New England or The Deep South, it is not characterised by a grouping of states but rather by counties spread across 13 states. Indeed, West Virginia is the only state to be considered 100% Appalachian within its borders. Other states only have designated swathes delineated as Appalachian. Complicating matters further, is the fact that many of the counties are within states that have other strong regional identities. For example, one could be Southern *and* Appalachian, but Appalachian is not synonymous with being Southern (although some stereotypes can overlap). Similarly, regions can be considered both 'Rust Belt' *and* Appalachian (see certainly parts of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York state) but despite careless media blurrings of these two distinctions in recent years, they too are not synonymous. Equally, to what extent can a county in New York State be viewed as part of a homogeneous region that also encompasses areas of Mississippi? To most peoples' minds these two states would perfectly epitomise the supposed cultural, regional and political polarisation, both historically and currently, of the US. Indeed, Meredith McCarroll summarises the confusion best, arguing "the difficulty to define Appalachia has itself become a defining characteristic."[33]

In response to these obvious issues, Bradshaw separated Appalachia into three smaller, distinct regions. He argued that as the Northern third was industrialised from the mid

[31] "Understanding the 7 distinct 'nations' of Appalachia" *Appalachian magazine* January 30th 2017. http://appalachianmagazine.com/2017/01/30/understanding-the-7-distinct-nations-of-appalachia/

[32] Michael Bradshawl. *Appalachian Regional Commission- Twenty five years of government policy* (University of Kentucky Press 1992) 13.

[33] Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia Race and film* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), Kindle edition 46.

nineteenth century onwards it was distinct from the central region which formed the majority of the border states in the civil war before being isolated and exploited for coal. This was in turn distinguishable from the Southern third deeply afflicted by the post-civil war economic disaster. This assessment was made in 1992, but in the ensuing years things have gradually become even more convoluted given the briefly aforementioned phenomenon across cultural and political discourse of conflating regions and identities in the US that were once more clearly defined. This phenomenon reflects a general shift in the political and cultural geography of the country, something that analysis surrounding the 2016 election certainly brought to the fore but that had been fermenting for years previously. In 2013, a map from Colin Woodward's book *American Nations* showing the US divided into 11 distinct 'nation states' including 'Greater Appalachia' went viral after it was reprinted in *The Washington Post* and readers obsessed and argued over the boundaries and definitions of regions in contemporary America (Figure 1).

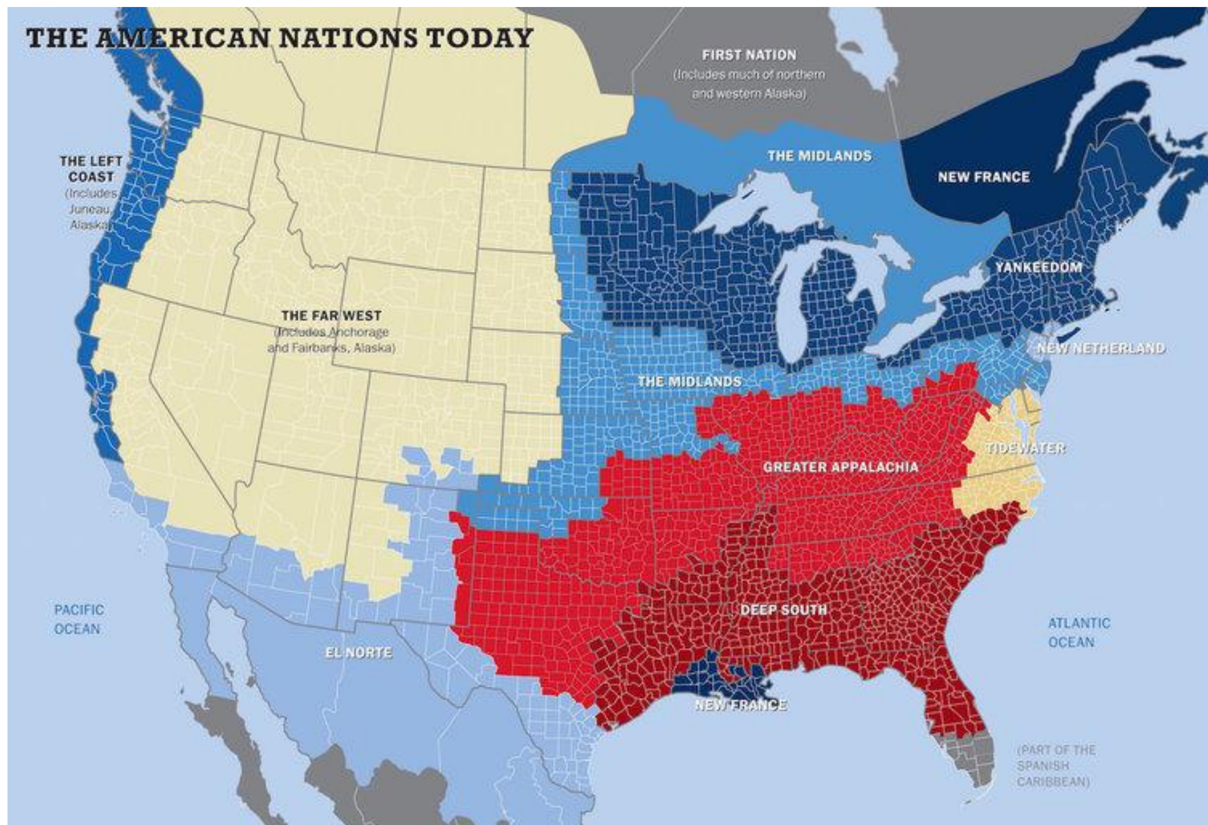

Figure 1[34]

In the map, 'Greater Appalachia' was delineated as a far vaster region than conventional definitions of Appalachia, spreading into what would traditionally be viewed as the Midwest and parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and even as far west as New Mexico. But interestingly, it also eliminated much of Pennsylvania coal country—traditional Appalachian heartlands—drawing its border at the far southern end of the large state instead and splitting the rest between two separate regions of 'New Netherland' and 'Yankiedom'. Woodward describes the inhabitants of Greater Appalachia as being "characterized by a warrior ethic and a commitment to personal sovereignty and individual liberty" as well as being "intensely suspicious of lowland aristocrats and Yankee social engineers", a description that correlates with much of the current cultural and racial, 'scots-Irish' characterizations of

[34] Colin Woodward, *American Nations: A History of the eleven rival regional cultures of North America* (New York: Random House, 2012).

Appalachia we will see throughout this thesis. [35]Woodward explained his work thus: "Our continent's famed mobility has been reinforcing, not dissolving, regional differences, as people increasingly sort themselves into like-minded communities."[36] This speaks to an idea that will become a focal point of discussion in this thesis: that Appalachia has ceased to be a strict geographical region and is instead now viewed as more of a cultural identity and/or a mindset, a concept that has been bought into and perpetuated by both the left and the right of the political spectrum and reinforced in popular culture.

However, far from adhering to a 'Greater Appalachia' identity, Appalachians themselves seem to be self-identifying into smaller internal clusters. *Appalachian magazine*, a grassroots journalism project that came to fruition out of the frustration Appalachians felt at the media's ongoing erroneous and problematic portrayals of the region, produced an article and accompanying map identifying seven distinct 'nations' of Appalachia (Figure 2). It was intended as a "helpful guide that details 'The Seven Distinct 'Nations' of Appalachia', showcasing what makes each one of these places so incredible and different," and its intended audience was "our friends in the media, who may be unaware of this reality."[37] The nations they identified were: Agrilachia, Appalachian coalfields, Metrolachia, Dixielachia, Yankeelachia, Pennsylachia and Smoky Mountains. Their architects explained that the nations "have very little in common with state boundaries and were formulated using election data, shared histories, socio-economic identities and natural geography in order to provide the reader with a more accurate guide to understanding the folks in 'them thur hills.'"[38]

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] "Understanding the 7 distinct 'nations' of Appalachia" *Appalachian magazine* January 30th 2017 http://appalachianmagazine.com/2017/01/30/understanding-the-7-distinct-nations-of-appalachia/
[38] Ibid.

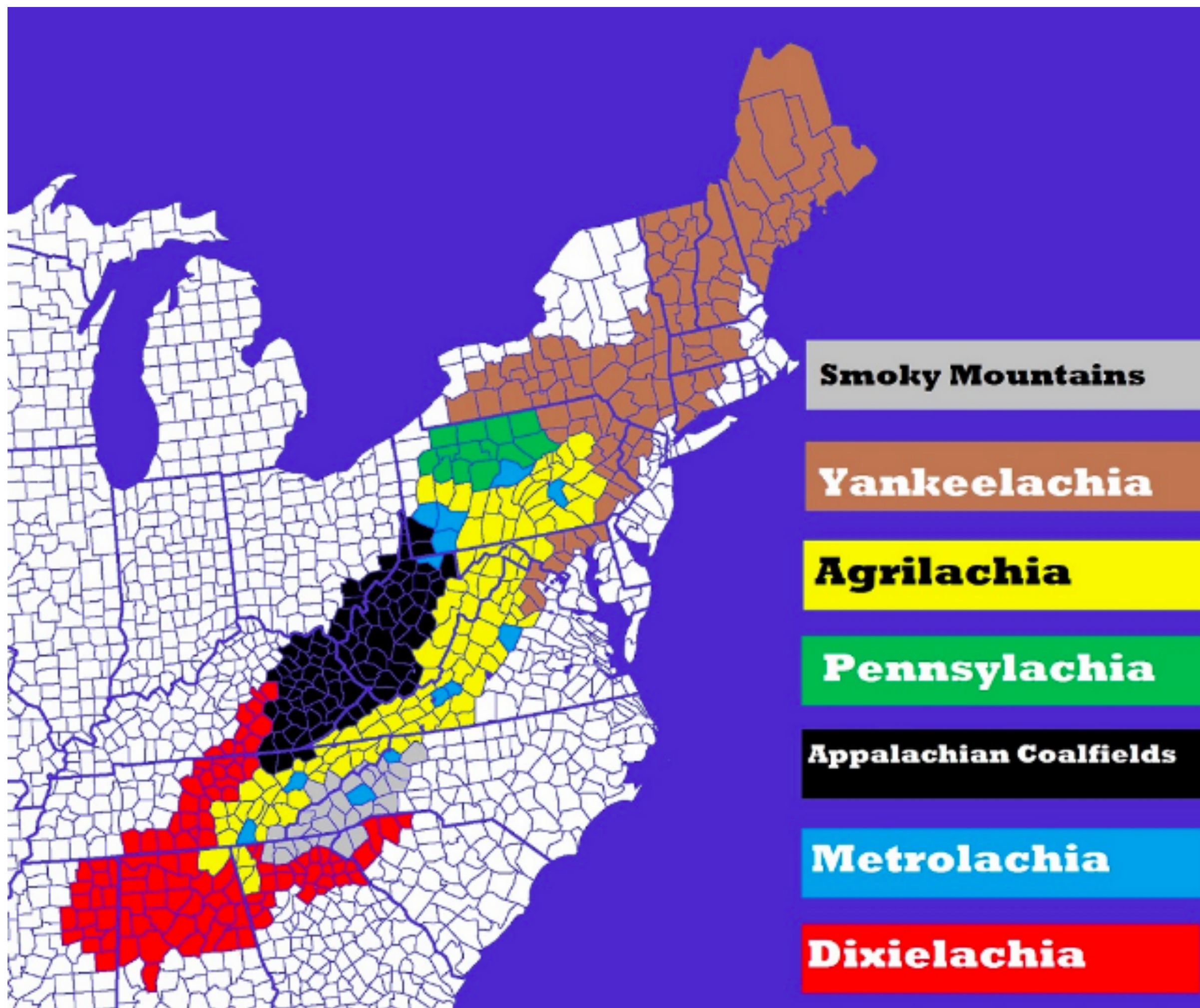

Figure 2

But one only had to look at the comments on the article to see that these 'nations' and their boundaries weren't without controversy, either. Among many things to cause consternation, the inclusion of Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts as part of Yankeelachia (or any part of Appalachia at all, for that matter) and the simultaneous omission of parts of Appalachian Ohio seemed to particularly rankle. After all, for a region that invokes such ambiguity and confusion regarding its definition, it *is* bound by an ostensibly clear method for establishing its parameters. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) defines 420 counties in 13 states as Appalachian. West Virginia is the only state to be fully, 100% Appalachian and nearly 78% of counties in Pennsylvania are. Yet even this definition

has proven to be problematic, political and contested. Though the ARC was founded in 1965, Appalachia as a region and entity obviously predated its inception and the ARC made use of existing, loose geographical and cultural boundaries. But Catte, amongst others, argues that the ARC's "primary lens was economic."[39] Founded during the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, the ARC as a result saw the region as "defined by poverty and subsequently poverty came to be defined by the region."[40] Bolstering this assertion is the fact that certain geographically contentious counties in Mississippi were included under the ARC umbrella purely because of their level of deprivation. In contrast, counties in the quintessentially Appalachian Shenandoah and Roanoke valleys had the opportunity to be included but the majority of residents declined. They worried that being associated with 'Appalachia' could be a deterrent, limiting the interest of private sector businesses to locate in the counties—a testament to the negative connotations 'Appalachia' had long held.

When researching this project, I spoke informally to two of the authors of *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto*, a primary source I utilise in chapter one, Trae Crowder and Drew Morgan. I was interested to know why Drew Morgan, from Anderson county Tennessee, identified as Appalachian regularly throughout the text whereas Trae Crowder, from Clay county Tennessee, which is also included in the ARC borders, did not. Surprisingly, Crowder told me that this was the first time he had even heard that Clay county was considered Appalachian. Evidently, even the ARC parameters are problematic and not a reliable tool in the never-ending discussion of what constitutes Appalachia and what does not. Similarly, as we will see further in chapter 1, *Hillbilly Elegy* author JD Vance grew up in Middleton, Ohio which is not Appalachian by any definition, historical or otherwise. Yet he took it upon himself to speak for all of Appalachia in his 'memoir of a culture in crisis'.

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[39] Catte, *What You're Getting Wrong.*
[40] Ibid.

These geographical semantics will crop up regularly throughout the thesis and foster much discussion about ethnicity, social class and identity, but for the purposes of clarity I will largely be adopting the ARC definition of Appalachia, despite its many aforementioned flaws. With very few exceptions, most of the primary sources analysed in this thesis will involve regions that are rather unambiguously Appalachian. This includes parts of Pennsylvania that the media often appears to prefer to label 'rust belt' or 'coal country'. Essentially, while the malleability of the cultural and media definition of Appalachia is a salient issue in and of itself, much of the attention that Trump's ascendency has brought to the region has been focussed on what would be considered *central* Appalachia: West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Tennessee and Southern Pennsylvania. While the geography and vocabulary of the area is often confused and fudged and, as we will continue to see, in contemporary discourse Appalachia sometimes simply seems to mean 'anywhere that is rural and not a cosmopolitan metropolis', the physical geography of Appalachia is also important and political— and always has been. Not only do many portrayals of Appalachian inhabitants show them to be 'stuck' figuratively (in cycles of poverty, limited employment prospects and drug dependency) but the physical landscape of the area is often implied to be partly responsible and emblematic of this, too. They are *physically* stuck in a mountainous, geographically isolated part of the United States. And the accompanying inference to this fact is: why would anyone choose to live in such a remote, hostile and difficult area and expect to prosper?

Again, this characterization satisfies both left and right political biases. For the left, it signifies the limits of neoliberalism, the resource-rich land being plundered at the expense of the isolated and neglected local folk, often portrayed as relics of a non-materialistic, agrarian bygone era. For the right, it fits with an idea of a lazy and feckless poor, lacking the all-American initiative and pioneer spirit to leave and chase prosperity. This characterization is

particularly curious as it was not always thus. Razib Khan, while perpetuating the Scots Irish myth, argues that early attitudes to Appalachian residents were positive, characterising them as "the prototypical cowboys, pushing into the Appalachian wilderness despite the attempts of the British crown to restrain them."[41] But according to Steven Stoll this attitude shifted somewhere in the 19th century around the era of Manifest Destiny. While agrarian society was of course held in high regard during the period, the Appalachian model of it did not fit the bill, as he explains, "when they weren't moving westward anymore they no longer advanced the American empire. Their story no longer coincided with the one about a nation destined to embrace a continent."[42] They were not pioneers temporarily lost in the wilderness, they were stuck permanently. And it is this narrative of a geographic pertinacity that dogs analysis of Appalachians today. In *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance laments: "Many of us have dropped out of the labor force or have chosen not to relocate for better opportunities."[43] The argument was echoed more crudely and ruthlessly by fellow conservative journalist, Kevin Williamson in the 2016 election cycle thus: "What they need isn't analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul."[44]

A post-2016 language

Since this most recent resurgence of interest in the region, the traditional language of class, economic disadvantage, as much as it was ever particularly common parlance in the

[41] Razib Khan "The Scots-Irish as Indigenous People".
[42] Steve Stoll. *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal Of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017) , 276.
[43] Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*.
[44] Kevin D Williamson, "Chaos in the Family, Chaos in the State: The White Working Class's Dysfunction" *National Review ,March 17 2016.*

US, has been superseded by a new vocabulary, the etymology of which deserves attention. Changing linguistic trends are usually more gradual, but like many other cultural facets, seem to have exploded and evolved rapidly since the 2016 election. Words and terms such as (but by no means limited to); **coastal elites, flyover country, trump country, acela corridor, coal country, the heartlands, portland baristas, rust belt, white working class** all crop up with regularity in primary and secondary sources consulted for this thesis. The idea of a cultural war between 'coastal elites' and the rest of 'real America' is one that has taken firm root on both the left and the right since the election of Trump. What this means for language is that the need to describe the economic and cultural divides that characterise Trump's America—whether real, imaginary or greatly exaggerated—has led to a plethora of new terms and the recycling and merging of old ones. But many of these terms are being used interchangeably and misleadingly. And those on the political left are as guilty of this as those on the right.

Just one example of this among many can be found in the documentary *Angry White and American* made by British, left-wing journalist Gary Younge in 2017.[45] The premise of the film is Younge traversing the US talking to Americans about race in the wake of the Trump election. At one point, after visiting rural Appalachian Pennsylvania he leaves to drive further South, presumably crossing the Mason-Dixon line. As he does, he states: "I'm now driving to the South which northerners think of as hillbillies." But the irony is, he is leaving rural Appalachia for a Southern Eastern metropolis. The term hillbilly originated as a descriptor primarily for Appalachian people. Residents of urban Atlanta, while no doubt historically southern, would be more likely to level the moniker of hillbilly at residents of rural Pennsylvania than vice versa. His terminology, while offhand, is confused and this

45 *Angry White and American.* Gary Younge. (2017:UK:Channel 4).

confusion is telling of the wider difficulties in categorizing Americans politically and geographically.

Another problem much of the new and evolving phraseology has is that the social class connotations don't always make much sense. A compelling reason for this is that nobody seems to be sure whether they are talking about a cultural divide, a socio-economic divide or both. A sound example is a passage from *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* by comedic trio Trae Crowder, Corey Forrester and Drew Morgan. In it, the men repeatedly use the term 'Portland baristas'[46] as a catch-all term for urban liberals who, while socially conscious and politically correct in virtually every other walk of life, deal in the currency of offensive stereotypes about the rural South. While the point they are making with this term is a valid and salient one about cultural snobbery, it is also ripe for analysis. The authors are fixating on a cultural divide in the US and their choice of a barista for a caricature is interesting. Not least because baristas generally earn minimum wage or just above it in virtually every state, including Oregon.[47] In many ways, one gets the impression the term was designed as a more quirky and amusing synonym for 'coastal elites', a term that seemingly developed overnight and is now virtually unavoidable in all discourse surrounding the 2016 election.[48] But what is remotely elite about a precarious, minimum wage job? Furthermore, their cultural nemesis, the hillbilly, could very well be an *employed* coal miner earning nearly $60,000.[49] While *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* does indeed go on to have a more nuanced conversation about the intersection of class and culture, this particular example demonstrates something crucial about the wider current discourse and something that will become a central

[46] Trae Crowder Corey Forrester & Drew Morgan, *Dragging Dixie out of the Dark:*
[47] "How much does a barista earn an hour?" *Chron* Accessed 1 August 2019 https://work.chron.com/much-barista-earn-per-hour-14009.html.
[48] David Masciota, "Real Americans vs Coastal Elites: What right wing sneers at city dwellers really mean" *Salon,* November 20 2016 https://www.salon.com/2016/11/20/real-americans-vs-coastal-elites-what-right-wing-sneers-at-city-dwellers-really-mean/.
[49] "Average coal mine worker hourly pay" *Payscale* accessed 1 August 2019 https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Coal_Mine_Worker/Hourly_Rate.

part of my investigation and argument: that the US cultural and political left and right have colluded to talk about class largely in muddled cultural terms, obscuring a class war with a cultural one.

That is not to say there is not a conversation to be had about cultural manifestations of class division in the contemporary US, far from it, and that conversation will play out on many pages of this thesis. It also does not mean that a conversation about economic inequality has to be had at the expense of one of many other forms of inequality, though this is, indeed, an apparently pervasive belief in contemporary political circles. The fact that social class is often talked about as a separate phenomenon to issues of race, gender and sexuality is, I intend to argue, the fault of the current American left establishment and both their discomfort with talking about class and their inability to integrate class conscious language into otherwise socially-liberal, 'woke'[50] discussions. A stubborn, erroneous and damaging belief that class is at loggerheads with other 'progressive' causes has come to define much contemporary left rhetoric: a "false dichotomy of economic equality versus identity politics."[51] Heather McGee, a distinguished senior fellow and former president of left think tank Demos articulated this perfectly when she said:

> The problem is Democrats in power today hear 'we need to chase the white working class' and that doesn't say to them 'we need to take on Wall Street or we need to fight for unions and not be for corporate-driven global trade deals'. They hear that and say 'we need to stop talking about race'… And when that happens you suppress the votes and enthusiasm of those who are your natural base. And you just look like cowards to everyone else.[52]

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[50] Merriam Wester definition of 'woke': Aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).

[51] Jon Favreau interview with Sean McElwee *The Wilderness Crooked Media* Podcast Audio Sept 4 2018 https://crooked.com/podcast/chapter-12-the-party/.

[52] Ibid interview with Heather McGee

This perceived conflict is part of what some have termed the 'Calamity thesis'[53]—an explanation that emerged for Trump's victory which Adam Serwer articulates as: "the belief that Trump's election was the direct result of some great, unacknowledged social catastrophe—the opioid crisis, free trade, a decline in white Americans' life expectancy—heretofore ignored by cloistered elites in their coastal bubbles."[54] In other words, while liberals have been busy passing affirmative action laws or discussing sexual harassment in Hollywood, a calamity happening to the invisible 'white working class' has been ignored. Serwer further argues that the irony of the "Calamity Thesis" is that it is "by far the preferred *white-elite* explanation for Trumpism, and is frequently invoked in arguments among elites as a way of accusing other elites of being out of touch."[55] This irony correlates with the self-flagellating and flip-flopping that played out in sections of the liberal media pre and post 2016 election, as outlined earlier. Aside from who is and isn't an 'elite' and whether it is defined by geographical location, material wealth, education or a combination of these factors, it's increasingly clear that it's a negative label no-one wants to own, synonymous with being out of touch, naive, blind to your own *privilege.*

White Privilege

The language of class and culture's rapid evolution in the latter half of this decade has also coincided with the popularisation of the terminology associated with an academic theory previously used in predominantly academic circles, convoluting the conversation even further. That is the theory of intersectionality, a term first coined by Kimberley Crenshaw in 1989.[56] Crenshaw posited that black women could not and should not think of the two

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[53] Adam Serwer ,"The Nationalist's Delusion" *The Atlantic November 20 2017* (first reference I can find, but seems to have been emulated elsewhere since) https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-nationalists-delusion/546356/.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kimberley Crenshaw, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex": A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *University of Chicago Legal Forum* No1(1989) 8

oppressions (misogyny and racism) they faced separately and that the two were far more tightly interwoven; they intersected. Her ruminations on race and gender were born from a frustration on dual fronts that the feminist movement centred white women and the civil rights movement centred black men. The theory has subsequently been applied in a range of conversations on race, class, gender and sexuality and wider social justice. In short, oppressions and privileges intersect in everyone's lives and any movement for equality that fails to consider the nuances of these intersections in its analysis is moot and reductive. It is through this lens that I will be primarily approaching this project.

While it may seem odd to utilize a theory largely recognisable for its associations with black feminism to dissect contemporary issues surrounding the white working class, I think it is the correct approach for several reasons. Firstly, as mentioned, despite its firm grounding in academia, intersectionality has recently transcended these roots and become common parlance in more accessible political debate. The hallmark terminology of intersectionality, privilege and oppression are now used with regularity in journalism and on social media. In 2014, while assessing the trajectory and evolution of the theory, Kristin Moe remarked that intersectionality "has become a buzzword in activist circles, at conferences, and in progressive media," [57] and noted that google searches for the term had skyrocketed by 400% since 2009. Because of this shift, intersectionality has already permeated the rhetoric and concepts that arise when looking at cultural representations of the Appalachian white working class and the discourse surrounding them in the contemporary US. A perintent example, is the rhetoric both in *Hillbilly Elegy* and surrounding its release and reception. The book is a neoliberal political manifesto masquerading as a memoir of a low income, dysfunctional Appalachian family. Following the book's huge popularity, openly conservative Vance

[57] Kristin Moe, "The Evolution of Intersectionality: From a theory to a way to fight back" *Yes! Magazine* April 9 2014 https://www.alternet.org/2014/04/evolution-intersectionality-theory-way-fight-back/.

became a regular on the talking head circuit in both the lead up to the election and the aftermath. He regularly used the language of intersectionality and on one such occasion, invoked the theory very pointedly, remarking in an interview with Ezra Klein: “One of the points I’ve tried to make is that if you’re asking the son of a West Virginia coal miner to check his privilege or to appreciate the ways that say, Barack Obama’s daughters are going to be privileged or underprivileged relative in certain ways, I think you’re asking too much from basic cognition.”[58] If the likes of Vance, are weaponizing the language of an academic theory in the process of discrediting it, I feel compelled to address the theory of intersectionality and how it has framed the narrative to this point. The conversation is already being had in intersectional terms, if not always overtly. Those on the left who ascribe to a ‘Calamity thesis’ explanation for Trump’s victory would, and do, argue that a focus ‘identity politics’ has been damaging and needs reversing. ‘Identity politics’, I would argue, is actually in many cases, a disparaging shorthand for intersectionality. But in this thesis I intend to demonstrate that it is not necessarily intersectionality that is holding us back from fully engaging in a genuine class analysis in both contemporary Appalachia, the wider US and, indeed, elsewhere—but an occasionally poor application of it.

In academic terms, what Sean McElwee termed the “false dichotomy of economic equality versus identity politics” surrounding the 2016 election is perhaps the conflict between traditional Marxist thought and intersectionality. Ashley J Bohrer addresses this dispute in depth, explaining, “as these two frameworks have been increasingly analysed and considered over the past decade, they have also come into contact with one another. Marxists have criticised intersectionality scholars and vice versa.”[59] She concedes validity in criticisms from both sides, allowing the following Marxist criticism of intersectionality: “While many

[58] Ezra Klein, “A conversation with JD Vance, the reluctant interpreter of Trumpism” *Vox* Feb 2 2017 https://www.vox.com/2017/2/2/14404770/jd-vance-trump-hillbilly-elegy-ezra-klein-show.

[59] Ashley J Bohrer, “Intersectionality and Marxism: A critical Historiography” *Historical Materialism,* Issue 26:2 Identity politics 2018

intersectional theories discuss class or name it as one of the axes of oppression in the contemporary world, few delve into the specificities of structural class relations or engage in a holistic critique of capitalism." On balance she believes that sometimes Marxist theorists "reduce analyses of oppression to class oppression, only or primarily, and consider all other forms of domination (like sexism, racism and heteronormativity) to be merely epiphenomenal to primary class-relations." However, she goes on to attempt to synthesise the frameworks in order to provide a "productive and nuanced theory that is able to respond dynamically to the complexities of oppression in the twenty-first century." I intend to emulate this combined framework and apply it directly and indirectly throughout my thesis. Central to my argument is the idea that the current cultural fixation with Appalachia often masks issues of social class and illuminates the lack of coherent, confident discourse on the topic among the left establishment and the media. But I do not believe that class has been neglected because of a fallacious focus on other forms of oppression and hope to push back against that narrative when it does arise from any sources. It should also be noted that I will largely use the terms 'left' and 'right' to refer to broadly Democrat or Republican affiliated columnists, authors and academics. Yet again, these terms have become increasingly meaningless and muddled in recent years and I am aware of the issues that arise from referring to the US Democratic Party as 'the left' when by most metrics their politics are centrist, at best. Where possible I will unpack and interrogate these issues but in lieu of a more satisfying terminology, left and right should be taken at face value. I've largely avoided the term 'liberal' in most cases unless in a direct quote or paraphrase as this is yet another phrase that has become increasingly loaded and inane in contemporary discourse, seemingly often meaning 'anyone to the left of Donald Trump, politically', and often preceding the word 'elite'.

The thesis will take form in three distinct but interlocking chapters. In the first chapter, I focus closely on two books that were published during the 2016 election cycle—

Hillbilly Elegy by JD Vance and *The liberal Redneck Manifesto;Dragging Dixie Outta The Dark* by Trae Crowder, Drew Morgan and Correy Ryan Forrester—and look at how the desire for 'authenticity' in 2016 inadvertently shone a light on America's shaky understanding of class, race and identity. In the second chapter, I look at what various cultural depictions of 'hillbilly' women have illuminated about the intersection of class, race and gender in contemporary discourse on Appalachia. This will involve a close reading of scenes from the women's prison-set TV show, *Orange Is the New Black* and its depictions of whiteness and class, further analysis of *Hillbilly Elegy* with a gendered lens and an exploration of the overall absence or at least under representation of Appalachian women in the 2016 discourse. In the final chapter, I take a deeper look at the "Trump County" genre of journalism and coverage of McDowell County, West Virginia, as a particular point of fascination for both US and foreign journalists in explaining the Donald Trump phenomenon both before and after the 2016 election. The chapter will examine what the saturation of pieces focussed on tiny McDowell County says about class, Appalachia and crucially the future of journalism as the industry enters are difficult era of decline and mistrust.

All three chapters are united by a belief that Appalachia continues to largely be misrepresented culturally and that this misrepresentation is often a subconscious, if not deliberate, attempt to make the region serve as a lightning rod, a scapegoat, a dumping ground for issues surrounding class, race and politics the United States would rather avoid interrogating more deeply. This thesis is , overall, bound by the belief that in pushing back against these lazy, enduring narratives of Appalachia and refusing to allow the region to serve as a political and cultural fig leaf, the important, necessary conversations can begin.

Chapter One

Hilbilllier than thou: Authenticity and authority in politically charged memoirs and manifestos that influenced the 2016 discourse.

In October of 2016, as the 2016 election cycle neared completion, *New York Times* journalist Jennifer Szalai referred to the campaign trail as a "pageant of authenticity."[60] Describing the performative nature of the front-runners' increasingly overt attempts at ingratiating themselves with voters, she argued that both the GOP and Democrat campaigns seemed to be firmly of the belief that proving their authenticity with the electorate was, if not the key, then certainly an important route to victory. Despite the unprecedented nature of many aspects of the 2016 election, politicians scrambling to tap into the elusive "everyman" appeal they were assured would bolster their support in "flyover states" was nothing new. Szalai herself chooses just one of many infamous historical missteps in this approach to illustrate this strategy– that being 1972 Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Sargent Shriver drawing ridicule for ordering cognac while talking to beer drinking steel-workers at a bar in Ohio. Yet the concept of authenticity suddenly developed a new political saliency in 2016 when the rhetoric of the race became increasingly concentrated on a purported choice between the familiar old-school Washington "elites" and a man with no previous connections to the DC machinations who promised to "drain the swamp"[61] and represent "ordinary Americans". That a New York City billionaire, raised with inherited wealth, could somehow come to be the self-styled saviour of the white working class was not lost on pundits, journalists and commentators of many stripes and neither, indeed on many voters themselves.

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[60] Jennifer Szalai, 'What Makes a Politician Authentic?' *New York Times Magazine,* October 7 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/magazine/what-makes-a-politician-authentic.html,

[61] Trump first uttered what would go on to be a central catchphrase of his campaign on October 17th 2016 at a rally in Greenbay Wisconsin according to Newsweek :http://www.newsweek.com/trump-white-house-has-become-swamp-he-promised-drain-686000

Regardless , the battle in its later stages, became framed almost solely around issues of authenticity and representation.

The quest to be seen as representative of "authentic" America, despite the increasing inaneness of the term , was unstoppable. The Trump campaign, sought to demonstrate his authenticity by eschewing anything resembling civil political rhetoric or debate and instead churning out increasingly meaningless soundbites, the likes of which had never been seen before on the American political stage. Hillary Clinton's attempts, while slightly subtler, were of course aimed at pop culture savvy millennials. Szalai notes with a certain level of ridicule an occasion during which the Democratic candidate claimed to have "hot sauce in her bag" -a Beyonce lyric- during a radio interview. This fixation with authenticity correlates with Joe Kennedy's argument that modern politics is now dominated by what he calls "authentocrats"; politicians who self-consciously try to convey their authenticity, often erroneously conflating class and consumption in their belief that the former is identifiable purely through the latter. Just one notorious example example he cites is the cringe inducing episode in which British politician Owen Smith was served a cappuccino in a cafe in his South Wales constituency in front of the media and referred to it a "frothy coffee" before unnecessarily explaining that "it is the first time I have ever been given little biscuits and a posh cup in here [...] Seriously, I would have a mug normally". [62]While his work largely focuses on the intersection of culture, class and authenticity in British politics he sees obvious parallels with the current wave of populism in the US.

During this pageant of authenticity, a corresponding trend was emerging in popular literature: that of self-professed "rednecks" and "hillbillies" seeking , ostensibly, to explain their underrepresented demographic to clueless yet intrigued, predominantly Democrat-affiliated "coastal elites" through the form of memoir. Politically charged non-fiction and

[62] Joe Kennedy, *Authentocrats.* (London: Repeater, 2018) 19.

memoir focussing on Appalachia but aimed at an audience outside the region is not necessarily anything new. As recently as the last decade, Joe Bageant made similar attempts to explain George W Bush supporting Appalachians to the blue states through texts such as *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*(2007) and his memoir *Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir*(2010). The "culture wars" of the Bush years were arguably a precursor to the current division, but the two key texts that feature in this chapter were both published before or in the lead up to the 2016 election and their sales rose further in the wake of the shock result.. Intentionally or not, the books fed into the post-election narrative of a mythical "real" America, full of people frustrated at being ignored by the "coastal elites." As these coastal elites were chastised in the public discourse for their ignorance of the former demographic, their ensuing appetite to quickly educate themselves was partially sated by memoirs with distinct political slants.

In this chapter, I will analyse why these texts came to prominence and popularity when they did and why the gap in the market that they filled, previously existed. Furthermore, I'll examine what the consumption of them and the response they received from certain demographics says about America's superficial grasp of class and race, both in Appalachia but also, as a result, the wider country.

Who gets to speak for Appalachia?

The first and by far the most high profile text to fall into this category is *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir Of A Family And Culture In Crisis* by JD Vance. In his phenomenally successful book, ex-marine and Yale Law graduate Vance uses the form of memoir to make a wider point about "hillbilly culture" by extrapolating the problems and dysfunction of his own childhood and family onto white, working class Appalachia more generally. Since the book's release, and particularly since Trump's victory, Vance has become something of a

minor celebrity, appearing as a panelist and talking head on numerous current affairs and analytical TV shows regularly. Writing in the *New Republic,* Sarah Jones noted with derision that Vance had become the liberal media's resident "white trash-splainer".[63] In early 2019, Vance sold the film rights for *Hillbilly Elegy* to Netflix for $45 million. The second text is *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto: Dragging Dixie Outta the Dark* which was joint-authored by three comedians, Trae Crowder, Corey Ryan Forrester and Drew Morgan, know better as the WellRed trio. At first glance the two books are not particularly worthy of comparison. The latter is an openly political, humorous polemic with a smattering of personal anecdotes from childhood and young adulthood that allow it to awkwardly skirt the memoir genre whereas *Hillbilly Elegy* is largely sombre in tone and intended to be more subtle in its political ideology. *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto*'s scope is the wider US south, yet two of the three authors (Drew Morgan and Trae Crowder) are Appalachian and make regular reference to the region specifically, therefore much of the material is salient to the wider discussion. While certainly well received in its own right, *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* has not reached the household name status that *Hillbilly Elegy* has. This fact in itself perhaps tells us something important about the difference in the books' messages and how palatable they were to audiences.

But the aforementioned limitations notwithstanding, they often appear to unknowingly be engaged in an urgent conversation with each other about American society in the 21st century. Polar opposites ideologically, they almost serve as a call and response on arguments and theories about cultures of poverty, yet employ very similar tactics to both convey their message and illuminate their authentic hillbilly/redneck credentials–the source of their authority.

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[63] Sarah Jones 'JD Vance the False Prophet of Blue America' *New Republic* https://newrepublic.com/article/138717/jd-vance-false-prophet-blue-america.

Trae Crowder, the de-facto lead and spokesperson of the trio argued that the book was intended as a simultaneous rejoinder to sneering, educated yankees who believe every unflattering, offensive stereotype about the South and Appalachia despite being proudly liberal in all other aspects of their life and as a rallying cry for "liberal rednecks"– a group whose existence he believes is hugely understated in American culture and political discourse. In the introduction alone, he asserts: "I'm not some redneck unicorn. I'm not special. There are plenty of liberal-thinking, intelligent country folk out here, and we're tired of people either not knowing or not caring that we're down here. It's time we made our presence known."[64]

JD Vance, in addition to making sure it is clear from the book's title, also goes to great pains to make sure the reader understands that he identifies as a hillbilly from Appalachia, referring to "us hillbillies", "hillbilly culture", "Appalachians" and "Scots-Irish" with regularity and interchangeably. This self-identification was not, however, without controversy. Vance was born and spent most of his life prior to leaving for college and the marines in Middletown, Ohio. His Grandparents were from the hollers of Kentucky, but like many Appalachians took the "Hillbilly highway" to the industrial Midwest during the post-World War 2 boom[65]. Although he visits extended family in the Kentucky hollers, he is non-Appalachian Ohioan; a second or third generation Appalachian. Writing in Kentucky paper *Lexington Herald leader*, Brandon Kiser cuttingly dismissed Vance's claim for "hillbilly done good" status, writing:

> If I may be frank: the only hillbillies to 'get out' in Vance's story were his grandparents. Vance grew up in Middletown, Ohio. His grandparents grew up and lived in Jackson in Breathitt County — Hillbilly Headquarters, USA — and Vance spent some summers there. But most of his life, and the majority of the story he tells, takes place back in Middletown just north of Cincinnati. Vance is no hillbilly.[66]

[64] Crowder, *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto (foreword)*

[65] Jack Temple, Kirby "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. XLIX, No. 4, Nov. 1983, 598.

[66] Brandon Kiser ,"Author Too Removed from Culture he Criticizes" *Lexington Herald Leader.* August 21 2016 http://www.kentucky.com/opinion/op-ed/article96779312.html .

On the contrary, others were quick to come to his geographical and cultural defence, with fellow Appalachian author Kim Michelle Richardson arguing “Vance is Appalachian. He’s from Middletown, Ohio which touches corners with an Ohio county that according to the Appalachian Regional Commission is Appalachia.”[67] The debate over Vance’s Appalachian authenticity raises several interesting points, both about the mediums of memoir and autobiography and the evolving definition and understanding of what constitutes being Appalachian. While arguing that “autobiography has a special role in American literature,” G Thomas Couser explained that the form confers a certain level of authority to its author not necessarily found in other genres in three ways; “First, the idea that autobiography is authoritative writing because it is presumably verifiable. Second, the idea that one's life is one's exclusive textual domain..” [68]Essentially, authority in autobiography is paradoxically both easy and difficult to challenge. The average reader of *Hillbilly Elegy* would no doubt accept Vance’s claim to hillbilly status because of the nature of the form he is using and the accompanying assumption that everything in it is verifiable. Vance identifying as an Appalachian hillbilly, despite their being a strong geographical case to be made that he is not, also speaks to the wider complexity of Appalachian identity as a concept and further bolsters a recurring point throughout this thesis; that even though there is a clear tool to decipher what strictly constitutes Appalachia, the definition is becoming increasingly fluid and loaded in both media and political rhetoric. Colin Woodward’s aforementioned theory of a Greater Appalachia, is certainly one Vance subscribes to, portraying ‘hillbillyness’ as a cultural and, crucially, an ethnic identity that is passed down through the generations rather than simply bestowed upon inhabitants of a strict geographical region. It is this theory that is arguably

[67] Appalachian’s Dirty Laundry *Huffington Post* https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/appalachias-dirty-laundry_us_591480d6e4b01ad573dac1b1 (Accessed January 2018).
[68] G Thomas Couser *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 8.

further enabling the discourse that uses "Appalachia" as shorthand for the white working class. Vance even refers to "hillbilly values" while promoting the Greater Appalachia theory, writing: "Thanks to the massive migration from the poorer regions of Appalachia to places like Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvannia and Illinois, hillbilly values spread widely along with Hillbilly people."[69] Through the interchangeable use of "hillbilly" and "Scots–Irish" , Vance posits "hillbilly" as an ethnicity and through the concept of a shared value system, a homogenous culture that generalisations can be made about. Simultaneously, through the use of the medium of autobiography and the authority it affords him he is using a slight of hand to turn an individual memoir into a "memoir of a culture," and therein lies the contentiousness of his position. For Elizabeth Catte, it was this distinction that rankled. She riled: "I have nothing good or bad to say about the way that the story of this family is presented within the book. But what the hell is a memoir of a culture? This is not a thing that exists, and it's not a thing that people write."[70]

The WellRed trio address questions of their authenticity and authority, having achieved a certain level of fame prior to the publishing of the book. Drew Morgan, despite growing up by his own claim "dirt, fucking poor in the hills of East Tennessee subsequently became a lawyer (like Vance),albeit a public defender, in New York City. Having transcended the social class and geography of his birth, he claims to have had to contend with the accusations that he has now forfeited his right to speak for impoverished rural whites of Appalachia, a problem certainly not unique to an Appalachian background but a wider class and cultural phenomenon. It is though, pertinent to note, that largely without exception, criticism about Vance or Morgan's authentic hillbilly status comes from those who do not

[69] Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy,* loc 341
[70] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica* March 7, 2018 https://www.guernicamag.com/elizabeth-catte-appalachia-isnt-trump-country/.

agree with their wider political argument, despite occupying vastly different positions. In that regard, questioning authenticity is an effective way of debunking a person's "right" to speak on behalf of others without having to directly engage with the substance of the argument. The strength of memoir as cultural and political tool is therefore also its weakness.

Liberal Blindspot?

But of its strength, there is certainly much to be said. This is best illustrated by the fact that, initially, *Hillbilly Elegy* received almost unanimous praise. Indeed to truly understand the relevance and bearing *Hillbilly* Elegy *The New York Times,* shorthand in common parlance for metropolitan liberalism, described it as "a compassionate, discerning sociological analysis of the white underclass that has helped drive the politics of rebellion." [71] Did one of the most ,if not *the* most, left-leaning mainstream newspapers in the US receive a clear love story to neoliberalism at face value because they deferred to the authenticity of the author's experience? Vance's conservatism in the book is overt, filled as it is with culture of poverty tropes and characterised by an unrelenting disdain for anyone in receipt of any sort of government assistance. Even while supposedly extolling the virtues of the culture he presumes to speak for, he cannot resist a rightwing jibe thus: "It's people are hardworking, except of course for the many food stamp recipients who show little interest in honest work.[72] He tells anecdotes about former childhood acquaintances with a family to feed quitting jobs because they didn't like getting up early in the morning or of working menial jobs back home between college only to see high school dropouts on welfare buying huge televisions and smartphones while he struggled for every penny. And if his political stance was intended to be more subtle in the body of the memoir itself, he has no such qualms in the epilogue,

[71] Jennifer Senor, "In Review: In Hillbilly Elegy A Tough Love Analysis Of The Poor Who Back Trump" *The New York Times.* August 11 2016 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/books/review-in-hillbilly-elegy-a-compassionate-analysis-of-the-poor-who-love-trump.html.

[72] Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* loc 341

ending the book with an openly conservative polemic and call to arms. Most notably, he even goes as far as to place the blame for the usual welfare dependency cliches as much at the feet of the political right as the left, arguing that modern conservatism does not go *far enough* in promoting self-reliance and personal responsibility, saying: "What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations they had for their own lives. Yet the message of the right is increasingly: It's not your fault that you're a loser, it's the government's fault."[73]

Despite such blatant right wing rhetoric, it was only when a spate of rejoinder journalism from people who could also lay claim to Appalachian authenticity began to emerge that a more critical reaction to the book began to circulate. Elizabeth Catte was one of these people. She was so incensed by its portrayal of her home region that it was the catalyst for her own book, the aforementioned *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*. In a promotional interview she gave an insight into its conception and the dismay she felt at fellow people on the left consuming *Elegy's* narrative uncritically. "They bought it lock, stock, and barrel and not only found connections to it but were out there spreading the gospel of it, as well. They wanted to tell other people these things that they had learned about this region that, in their mind, concisely explained something very troubled about our political moments." [74] Catte wasn't the only person incredulous at the book's reception. Indeed, conservatives pundits seemed both surprised and positively gleeful that the left were on board with Vance's victim blaming diatribe. After an interview with JD Vance around the time of the book's release, Rod Dreher at *The American Conservative* shared many of the letters he had received from self-professed liberals claiming to find Vance's take refreshing and enlightening. One such example reads:

> I just wanted to write and tell you that I was fascinated by your interview with the author JD Vance, and I speak as a socialist, agnostic, gay white male who's never voted Republican in all his years! As a lifelong resident of the suburbs of Houston, Texas, it's

[73] Vance, *HillBilly Elegy,72.*
[74] Ann Derek- Gaillot, "Appalachia Deserves More than J.D. Vance," *The Outline.*Jan 30 2018 https://theoutline.com/post/3147/elizabeth-catte-what-you-are-getting-wrong-about-appalachia-interview?zd=3.

> long occurred to me how insulated I am from the struggles of poor and working-class folks today(...) I also feel a greater understanding now of the appeal of Trump to certain strata within our society. [75]

There are several possible reasons why the book played well with liberals during one of the most polarized election campaigns in living memory. Firstly, it could be posited that the most simple explanation is just plain naivety. Such reactions demonstrates perfectly the supposed gulf between the two communities that lead to the book's inception in the first place in that it seems many urban, educated liberals *are* incredibly ignorant about the world Vance appointed himself spokesman for. If you have no knowledge of something it is perhaps natural to defer to someone who speaks with such authority on it. Their response to what is essentially, a rather staid memoir speaks volumes about their removal from the dysfunction depicted in the book. It could also be compellingly argued that the dysfunction Vance recalls, while no doubt completely accurate, is used somewhat disingenuously to manipulate such unversed readers and effectively "play to the gallery". Although *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* is not without fault, the intention to bridge the divide between the two audiences it is aimed at("bigoted right-wing assholes and self-righteous prejudiced liberals") appears sincere. Vance, on the other hand seems only to have one audience in mind for his memoir and it is isn't the people he claims a tough love allegiance to in the book. Like much of the cultural representations of Appalachia we see in this thesis, the intended audience for the output is not Appalachians themselves. Writing in *Jacobin,* Bob Hutton summarises the book's intended readership thus:

> The book is not aimed at that underclass (few books are), but rather a middle- and upper-class readership more than happy to learn that white American poverty has nothing to do with them or with any structural problems in American economy and society and everything to do with poor folks' inherent vices.[76]

[75] Rod Dreher, "Why Liberals Love Hillbilly Elegy," *The American Conservative.* August 5 2016 https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/why-liberals-love-hillbilly-elegy/.

[76] Bob Hutton ,"Hillbilly Elitism" *Jacobin.* October 2016. https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/hillbilly-elegy-review-jd-vance-national-review-white-working-class-appalachia/

Many people with actual lived experience of Appalachia were quick to pour scorn on the book, but it seems a certain segment of the left were seduced by the tale of violence and dysfunction. On several occasions, Vance affects a faux nonchalance as he recounts what is clearly intended to be a shocking anecdote, usually involving violence. “I earned my first bloody nose at five and my first black eye at six,” he writes in an early passage.[77] The coddled, middle-class reader is presumably intended to be left reeling from this revelation, while Vance has already moved on to another point. Despite this tactic appearing rather juvenile and obvious, it seemingly had the desired as countless reviews were laden with adjectives such as “harrowing”, “sad” and “fascinating”. In short, the book served as rubbernecking poverty porn to a certain portion of Americans but was largely dismissed or challenged by the community it was supposed to speak for. Vance may have had a dysfunctional childhood and it is entirely his prerogative to explore that but it conferred him no authority to say that everyone else in the region had, had one too and moreover that this was part of a shared culture.

Coupled with the inexperience of the impoverished dysfunction that Vance exploited, there is an aforementioned uneasiness to question the substance of an argument when it comes from a place of experience they can’t personally speak to. And while this tendency is somewhat universal and innate it is interesting to consider whether it is more pronounced on the left. As intersectional politics has moved from an obscure academic theory to the everyday vocabulary of an increasing number of western liberals, there is an increasing, well-meaning, tendency to defer to lived experience in all debate. Terminology such as “stay in your lane” (meaning essentially not to pontificate on issues you couldn’t possibly understand) are often levelled at public figures, journalists or authors who wade into discussions of race

[77] Vance, *HillBilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis,* 43

or gender in the US, most commonly. After generations of minorities being spoken over, or told their experiences weren't real, this reckoning was overdue and the instinct to sustain it understandable. But well-meaning majorities can often *overly* defer to lived experience without critiquing the underlying argument. Similarly, there is also the problem that majorities often seem to think minorities only need one voice and are happy to take that voice as gospel. This is a phenomenon Catte notes, describing it as the idea:

> (...)groups that are under-represented can only have one spokesperson and one translator at a time. You see that within African-American literature and journalism. This is a role that J.D. Vance has assumed as well, the tour guide, the interpreter, the translator to a misunderstood culture. That has a lot of resonance for the kind of readers that *Hillbilly Elegy* enjoyed.[78]

But talking further about *Elegy's* reception, Catte also points out that people on the left who were not exactly privileged themselves often still had a strange reverent and uncritical take on the book. She cites the example of temporarily living in Southeast Texas –an area not dissimilar to Appalachia in terms of social disadvantage –and being cornered by progressives at social events who parroted the book's narrative and singled out the region and its problems as unique. Catte labelled why such a cross section of people needed *Hillbilly Elegy's* thesis about Appalachia to be true, the "million dollar question."[79] Furthermore, she found the popularity particularly frustrating given that Vance's central thesis seems to be rooted in culture of poverty theories often linked with racist thought in line with the work of Charles Murray, saying:

> The hallmark of Charles Murray's career is trying to understand the genetic and cultural failings of poor people, specifically poor African Americans, but sometimes switching the script to poor whites to mitigate the racist origins and applications of his beliefs. In op-eds and interviews, J.D. Vance references one specific Charles Murray book called Coming Apart: The State of White America, and it's easy to see imprints of his work within Hillbilly Elegy. [80]

[78] Ann-Derek Gaillot 'Appalachia Deserves More than J.D. Vance' *The Outline* https://theoutline.com/post/3147/elizabeth-catte-what-you-are-getting-wrong-about-appalachia-interview?zd=3
[79] Ibid.
[80] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica.*

Adding that she found it totally incongruous that intelligent liberals would be so uncritical towards something with racist undertones she went on:

> (...)people, for example, who in my life as a former academic would never think of assigning anything by Charles Murray for their students to read, are suddenly consuming lots of analyses about Appalachia that have Charles Murray's fingerprints all over them.[81]

As dedicated as Vance is to promoting a hillbilly culture of poverty theory throughout his book, the WellRed trio are clearly invested in pushing back against it.Vance makes it clear throughout his memoir that he believes his extraordinary life trajectory was the result of shaking off the dysfunction of his childhood and discovering a work ethic and self esteem through enlisting in the marines. Because of this, he believes that fecklessness a lack of discipline is all that is standing in most impoverished Appalachians way to improving their lot, refusing to acknowledge virtually any systemic problems. But Trae Crowder, whose childhood was also marred by Appalachian poverty and dysfunction, mines his life to find anecdotes to disprove this. He reflects on the trajectory of his uncle, who died from a drug overdose after years of addiction and prison stints, and how statistically this is how his life should have panned out too, saying:

> Most people who come from the circumstances I come from end up dead or in jail, by a large margin. But not me. And I do not have a good answer as to why that is. For the record, neither does sociology. But there's a phenomenon known as "resiliency." Some kids from highly disadvantaged upbringings are just resilient, and they don't know why. So at least there's a name for it, I guess. [82]

He then adamantly affirms his position that there poverty is systemic not cultural:

> But my point with all of this is that I am in no way proof that anyone can rise out of poverty if they just put their mind to it. I'm the exception, not the rule. But since I have the extraordinary fortune of being that exception, I intend to use my position to plead with people on the right to please, *please* take it from someone who lived it: you're wrong about poor people. You are. And your wrongness is dangerous.[83]

[81] Ibid.
[82] Crowder, *Liberal Redneck Manifesto*, loc 1017.
[83] Ibid.

Though Crowder and Vance both "lived it" they come to two very different conclusions on white rural poverty. *Hillbilly Elegy* was published just a few months prior to *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* and if the authors of the latter were aware of the existence of the former at any point, it is never mentioned in the text. Still, the pushback against Vance's rhetoric seems prescient throughout. But despite such pushback and the strong criticism of the text that emanated from the region itself, it is still hard to find evidence of this counter argument in the mainstream. If it seems like Elizabeth Catte is overrepresented as a secondary source in this thesis it is because she is one of the very few people using her modest platform to confront Vance's message. Her book was published by an indie publisher in Cleveland, and another anthology of essays deconstructing Vance's portrayal of their region, *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds To Hillbilly Elegy* was recently published by the West Virginia University Press. But *Elegy* was the product of one of the biggest publishers in the world and despite these attempts at corrections, mainstream, and indeed liberal, outlets are still largely uncritical in their coverage of *Elegy* as it moves towards the Hollywood feature film treatment.

"Nothing to do with skin colour.."

The culture and demographic and the centre of both books is white. But it's notable that only the WellRed trio are overt in this choice. Vance simply seems to infer Appalachian is synonymous for white, which as we have previously seen is a problematic concept. In Vance's depiction of Appalachia there are no people of colour whatsoever. But while introducing the premise of *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto*, the WellRED trio claim that it is rare but not impossible to be black *and* a Redneck or Hillbilly while accepting with comic aside that African American southerners have experienced a whole different and more grave form of oppression than simple poverty and yankee snobbery for generations. The authors

also go on to address the South's racism problem in a whole separate, dedicated chapter. In an honest, if clunky, attempt to pre-empt criticism. They also feature an aside about the problems of three white comedians writing about racism in the south, saying: "most of the burden for [race relations] improvement falls on our fellow red- asses. And so our book is directed largely *at* our people".[84] And showing that they are well versed in the aforementioned rhetoric of intersectionality, they assert they "feel very strongly that it's not our place to speak for [black Americans] .The passages on race are not without merit, especially in terms of their candour, but also feel strained. In a segment on the Confederate flag, they argue that a commendable shift in many southerners' attitude towards the stars and bars occurred *after* the massacre in Charleston by white supremacist Dylan Roof in 2015.[85] The obvious retort would be that they were a little late on the uptake, given that its racist associations pre-date 2015 by over 150 years. They also insist that the "flag issue(unlike the flag's defenders) is a little more nuanced than you[presumably meaning coastal liberal elite reader] may think at first, but fail to sufficiently unpack any of that supposed nuance.[86] Crowder tries to explore it briefly in a later passage by explaining the personal sentimental value of Lynyrd Skynyrd and their ilk while clarifying he hasn't courted any such paraphernalia for "goin' on fifteen years".[87]Similarly a passag on the Klan has not dated well, given the events of Charlottesville in August 2017, when a neo-nazi and klan allied protest saw a young woman murdered in broad daylight and others brutally attacked. While acknowledging the abhorrence of the KKK, they urge liberal outsiders to simply laugh at them and not give them the attention they crave, arguing that they are now largely defunct and pathetic, their contemporary prevalence greatly exaggerated. There may have been some

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid. Loc 3230
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid loc 3330

logic behind the "ignore them and they'll go away" school of thought with regard to the extreme right in the lead up to the election, but since Trump's victory it increasingly sounds like white privilege; it's easier to ignore an organisation when that group doesn't espouse *your* subjugation and murder. But while the WellRed are keen to be seen taking their people kinsfolk to task over their racism, Vance's take on racism and the white working class is telling in its almost complete absence from his 'elegy'. Despite spending most of his memoir dispensing what he believes to be tough love to everyone from his drug addicted mother to people not chasing "The American dream" but taking government assistance at every turn, he is then happy to give poor, white Appalachians a free pass regarding racism. During a frustratingly tone-deaf passage regarding hillbilly engagement with contemporary politics and the media, Vance discusses the prevailing belief among his hillbilly peers that Barack Obama is a Muslim- despite it being a patent untruth. He says: "Many of my new friends['elites' he met since attending Yale] blame racism for this perception of the president. But the president feels like an alien to many Middletoninans for reasons that have nothing to do with skin colour."[88] He argues that these people resent Obama because of the conspicuous upper-middle- class achievements and sensibilities he personifies and they lack- his eloquence, his dress sense, his education record and prowess as a father. He says this without remotely confronting the idea that the people who envy these traits may have a particular, well documented problem with a *black* man possessing them so brazenly. Nor does he address the fact that, as a black man, Barack Obama had to excel beyond all reasonable expectations in these fields to even be considered qualified to hold the highest office in the land and so he had no chance of winning the support of such people, either way. Either insidiously or, at best, just plain ignorantly, Vance spends most of his book masking systemic issues of class and poverty with cultural arguments about work ethic and dysfunction only to

[88] Ibid, 255

then disguise the one mention of endemic racism in his home town with an argument about class.

Vance's aforementioned fixation on the supposed "Scots-Irish" ethnicity of white Appalachians, is also racially problematic. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the existence of a shared white ethnicity and culture in Appalachia is generally agreed to be overstated and exaggerated.[89]Coupled with the post Trump narrative of neglected Greater Appalachia as the mythical "real" America, it is easy to see how these falsehoods are fodder for racists. And while the Liberal Redneck Manifesto steers clear of using the Scots-Irish terminology directly, they often perpetuate the same stereotypes of a tough, easily angered people with a shared lineage and give these with the same reverence both Vance and left-leaning Joe Bageant showed before him. The tendency of the hillbilly left to "lean in" or double down into stereotypes as a defence mechanism is understandable but it also serves to sustain the vicious cycle of talking about Appalachian identity as exclusively white , ethnically homogenous and also… largely male.

[89] Emily Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity And Popular Fiction Since 1878 (*Lexington:University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 46.

Chapter Two

Mamaws and hillbilly whores: The reductive, narrow parameters of Appalachian womanhood in the 2016 public consciousness

> I'm just gonna give it to you straight, college. I've been harbouring some real bad hate in my heart for you(.....) What do you believe in? You believe in Hussein Obama? Electric cars, and Shakespeare books and you go out to eat to restaurants? I don't have any of that, ok? All I have is Jesus.[90]

The above is part of an exchange between two characters in the first season of Netflix series *Orange Is The New Black.* The series premiered in 2013, three years before the election of Donald Trump, but the themes it explored between protagonist Piper Chapman and her nemesis Tiffany "Pennsatukcy" Doggett spoke to the brewing perceived divide between parts of the American population that would come to form a central part of the election campaign and the aftermath. And what makes the dynamic particularly compelling is that it is examined through the prism of gender, in the claustrophobic setting of a women's prison. Piper Chapman, based on the real life character Piper Kerman whose memoir about the time she served in a federal penitentiary *Orange Is The New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* was the source material for the show, is an attractive, thirty-something, upper-middle-class WASP from Connecticut living in New York City at the time of her sentencing. She is portrayed as generally well-meaning but ultimately condescending towards more disadvantaged inmates, and her naivety, bourgeois tastes and lack of street smarts are frequently the target of the jokes in the "dramedy".

[90] *Orange is the New Black.* "Fool Me Once." Episode 12. Season 1. Directed by Andrew McCarthy. Written by Sarah Hess. July 11 2013.

In contrast, Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett is a poor, white woman with bad teeth, little education, drug problems and speaks in a southern accent and vernacular. She is in prison for shooting a nurse at an abortion clinic because the woman insulted her after her fifth procedure. Through flashback sequences we see that anti-abortion zealots learned of the incident and paid for Pennsatucky's legal fees and defence leading her to adopt an aggressive, bigoted form of evangelical Christianity because of the attention and adoration she received. We're also to assume she's Appalachian: her nickname, Pennsatucky, implies she is from some non-specific part of the region. Betsty Leondar-Wright calls the character "a jumble of sometimes contradictory stereotypes."[91] In Kerman's original book, she describes Pennsatucky as "a young woman from western Pennsylvania who proudly called herself a 'redneck'" and as a member of a group she calls the "Eminemlettes—Caucasian girls from the wrong side of the tracks."[92] The book's events take place in the late 1990s, hence the now slightly passé Eminem reference, but the class and race inferences remain.

In the first season of the show, Pennsatucky is the primary antagonist and the hostility between her and Chapman eventually culminates in a violent showdown in the first season's finale. But while the show's opening season generally garnered positive reviews for its novel depictions on things as varied as the prison industrial complex to bisexuality, some critics found the portrayal of Pennsatucky a hackneyed, one-dimensional weak spot. Leondar-Wright lamented:

> While a few villains also appear among the show's portrayals of lesbians, African Americans, Latinas, men, and college-educated and solid-working-class white women, in each of those categories there are a variety of admirable or just quirky characters as well – a healthy mix. But all the other poor whites in the series are similarly dim-witted lank-hair white extremist Christians who collude with Pennsatucky's evil deeds.[93]

[91] Betsy Leondar-Wright, "Orange is the New Redneck Bashing," *Classism Exposed,* October 1 2013 https://web.archive.org/web/20150911223152/http://www.classism.org/orange-newest-redneck-bashing/..
[92] Piper Kerman, *Orange Is the New Black* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010).
[93] Betsy Leondar-Wright, "Orange is the New Redneck Bashing ".

This raises one of the recurring themes of this thesis: the idea that socially conscious people on the American left are happy to utilise offensive stereotypes about poor white Appalachians they would balk at if employed about other groups. Leondar-Wright certainly subscribes to this, remarking; “One of the groups that it is most socially acceptable to stereotype, mock and despise in US culture today is the rural poor white people sometimes called ‘rednecks’ or ‘hillbillies’, insulted as ‘white trash.’” She goes on to cite internet comments mocking “Redneck Reality TV” as examples of the prejudice that exists in the open towards rural, poor white people before asking: “Try substituting a term for any ethnic group, gender, religion or disability for ‘redneck’ in those comments – how would readers react to such hatefulness?” However, Elizabeth Catte cautions against perpetuating this argument, saying:

> You’ll often hear in the region, variations of the belief that ‘hillbillies are the only group it’s still socially acceptable to belittle.’ This is not the case, not by a long shot. What is true, however, is that people are often blindly classist while remaining self-congratulatory about their other progressive credentials.[94]

Any validity Leondar-Wright’s argument originally had is negated by her equating the term “Redneck” with other ethnic slurs, ignoring (either wilfully or otherwise) the potent racial power dynamics of the United States. Catte however rightly points out the kernel of truth in this muddled and problematic conversation. Hillbillies and Rednecks do not have some special victim status in contemporary US society and their white privilege will always protect them from the added oppression that poor people of colour, rural or urban, face. However, what does differentiate them is that certain segments of the progressive left have been content to mock them in ways they wouldn’t other groups, something that those on the right, such as JD Vance, have noticed and managed to exploit.

For Appalachian women, this classism intersects with a complex form of sexism that manifests itself in a handful of tropes (many of which the character of Pennsatucky manages

[94] Elizabeth Catte, *What You’re Getting Wrong About Appalachia,* (Cleveland: Belt, 2018).

to embody simultaneously) or often in complete erasure. Women were curiously absent from the conversations around Appalachia, the existence of a class/cultural divide and the 2016 election, , for the most part. Inarguably, with Hillary Clinton being the first female nominee of a major party for president, gender was a central issue of the 2016 election cycle. But given the already outlined prominence of Appalachia in 2016, there was actually very little of substance seen or said about Appalachian women. They existed largely on the periphery, waving “Women for Trump” placards on news segments, as asexual but hyperviolent, matriarchal “mawmaw” figures raising the likes of JD Vance and Trae Crowder and countless other opioid orphans, or as truly down-and-out drug casualties in media focussed on the opioid epidemic. In the same time period as the election, opioid journalism, which will be covered in more depth as a cultural form in chapter three, often focussed on young Appalachian women caught up in cycles of addiction and prostitution, conforming to a common trope of hillbilly women being promiscuous but lacking agency in their sexuality.

In this chapter, I examine how images of Appalachian women have been confined to narrow and restrictive tropes both historically and in regards to the 2016 election. I outline how these stereotypes play out in an array of cultural representations and demonstrate their limitations. I explore how working-class, rural women in Appalachia have been ignored and sidelined on a dual front: by a mainstream but oftentimes tepid feminism that centres middle-class women and appeases neoliberalism, and a populist leftism and opportunistic right wing that both have an investment in positing a mythical neglected working class of the United States as being homogeneously white and male.

Orange is the wrong type of white

Orange Is The New Black depicted the social groups women stratify themselves into while serving prison time. We see these groups fall predominantly along racial lines with

African American women forming one clique and Latina women another. But between the non-Hispanic caucasian inmates there are two very separate gangs which are differentiated according to the confluence of class and culture: working-class rural women in one camp and those hailing from East Coast suburbs and cities grouped together in an opposing faction, including protagonist Piper. There are two salient points to be made about this dynamic. The first is that clear class differences exist among members of other groups such as the African American women. Character Poussey Washington is shown to be an "army brat" who has lived abroad with her military family, benefitted from private education and has as a result a fluency in foreign languages and other forms of cultural capital. In contrast, her best friend in prison is Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson, a woman who grew up in foster care in New York City before being groomed by an older female drug dealer to work for her. In a confrontational scene between the pair, the stark difference in their backgrounds is acknowledged by Taystee who angrily rants: "You don't know where I come from, I ain't have no daddy in the army, parents looking out for me or a fucking winter coat you bougie bitch, so don't pretend you know me or my people!"[95] Nevertheless, despite such moments of class conflict their race is ultimately shown to be a stronger connection. The two friends regularly play-act as imaginary caricature middle-class white women, Amanda and MacKenzie, with affected snooty accents and mannerisms in an exercise Rachel Vorona Cote calls "a ping pong conversation full of snobbish buffoonery—a mockery of the detached ignorance firmly embedding racism and classism within the criminal justice system."[96] Similarly, when Piper Chapman is granted furlough to visit her dying grandmother, Taystee and Poussey show a united front of disgust due to the fact Poussey had previously been denied the opportunity to even see her terminally-ill mother. Poussey and Piper may both be from comfortable middle-class

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[95] *Orange Is The New Black. "*Little Mustachioned Shit." Episode 10 season 2. Directed by Jennifer Getziner. Written by Jenji Kohan. June 6 2014.

[96] Rachel Verona Cote, "The Love Story of Orange Is The New Black's Tasytee and Poussey," *Jezebel,* June 11 2015 https://themuse.jezebel.com/the-love-story-of-orange-is-the-new-blacks-taystee-and-1710343058.

backgrounds but Piper's white privilege means there is little commonality between them. Thus for Taystee and Poussey, a bond across class lines forged on the basis of racial solidarity makes more sense.

But between the incarcerated white women, things are more convoluted. When we see Piper first enter the prison, she is briefly inducted into inside life and shown to her bunk by fellow white inmate Lorna Morello, who we're to assume by both name and accent is a solidly working-class Italian American. Their stilted but friendly interactions illustrate their obvious class misalignment, but with the following exchange Morello reassures Piper that race solidarity is what matters:

> **Morello:** Here. Here's some tissues. First night's always hard. And a toothbrush. They don't give you one.
> **Chapman:** Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for everything.
> **Morello:** Aw! No, no. It's no problem. We look out for our own.
> **Chapman**: Our own?
> **Morello:** Oh, don't get all PC on me. It's tribal, not racist. I'll see you around.[97]

Yet racial solidarity does not unite Piper Chapman with Pennsatucky and her acolytes, women we are presumably meant to assume are also Appalachian by the uniformity of their bad teeth, unkempt appearance and ignorant views. For them, their class differences with Piper are portrayed as insurmountable and as a result, their shared whiteness is cancelled out just as the shared class background between Piper and Poussey is. This squares with the theme of the racial "othering" of Appalachia as ultimately "less than" or "white trash".[98]

The positionality of white women in *Orange Is The New Black* is also relevant with regards to much of the discourse about "whiteness" and gender that occurred in the 2016 election post mortem. One of the few times the 2016 election conversation focussed on gender was when analysis of the vote showed that 52 percent of white women voted for

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[97] *Orange Is the New Black.* "I Wasn't Ready." Episode 1 Season 1. Directed by Michael Trim. Written By Jenji Kohan. July 11 2013.

[98] Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia Race and film* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), Kindle edition 46

Trump. This soundbite was the subject of much press attention and the consensus seemed to be that despite Trump's documented misogyny and racism, white women still chose their race, closing ranks around their whiteness rather than their gender. In a post-election piece for *The Atlantic*, African American sociologist Tressie McMillam Cottom remarked: "Those of us who know our whites, know one thing above all else: whiteness defends itself."[99] Elizabeth Catte admitted to enjoying a certain level of schadenfreude in the response to this image of white women post-election. "Many white individuals were aghast to see their progressive credentials questioned by proxy. Pundits previously content to cast an entire region as universally white and poor now demanded the absolution of nuance for themselves."[100] White women who didn't vote for Trump were very quick to make sure everyone knew they weren't *that* kind of white and just as quickly as think pieces had emerged on white women's voting as a monolith, came those breaking the numbers down into those with a college degree and those without.[101] Essentially liberal white women were keen to be seen as Pipers rather than Pennsatuckies.

On the show, we are reminded of the gaping class and cultural divide between Pennastucky and Piper, and by extension contemporary US white womanhood, by interactions like the one that opens this chapter. Pennsatucky refers to the then president as "Hussein Obama" (a racist dog-whistle that was popular with a segment of Republicans at the time as part of a conspiracy theory that he was a Muslim) and resentfully cites all the cultural capital Piper possesses that she does not. Pennsatucky's insistence on referring to Piper disparagingly as "college" further exemplifies the anti-intellectual, anti-elitist attitude that would come to the fore in 2016. But we're also reminded of the class and cultural divide

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[99] Tressie McMillam Cottom, "The Problem With Obama's Faith in White America," *Slate,* December 13 2016 https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/obamas-faith-in-white-america/510503/.
[100] Catte, What You're Getting Wrong, 33.
[101] Molly Ball, "Donald Trump Didn't Really Win 52% of White Women in 2016," *Time* October 18 2018 https://time.com/5422644/trump-white-women-2016/.

through the contrast in their appearances. Despite the limitations of incarceration, most characters on the show are seen to take great efforts to maintain their appearance as close to the one they previously presented in the outside world as possible. It could even be argued that this is especially true of more lower-class inmates. Morello, for example, always has a full face of slightly garish but immaculate bootleg make-up, the lack of subtlety helping us remember that she is indeed working-class but also proud and overtly feminine, not down and out. The sole trans inmate in the prison, Burset, runs the hair and beauty salon and we regularly see characters from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds frequent it, all exercising agency by controlling their femininity in an environment designed to strip them of it. But Pennsatucky and her fellow hillbilly cronies never do and are notably unkempt in comparison. Indeed, actor Taryn Manning who portrayed Pennsatucky confirmed that she was expressly forbade any personal grooming or make up for the role. Talking to *Vulture*, she said:

> I don't wear a stitch of makeup. For my character, if anything, they made my eyes a little darker under them. So I snuck just a dab of mascara. So the makeup artist is like, 'Do you have mascara on?' And I'm like, 'No, no, no, no, not at all. Why?' She's like, 'Come here.' She grabs the makeup wipe and lo and behold …I just felt so ugly. But then that day was the day I was like, *Just go for it. Just go for it.* And that's what I did. I just sort of was like, *All right, I look terrible, but she's just this terrible person.* I just made a commitment to it.[102]

The conflation of being a "terrible person" and looking unattractive taps into the sexist underpinnings of appearance in women, where worth is equated with beauty. But compounding the misogyny Pennsatucky's characterisation is founded in, is a region-specific classism which we are invited to indulge in via disgust at her teeth. Susan Sered explains how Pennsatucky's poor oral hygiene and reactions to it demonstrate how classism and sexism intersect, saying:

[102] Lindsey Weber, "OITNB Taryn Manning On Being Typecast As A Crackhead, Playing A Meth-Head And Those Godawful Teeth," *Vulture,* July 29 2013 https://www.vulture.com/2013/07/orange-is-the-new-black-taryn-manning-interview.html.

> On *Orange is the New Black*, as in real life in America, access to healthcare remains a class indicator. Rotten teeth are hard to hide. Tooth decay is embarrassing. It signifies that supremely unforgivable character trait: not taking care of oneself—a particularly serious flaw in women, who are expected to look attractive. [103]

Crucially, it signifies several Appalachian tropes—and not just the face value implication that hillbillies have bad teeth. Firstly, we are told that Pennsatucky's dental problems largely stem from her methamphetamine addiction prior to prison as the drug is known to erode and destroy teeth, leading to what is colloquially known as "meth mouth". Before the media became fully aware of the extent of the opioid crisis in Appalachia, stereotypes of rural Americans as "meth-heads" abounded. While it's perfectly plausible that Pennsatucky would be addicted to methamphetamine, and the drug has actually recently returned to Appalachia with a vengeance, in 2013 this stereotype was arguably somewhat dated, even as an offensive generalisation, showing that the characterisation of this Appalachian woman was potentially rooted in sloppy research and a lack of understanding of the region the show's producers casually elected her to represent. In the original source material, Pennsatucky was known to have been addicted to crack cocaine and struggled with having lost custody of her child. But crack cocaine carries with it a different set of racialised stereotypes, being most commonly associated in popular culture with black, urban communities. Therefore, it's easy to posit that when adapting her character to the screen, the writers decided that methamphetamine, a recognisable stereotype, would further bolster her hillbilly status among the eyes of the audience.

[103] Susan Sered, "What Pennsatucky's Teeth Tell Us About Class In America," *Bitchmedia,* July 1 2014 https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/oitnb-pennsatucky-teeth-class-in-america.

Abortion in Appalachia

In flashback sequences, a regular device the show usually uses to humanize its characters and explain the background to how they became incarcerated, we learn that Pennsatucky's drug habit is the reason she has had multiple abortions. The substitution of an estranged child in the book for a string of abortions in the TV show is an interesting one. While promiscuity and a lack of responsibility or ignorance towards conception are often negative behavioural tropes foisted on Appalachian women (and poor women more generally), a more recognisable hillbilly stereotype would be a young woman who already has several children and survives on welfare But the repeat abortions were clearly deemed necessary to serve as both a plot device and an allegory about contemporary right-wing politics. Pennsatucky represents the hypocrisy of the evangelical right wing often, but not always correctly, associated with Appalachia, who judge and attempt to legislate against behaviour they themselves secretly engage in. But the point arguably misfires as the hypocrisy it is seemingly lampooning normally stems from powerful men, not utterly powerless women like Pennsatucky. Furthermore the show's use of a sexist right-wing stereoype to make an apparently liberal point further negates its intended impact. Despite being an ostensibly feminist show, a flashback sequence in which Pennsatucky and her partner are discussing her upcoming fifth abortion seems to be designed to shock the viewer with Pennsatucky's flippancy and indifference.[104] The pair even discuss carrying the fetus to term purely because they believe they'd receive government financial assistance; they then fall into fits of hysterics at the absurd notion that they might kick their drug habit in order to raise a child. Instead, Pennsatucky chooses an easily accessible fifth abortion. My criticism of this scene is not rooted in moralising about levity towards abortion, or repeat procedures.

[104] OITNB received praise from many quarters on its release for its feminist undertones, realistic depictions on women's life and it's overwhelmingly female majority cast.

However, what *is* arguably offensive is its portrayal of abortion in Appalachia as something that is easy to physically and financially access. It would be very difficult to use the procedure as a form of contraception given the well-documented restrictions on access to reproductive healthcare in most central Appalachian states.[105] The plausibility problems with this storyline are further evidence that Pennsatucky is an unevenly drawn composite character, with creators eager to fit as many stereotypes and unpleasant traits into one figure as possible. As Jessica Scott argues: "Pennsatucky's reproductive decisions are at the center of her character's fraudulent tendencies, which are tied, through her name, directly to the construction and representation of white rural poverty as monstrous and horrifying."[106]

It is perhaps a credit to Taryn Manning that despite the aforementioned reductiveness of the character she was able to draw out some depth and become a hit with audiences. As a result of either her performance or possibly some of the pushback against the two-dimensional villainy of Pennsatucky in the first season, later seasons saw her downgraded from arch nemesis to a more nuanced ensemble character. But even when attempting to portray her in a more sympathetic light, she is still often defined by gendered Appalachian stereotypes. In a Pennsatucky-centric episode in the show's third season, we get a deeper insight into the woman's life before prison, including her childhood and adolescence. We see that Pennsatucky has been repeatedly abused by men, has no real grasp of the concept of consent and a complete lack of sexual agency.[107] We also see that this ignorance has intergenerational roots after one scene depicts Pennsatucky's mother brusquely and coldly explaining intercourse after her first period. "Go and let them do their business. If you're real lucky, most of them will be quick like your daddy. It's like a bee sting, in and out, over

[105] Allison McCann, "Access To Abortion By State," *FiveThirtyEight.* May 14 2014 https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/maps-of-access-to-abortion-by-state/.
[106] Jessica Scott, "Hillbilly Horror and the New Racism: Rural And Racial Politics in Orange Is the New Black," *Journal Of Appalachian Studies* 23, no2 (Fall 2017): 226.
[107] Her Homophobia is also deeply implied to be a result of sexual repression in general and jealousy. Not out of closeted homosexual tendencies but out of jealousy of upper- middle class, bisexual Piper's sexual agency and confidence.

before you knew it was happening."[108] The flashbacks are even sadder in context of their juxtaposition with the present-day storyline where Pennsatucky has just been raped by a corrections officer and does not understand that what has happened constitutes sexual assault.

Of course, in a series set in a women's prison Pennsatucky is not the only inmate to have been victimised by men in her life. Indeed, the majority of characters are shown to be incarcerated for reasons directly or at least indirectly relating to men which squares with the current national picture on reasons for women's incarceration in the US.[109] Instances of sexual and physical assault, coercion into criminal activity and drug addiction are all shown in flashbacks across the cross section of characters' backgrounds. However, what sets Pennsatucky apart is the utter fatalism of her attitude to sex and men. Other inmates, despite highly dysfunctional relationships and backgrounds of abuse are shown to actively enjoy sex. Aleida Diaz, a Latina imprisoned for drugs-related offences as part of her gangster boyfriend's enterprise, is shown to have multiple children to several different fathers but cares more about the meagre affection and attention of men and the material trappings of dating a gangster than her childrens' wellbeing. However she is also portrayed to be sexually voracious and unapologetic, remarking when asked what love means to her:

> What do I think love is? It's when someone makes your stomach feel all tight, but floaty at the same time, you know? And your cheeks hurt, from smiling. And you smile so much, that people think something is wrong with you. And also fucking! 24/7, deep dick, can't-walk-right fucking![110]

Her background, rather than breaking her, has seemingly made her savvier and stronger. She is adept at sexually manipulating men, including the corrections officers, to her own ends. Pennsatucky, in contrast, is victimised by men, regularly portrayed as easily fooled by both

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[108] *Orange Is The New Black..* "A Tittin' And a "Hairin'". Episode 10, Season 3. Directed by Jesse Peretz. Written by Jenji Kohan. Netflix .June 11 2015.

[109] Crime museum. "Women In Prison." https://www.crimemuseum.org/crime-library/famous-prisons-incarceration/women-in-prison/ (accessed October 14 2019).

[110] *Orange Is The New Black.* "You Also Have A Pizza." Episode 6, Season 2. Directed by Allison Anders. Written by Jenji Kohan. Netflix. June 6 2014.

men and women and to generally be of low intelligence– both academically in relation to Piper but crucially in terms of street smarts in comparison to the likes of Aleida . Aleida may be an altogether unpleasant and mostly unsympathetic character but her background in urban poverty gives her a certain cachet that Pennsatucky's rural, Appalachian poverty denies her. She is overall a pitiful figure. The aforementioned episode where we see Pennsatucky raped by a corrections officer, and the flashbacks to the years of abuse she has endured prior to that, may be the first time she is portrayed sympathetically. Yet Susan Sered believes there to be an important caveat to this:

> For the first time the show seems to encourage viewer sympathy for Pennsatucky but in reality what is invoked is pity. The difference, I suggest, is that sympathy invites some level of respect and identification with the sufferer; pity in contrast, is what one feels for a clearly inferior being. [111]

The episode even finishes with a close-up on Pennsatucky's passive, resigned face as she is raped while bluegrass song 'Good Old Mountain Dew' cuts in to make the point unambiguously, that Appalachian women are victims.[112]

Girls on a leash

Prior to the rape scene in episode 10, we see Pennsatucky humiliated in a different way in epsiode 9 when her attacker forces her to get on all fours and bark like a dog, throwing food on the ground for her to 'fetch'. The scene is distinctly uncomfortable but also recognisable as it has an Appalachian connotation from recent history: it is a callback to the images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, the international scandal of 2004, where leaked photographs showed American soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees, degrading them sexually and physically while posing and smiling for the camera.

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[111] Susan Sered, "Pennsatucky's Teeth And The Persistence Of Class," in *Feminist Perspectives On Orange Is The New Black Thirteen Critical Essays,* ed. April Kalogerpoulos and Adrienne Trier-Bierneck (Jefferson: McFarland and Co, 2016).

[112] Mountain Dew is a soft drink that has historical ties to Appalachia. It was originally produced in Tennessee, had a mascot known as "Willy the hillbilly" and is often claimed to be responsible for tooth decay in the region. We see Pennsatucky consuming the drink as a small child in flashback sequences.

Lynndie England, a twenty-year-old from a trailer park in West Virginia, arguably became the face of the incident after a widely circulated image showed her with a leash around a naked Iraqi man's neck as he lay at her feet. Though the image was indeed horrifying and reprehensible, the reaction to the Appalachian woman in the picture spoke volumes about their perceived place in US society. England had joined the army as a reservist at 17 before being sent to Iraq. She previously worked in a chicken processing plant and hoped the army would pay for her education; she wanted to become a "storm chaser". Catte argues that in the media narrative that followed the story breaking, England "became a bad apple that had been poisoned by her 'trailer trash' upbringing."[113] Because, as Philip Gourevitch articulated, Lynndie England "fit no-one's political narrative, not the left's not the right's," the bloodletting across the spectrum was fierce.[114] Catte further contends that the incident was a prime example of the wider country using Appalachia to compartmentalise issues they did not want to interrogate more deeply, in this case "systemic problems in the military or the consequences of occupation."[115] Indeed, it is notable that despite the furore over Abu Ghraib and Lynndie England's becoming a household name, no-one above the rank of staff sergeant ever faced consequences for the documented torture policy that was in place. The conversation stayed firmly focussed on "bad apples" rather than the wider scourge of the military industrial complex. And though there were several "bad apples" foolish enough to let themselves be photographed, it was the Appalachian woman, England, who was the nexus of the national rage and conversation. According to Gourevitch, England was portrayed in the press as "a sadist, a masochist, an Appalachian hillbilly slut, mentally retarded, you name it." Pundits focussed on her appearance and IQ, often in tandem, revelling in the type of classist

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[113] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica* March 7, 2018 https://www.guernicamag.com/elizabeth-catte-appalachia-isnt-trump-country/.

[114] Mike Birbiglia and Philip Gourevitch. "Fall Guy." *This American Life.* June 26 2009. Audio https://www.thisamericanlife.org/384/fall-guy.

[115] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica.*

misogyny "bad" Appalachian women seem to bring to the fore in the American consciousness. In the Russian newspaper for American expats, *Exile,* one writer called her a "chinless, inbred, runty, androgynous backwoods mutt," conflating her low class status, lack of femininity and rural background to conclude that she was on the level of a dog, and the lowest breed of dog, at that.[116]

Gourevitch contends "there was one thing missing from the discussion; her voice."[117] Yet when her voice *was* finally heard, after she served 18 months of a three year prison sentence, it arguably made matters worse. She was defiant and unapologetic but, crucially, curiously passive in her lack of remorse. In the documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), when pressed on her actions and whether she felt guilty about them she simply said, "Everything we did was just what we were told to do."[118] She barely seemed to bother to make a case for herself despite explaining the death threats she had received and her inability to find employment or a relationship post incarceration.

Central to the discussion around England is her relationship with the Abu Ghraib ringleader and her superior, Charles Grainer. Grainer was 14 years England's senior and had previously served in the first Gulf War before returning to the US to work as a corrections officer, earning a fearsome reputation. By England's account he seduced her out of an unhappy marriage, wooing her with bluegrass music, her favourite, among other things. She was soon completely infatuated by and devoted to him. According to England, it was at Grainer's behest that she posed in the photos, eager to please the man she loved. And when Grainer sent emails of the pictures back to his friends in the US, he captioned them with the boast: "look what I made Lynndie do!"[119] When the scandal broke England discovered she

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[116] John Dolan, "Abu Ghraib Fever," *The Exile.* May 13 2004
ttp://www.exile.ru/articles/detail.php?ARTICLE_ID=7326&IBLOCK_ID=35

[117] Mike Birbiglia and Philip Gourevitch. "Fall Guy." *This American Life.*

[118] *Standard Operating Procedure.* Errol Morris. Los Angeles: Paramount, 2008

[119] Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007) Kindle Edition.

was pregnant with his child. He denied paternity and married another soldier he had also been sleeping with, leaving England to raise his child back in a trailer park in Mineral County, West Virginia, after her sentence. Thus when pressed in subsequent interviews about her choices and behaviour at Abu Ghraib, England repeatedly invokes her relationship with Grainer, if not overtly as an excuse then as a perfectly rational explanation. She remarks with apathy and resignation on separate occasions in *Standard Operating Procedure*: “He played me” and “it’s a man’s world.”[120]

With a different delivery and inflection, these statements could be seen as indignation and even an invocation of feminist thought in her own defence. But England just seemed resigned to her lot in life, a fatalism mirrored by those who even sought to try and find some nuance or sympathy in her story. Joe Bagent, who was incensed by the media conversation on Abu Ghraib and Appalachia remarked: “Whatever, you think of the leash girl of Abu Ghraib, Lynndie England, she never had a chance. Abu Ghraib, or maybe something even worse (an RPG up the shorts, for instance), was always her destiny.”[121] And later of England’s resigned attitude, he wrote: “If you’re doomed to eat shit you may as well bring your own fork.”[122] Indeed, the apathetic submissiveness that so infuriated pundits and the general public when displayed by England is exactly the quality that makes people like her “good soldiers”, the type that in other circumstances American society falls over itself to display reverence for. But in this instance, it was easier for the country to focus on how this behaviour showed Lynndie England, the individual, was a worthless, soulless person than on why the military industrial complex thrives *because* of such people, and to what ends. Just as, in 2016, Appalachia as a whole absorbed the blame for Trumpism, Lynndie England, the real-life

[120] *Standard Operating Procedure.* Errol Morris.
[121] Bageant, *Deer Hunting with Jesus.*
[122] Ibid.

proto Pennsatucky, became the fall girl for the cruelty of neoconservatism and American empire.

The Madonna/Mamaw complex

In the previous chapter, we saw how politically-charged Appalachian memoirs and literature from self-professed hillbillies found a gap in the market around the 2016 election, given the renewed interest in the region. But we also saw that those voices have been almost exclusively male. Elizabeth Catte's *What You're Getting Wrong About Appalachia* was an excellent rejoinder to the neo-liberal victim blaming of *Hillbilly Elegy* but its focus was predominantly on deconstructing JD Vance's argument; there was little personal material involved and, sadly, its audience reach has so far been a fraction of "soon to be made into a Netflix film" *Hillbilly Elegy.* As a result, hillbilly women's narratives remain frustratingly absent from these conversations. However, women did, of course, feature prominently in the more popular literature, albeit through a male lens. And one trope that recurs in both *Hillbilly Elegy* , *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto* and indeed a range of Appalachian cultural output is that of the Mamaw character: the no-nonsense, fierce matriarch, held in often impossibly high esteem by the men she raised. While rural Appalachian society has long been family orientated and matriarchal to a certain extent, the opioid crisis has had a pronounced effect on the make-up of families in the region, especially the delegation of childcare to grandparents. Whether because they've lost their adult children literally to death by overdose or lost them in a more general sense to addiction, grandparents and in particular, grandmothers, are raising their children's children at an alarmingly high rate. A recent report on the problem stated:

> Although data is limited, research shows parental substance use is the most common reason these grandfamilies come together to raise children who would otherwise go into foster care. With the rise in heroin and other opioid use, more relatives are stepping up to raise children whose parents have died, are incarcerated,

> currently using drugs, in treatment or otherwise unable to take care of their children.[123]

In light of this trend, it's important to examine the stereotype of the Appalachian Mamaw and what the trope says about gender and class in the current conversation.

The Mamaw character from *Hillbilly Elegy,* is portrayed as virtually the polar opposite of the likes of Pennsatucky or Lynndie England in terms of agency and victimhood. From the outset, Vance goes to great lengths to extol the virtues of his grandmother, crediting her with the success and stability he has enjoyed in his adult life and for stepping in when his own mother couldn't or wouldn't. The reverence he affords her is matched only by the disdain he has towards his mother. Seeing in his grandmother only superhuman strength and in his mother (a prescription painkiller and later heroin addict with a string of boyfriends) pitiful weakness, he writes: "In Jackson, I was the grandson of the toughest woman anyone knew and the most skilled auto mechanic in town; in Ohio, I was the abandoned son of a man I hardly knew and a woman I wished I didn't." [124] Despite the raison d'etre of Vance's memoir largely being to admonish "hillbilly culture" for its dysfunction, he seems to take a perverse pride in it with regards to his Mamaw, making much of her violent and aggressive nature. Although he acknowledges her behaviour is unconventional and may shock the reader, it is clear he sees it as a sign of her love and "loyalty". He peppers the text with anecdotes such as, "According to family lore, Mamaw had nearly killed a man," and "Mamaw was so terrifying that many decades later, a marine corps recruiter would tell me that I'd find boot camp easier than living at home." [125] But it could also be argued that Vance is highlighting her strength in the form of violence and aggression to overcompensate for

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[123] Amy Morona, "America's Opioid Crisis Means Many Grandparents Are Now Raising Their Grandchildren." *Washington Week,* April 22 2019. https://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/blog-post/americas-opioid-crisis-means-many-grandparents-are-now-raising-their-grandchildren ; https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2018/09/Grandfamilies-Report-SOGF-Updated.pdf

[124] J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: a Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. (New York: Harper, 2018.) loc 226

[125] Ibid.

anything that could be perceived by the reader to be victimhood or weakness, something he clearly bristles at in both individuals and wider culture.

Indeed, it is abundantly clear from the story that Vance's Mamaw is the victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her alcoholic partner, Vance's Papaw, and has had a largely miserable existence. Yet, despite the adoration he clearly feels towards her, Vance engages in textbook victim blaming to minimise this glaringly unpleasant facet of her life. At one point he reveals that his grandmother suffered nine miscarriages in her life, after earlier relaying that she was first impregnated by his papaw at only 14, and muses whether the abuse (though he never calls it that) may have played a part:

> Mamaw carried the emotional scars of nine lost children for her entire life. In college I learned that extreme stress can cause miscarriages. I can't help but wonder how many additional aunts and uncles I'd have today were it not for my grandparents' difficult early transition, no doubt intensified by Papaw's years of hard drinking.[126]

His "years of hard drinking" involved physical violence, but Vance awkwardly cites the much maligned and discredited defence that they were both violent. "His [Papaw's] behaviour was due at least partly to Mamaw's disposition. She was a violent non drunk… If he was in a fighting mood, she'd fight back."[127] Doubling down, he even argues that misogyny was an integral part of Appalachian culture: "Hillbilly culture at the time (and maybe now) blended a robust sense of honor, devotion to family and bizarre sexism into a sometimes explosive mix."[128] It is interesting that he was bold, and some would say arrogant, enough to write a polemical memoir that extrapolates his own experience onto the culture of an entire region of people, yet is clearly hesitant to criticise or interrogate this part of the culture he appointed himself spokesperson for. Though he acknowledges that the violent and abusive environment in which his mother, Bev, grew up was probably at least partly

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[126] Ibid. loc 552.
[127] Ibid. loc 611.
[128] Ibid. loc 572.

responsible for the personal problems in her adult life, he still seems incapable of viewing her and his Mamaw as anything other than a problematic binary of Appalachian womanhood: a pillar of strength, fortitude, love and loyalty or a chaotic, promiscuous drug addict incapable of displaying any maternalism—A Mamaw or a Pennsatucky. Despite Mamaw being one of the most prominent characters in the book, she is rendered largely two-dimensional due to both Vance's stunted attitude to women and his need to see her largely as a comforting caricature .

This same caricature can be found in *The Liberal Redneck Manifesto.* Although of course the subject is treated more frivolously given the very different tone of the book, the authors still revert to a conscious infantile state of simplicity when talking about their grandmothers:

> That's why we love spending time at Mamaw's house: it's a safe haven from reality. No matter how much you try on the outside, it seems that people are never satisfied with your performance. You could do ninety-nine things right, but your boss will focus on the one thing you did wrong. Not a mamaw. [129]

In the very same chapter they confront the fact that most of the trio's grandparents were, or are, racist and how people have long made excuses for this behaviour because of a generational difference, arguing that this needs to stop. However, they also happily quip that the reason they enjoy their grandmother's hospitality so much is down to the servile gender roles they internalised because of their era, thus:

> You see, we Liberal Rednecks consider ourselves feminists, so in no way do we expect dinner to be ready when we get home. Hell, have you met the women in our lives? Wouldn't dare suggest it. We'd be limping to gigs for a week straight with a frozen T-bone on our nads, guarantee it. But our papaws? The greatest generation earth? You damn right they 'spected that stove to have three or four pots going when they crossed the threshold of the house they built with their two bare goddam hands. And, look, we aren't saying that's what made them the greatest generation on earth. You can decide that for yourselves, but that's the way it went down.[130]

[129] Crowder et al, *Liberal Redneck Manifesto,* loc 2039.
[130] Ibid, loc 2044.

There follows no such similar admonishment to stop excusing dated attitudes to gender. At one point in *Hillbilly Elegy,* Vance suggests that Mamaw had possibly been abused as a child because of how angry any mention of child abuse made her and laments that she had expressed a desire to have been a lawyer for children in custody and abuse situations, had she been educated. But still these snippets of vulnerability are not fully explored because Vance cannot allow that level of nuance in his heroine. Despite his clear love for her, she exists in his memory as a person defined by her relationship to him.

Similarly, another crucial woman in his life, and therefore in his memoir, his wife Usha Chilukuri, is largely presented through the prism of both what she brought out in Vance and, crucially, how she contrasts with the women he grew up with. An upper-middle-class Asian-American, Chilukuri is described by Vance as his "Yale spirit guide" as she possessed the cultural capital he lacked to navigate law school. He also appreciates that she wasn't prone to anger and aggression like the women he was used to, saying approvingly, "Usha hadn't learned how to fight in the hillbilly school of hard knocks."[131] And praising her for her patience with his volatile, emotionally repressed behaviour, he adds:

> The sad fact is that I couldn't do it without Usha. Even at my best, I'm a delayed explosion—I can be defused, but only with skill and precision. It's not just that I've learned how to control myself but that Usha has learned how to manage me. Put two of me in the same home and you have a positively radioactive situation. It's no surprise that every single person in my family who has built a successful home married someone from outside our little culture.[132]

There is no introspection whatsoever as to whether needing to be "defused with skill" is a fair expectation to have of his spouse or what it is that he offers in return. With this brief passage, he dismisses the possibility of ever having dated or married an Appalachian woman, because he believes they possess the same faults he has. Joe Bageant, the political polar opposite of

[131] Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy, lo*c 2929.
[132] Ibid, loc 2999

Vance speaks of working class Appalachian women in a similarly disparaging way even when ostensibly defending them. When talking about Lynndie England and her hopeless life chances he remarks:

> When I walk the street where I grew up and look around, I see the likes of Lynndie everywhere—the girls of the type I dated as a kid. Thanks to fast food (unavailable in my youth) they are fatter, but they are the same cigarette-smoking, in your face white girls I knew then, the tough daughters of the unwashed.[133]

As already outlined, *Hillbilly Elegy*'s portrayal of Appalachian culture overall is deeply reductive and problematic. So it is perhaps no surprise that its brief view of Appalachian women is equally simplistic and lacking in nuance. However, with a film adaptation set to feature prominent Hollywood actors sure to garner renewed attention upon its release, it is frustrating that Appalachian womanhood has been defined by such narrow parameters and it is perhaps even more frustrating that neither the left nor mainstream feminists have not stepped forward to correct these characterisations. But as previously alluded to in both this chapter and in the introduction, both the left and the right have an investment in a certain portrayal of Appalachian culture in light of 2016. In terms of left and right discourse around the aforementioned "calamity thesis"—the idea that some great unacknowledged calamity that befell white working class America was responsible for Trump's victory—not only have words like "Appalachian" and "working class" become shorthand for "white", they've also arguably become shorthand for "male"; coal miners and steelworkers. Catte concedes that the collapse of these industries has undoubtedly had a wider impact on the functioning of the region:

> The coal industry in Appalachia employs maybe thirty thousand people, and the reason that it's so important is because it was one of few industries where you could leave high school and get a job making a living, and even oftentimes a comfortable wage. When people lose those jobs, it's going to be a huge hit for the economy.[134]

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[133] Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus,* loc 2250.
[134] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica* March 7, 2018 https://www.guernicamag.com/elizabeth-catte-appalachia-isnt-trump-country/.

But she maintains that these people are overrepresented in popular and political images of Appalachia, and that the real working class in the region is the same as the working class in the rest of America, diverse and female.

> The working class of Appalachia is the working class of any region. It's people who work in retail and hospitality. People who work in healthcare and are underpaid for that. People who are teachers and educators, who, again, are very underpaid. The working class are the people just like in California, who are trapped in what we call the gig economy. People who are trapped in unstable work contracts, temp labor, people who work at the Dollar General store. People who give you your flu shot. These are the people in Appalachia who make the region tick. Also, the emerging face of the working class is more likely to be a woman or a person of color.[135]

Appalachian women have largely been absent from the 2016 conversation for the same reasons women are underrepresented in most political and cultural conversations but also because they served no purpose in a largely disingenuous discourse around Appalachia and the white working class that usurped an honest, necessary discussion about class in all corners of the US. If anything, they detracted from it.

But as women increasingly become the emerging face of the working class, that will hopefully begin to change. A recent *New York Times* piece drew attention to the rapid gender role adjustment taking place in the Eastern Kentucky coalfields as an increasing number of men are out of work while an increasing number of women are finding it, primarily in the growing healthcare industry in the region. According to the article, from 2010 to 2017, Letcher County saw a greater shift in the gender balance of its labor force than almost any other county in the United States. Just 10 years ago, nearly three-fifths of the workforce was male. Now the majority is female. The phenomenon and its coverage is a welcome rejoinder to the constant portrayal of Appalachian women as disempowered victims, with a local Kentucky woman quoted in the piece remarking:

[135] Ibid.

> Women now, they got a little taste of freedom. Men has been able to do whatever the hell they want for so long while women has had to sit in a chair and keep their legs closed and be nice and polite. Now they don't have to.[136]

However, as compelling and vital as this coverage is, it still, by omission, implies that feminism is just arriving in Appalachia in 2019. Yet the region has a history of some of the most radical feminist activism in the country and Jessica Wilkerson believes that the Appalchian feminists of the 1970s have much to teach both men and the left and liberal feminists about activism today. Encapsulating the ethos of women who mobilised in the 1970s around the confluence of labour and gender issues yet were largely eventually overshadowed by movements in urban areas and remain marginalised in both feminist and labour history today, she writes:

> Above all, Appalachian feminism insists upon an understanding of class oppression, which operates within a capitalism that thrives on racist and sexist social structures. It requires listening to women whose feminism is rooted in their daily experiences and charting feminist movements that will transform society for all women, not just those in positions of relative power.[137]

Instead of hackneyed tropes of either fatalistic, drug-addled victims or long-suffering, impossibly tough matriarchs who exist to coddle the male ego and absorb intergenerational trauma, these are the images of Appalachian womanhood that desperately need delving into, promoting and encouraging more than ever; a blueprint for a truly working-class, intersectional movement not just in the much maligned mountains but in the wider US.

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[136] Campbell Robertson, "In Coal Country, The Mines Shut Down, The Women Went To Work And The World Changed," *The New York Times,* September 14 2019 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/us/appalachia-coal-women-work-.html?fbclid=IwAR2g3dEgArqvDIyA2DyNhlQJJpo8efeX2pp1Rw7kqO1oc81sxRMr7p496io.

[137] Jessica Wilkerson, "Feminism In The Coalfields: What Appalachians Of The 1970s Can Teach Today's Feminists," *Rewire News.* Jan 26 2018.

Chapter three:

Poverty pornographers and parachutists in Trump Country

"I've come to West Virginia." So intones British documentarian Louis Theroux in his 2017 documentary *Dark States: Heroin town*.[138] His acclaimed documentary focussed on the region's very 21st-century opioid epidemic, but in many ways it could have been any of a series of documentaries, articles or photojournalism projects about Appalachia over the last 50 years. Despite the relative merits of Theroux's film, the format was a well-worn one; an outsider arrives in Appalachia to study its inhabitants, then, just as quickly leaves to return to 'civilisation' and share their findings with the modern world. While this is an inherent limitation of documentary journalism across a range of issues, Appalachia in particular has a long and storied history of being the victim of problematic 'parachute' journalism perpetuated by outsiders.[139] The current incarnation of journalistic preoccupation with Appalachia, which most notably began manifesting itself with the ubiquitous 'Trump country' pieces that saturated coverage of the 2016 election and the ensuing post-mortem, may be the 2010s zeitgeist, but the tropes it employs and the conclusions that are often drawn are virtually indistinguishable from those that have characterised journalistic coverage of the region since the 1960s.

In 1964, for example, the year LBJ announced his 'War on Poverty', photojournalist John Domini produced the infamous article 'The Valley of Poverty' for *Life* magazine. An except reads:

[138] *Dark States: Heroin Town.* Louis Theroux. London: BBC, 2017.

[139] 'Parachute journalism' is a largely pejorative term for the practice of sending in reporters on a whim from outside a region without a sufficient understanding of the area's issues and background.

> In a lonely valley in eastern Kentucky, in the heart of the mountainous region called Appalachia, live an impoverished people whose plight has long been ignored by affluent America. Their homes are shacks without plumbing or sanitation. Their landscape is a man-made desolation of corrugated hills and hollows laced with polluted streams. The people, themselves — often disease-ridden and unschooled — are without jobs and even without hope. Government relief and handouts of surplus food have sustained them on a bare subsistence level for so many years that idleness and relief are now their accepted way of life.[140]

The passage sets out many of the key tropes that would continue to define journalism about the region until the present day. Appalachia is depicted as a neglected region that wealthy Americans are unaware exists until the anointed roving journalist draws their attention to it, defined by primitive, developing-world level poverty, illiteracy and government dependency. As much as they ever departed the American consciousness, all these Appalachian motifs were given new life in the media scrambling to understand Donald Trump's election. In this chapter, I examine how the legacy of reporting on Appalachia from the 1960s informed the Trump Country pieces we saw in 2016 and are continuing to see today and why the public appetite for this type of narrative and imagery is still so voracious, fifty years on from the War on Poverty. I also look in depth at McDowell County, the West Virginian county that was the subject of a disproportionate amount of Trump Country coverage, and analyse what it was about this tiny area of Appalachia that captivated both American and foreign journalists so much. I examine how the twin scourge of opioid addiction and Trumpism has brought national media focus back to Appalachia but how that focus has largely been superficial and crucially lacks the necessary nuance to move past the enduring image of Appalachia as a cultural anomaly rather than the lightning rod for what ails the entire country in a larger sense.

Veteran Appalachian journalist Tom Gish, located the genesis of the 1960s fixation with Appalachia as the publication of Harry Caudill's seminal work *Night comes to the*

[140] John Dominis, "Valley of Poverty," *LIFE,* January 31, 1964.

Cumberlands:A Biography of a depressed area in 1963. He, like many others, credits the work with bringing the federal relief efforts to the region that would later become known as the War on Poverty, or more aptly he credits the subsequent journalism the book ignited. Describing the origins of the flurry of media interest he lived through, he said: "The New York Times sent a reporter and a photographer to see if Harry knew what he was talking about and they saw enough to convince them of the accuracy of his writings and did a story that was spread across a Sunday *New York Times*."[141]Almost overnight, the Eastern Kentucky region was inundated with journalists. Gish recalls: "Almost every time you looked up there was a newspaper reporter, magazine reporter or a television reporter."[142]

Some residents thought the attention was a positive development, initially. They reasoned that if journalistic focus had brought government intervention in the region, then its continued presence might help maintain that momentum. But over time tensions between local communities and the constant stream of outsiders began to fester. Despite the good intentions of many journalists and filmmakers, a significant number appeared to only be interested in superficial portrayals of abject, rural poverty rather than a nuanced conversation about the people, the culture and the ongoing exploitation that was responsible for the deprivation in the area. Elizabeth Barrett explains: "America needed Appalachia's coal. The same system that brought wealth to some, impoverished others. Some filmmakers wanted to show this contrast to help bring about social change. Others mined the images the way the companies had mined the coal."[143] They engaged in a form of voyeurism that is now often disparagingly referred to as "poverty porn", which Beth Wilson defines as films and images "made for a privileged audience, offering up stories of poverty and suffering for their

[141] *Stranger With a Camera.* Elizabeth Barret. Whitesburg: Appalshop, 2000.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.

enjoyment."[144] Indeed, the 1960s images from Appalachia increasingly seemed to serve no purpose other than to titillate Americans who were enjoying post-war prosperity far from the hills. A British documentary, *The Crusader* (1967), produced by the BBC, was singled out as a particularly exploitative example that Barrett found insulting as a child focussed on Kentucky poverty.[145] Additionally, there was resentment that the media focused solely on the poverty of the region, when a functioning working and middle class existed in many areas, even adjacent to and among the images. Barrett recalls wondering as a child in the region whether the middle-class people who complained about the portrayal of Eastern Kentucky worried that the rest of America would think they were responsible for the poverty or were more concerned about looking poor, too.[146] The pride of a whole area was increasingly bruised by the casting of Eastern Kentucky as uniquely downtrodden, dysfunctional area, irredeemably out of step with the rest of the United States.

Strained relations between locals and parachute journalists reached boiling point when in 1967, Letcher County Kentucky resident Hobart Ison murdered Canadian filmmaker, Hugh O'Connor, while he was taking pictures on his property. While many residents were aghast at the crime, a significant minority saw Ison as something of a hero; many offered to post his bond and his subsequent trial was moved out of the county over concerns about the feasibility of selecting an impartial jury. Reflecting in 2000 on the atmosphere surrounding the crime, Ison's attorney said:

> Of course that misplaced attitude of "Save the Aborigines" is as old as the hills. It's been practiced throughout humanity's span of lifetime that people who think they are more sophisticated are going to come into the backward countries and make everything right. And that kind of thing had been going on in eastern Kentucky where the people from the northeast of the United States and elsewhere were coming down filming the bad parts to publicize that kind of thing. And that's the backdrop of what happened with the Hobart Ison situation.[147]

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[144] Beth Wilson, "What is Poverty Porn and are we guilty of indulging in it?" *Trespass Magazine* February 4, 2010 http://www.trespassmag.com/what-is-%E2%80%98poverty-porn%E2%80%99-and-are-we-guilty-of-indulging-in-it/.
[145] *Stranger With a Camera.* Elizabeth Barret.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.

As the 1960s drew to a close, the filmmakers and reporters gradually left Eastern Kentucky and the national focus shifted elsewhere: to Vietnam, to the Whitehouse, to areas of urban poverty where more pressing problems of violence and friction seemed to be brewing. But the legacy of the journalism that surrounded the War on Poverty in Appalachia endured even after the cameras stopped rolling. The pervasiveness of the trope of outsiders explaining the strange folk of Appalachia to the rest of America is exemplified perfectly by an autobiographical passage in *Draggin' Dixie Out of the Dark*, where comedian Drew Morgan explains where he spent his formative years with the quip: "I come from a very tiny place in the middle of nowhere, Appalachia. It's the kind of place British people do documentaries on and 'regular' white Americans go, 'Wow can you believe this is here?'"[148]

Hillbilly Heroin

While Donald Trump was still only on most Americans' radar as a brash New York City real estate mogul and reality TV star, Appalachia was already beginning to slowly make its way back into national focus for negative reasons. The opioid epidemic, now the biggest drug epidemic in United States history, first took hold in Central Appalachia in the late 1990s.[149] But it would be a long time before it became headline news. Chris McGeal remarks of the lag in public and political consciousness: "How was it that this tragedy began when Bill Clinton was president, surged through the years George W Bush occupied the White House, but only began to be given the attention it deserved when Barack Obama was wrapping up his second

[148] Crowder et al, Liberal Redneck Manifesto, loc 5238
[149] Nadja Popovich, "A Deadly Crisis:Mapping the spread of America's drug overdose epidemic" *The Guardian ,* May 25, 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/society/ng-interactive/2016/may/25/opioid-epidemic-overdose-deaths-map.

term?"[150] When the media finally began to catch up with the epidemic, dispatches from rural Appalachian towns ravaged by drug addiction began to grow in frequency, almost as though journalists were overcompensating for their negligence until this point.[151] Parachute reports from places like Portsmouth, Ohio, the county seat town in Appalachian Scioto, became de rigueur in the years preceding the Trump country explosion of interest and the term 'hillbilly heroin' was either coined, or at the very least enthusiastically adopted by a media baffled by the emergence of a rural drug epidemic that contrasted with everything they knew about previous epidemics.[152]

There were a large amount of white addicts affected in rural communities, unlike the images of black addicts in urban housing projects the media had been used to in the late twentieth century.[153] Indeed, despite rising objections from residents themselves to the negative depictions of despair that characterised pieces on opioid-affected Appalachian towns, others from communities of colour noticed discrepancies in the style and tone of reporting when compared with reporting on previous drug issues that predominantly affected urban black communities, such as the crack epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. They argued there was a deeper level of empathy and nuance given to white drug addicts than had been shown previously. Lincoln Anthony Blades explained the stark difference in governmental attitudes with the remark: "Heroin use by black people was used to start a war on drugs, while heroin use by white people has been used to transition that war into a more gentle, health-conscious approach."[154] He went on to posit that it was politically expedient to be

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[150] Chris McGeal, *American Overdose: The opioid tragedy in three acts.* (Public Affairs: New York City, 2019).
[151] Ibid.
[152] Julian Borger, "Hillbilly Heroin: The painkiller abuse wrecking lives in West Virginia", *The Guardian,* Jun 25, 2001 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jun/25/usa.julianborger.
[153] Lincoln Anthony Blades, "The Opioid Crisis Only Became A Crisis When It Affected White People," *Teen Vogue,* October 30, 2017 https://www.teenvogue.com/story/the-opioid-crisis-only-became-a-crisis-when-it-affected-white-people.
[154] Ibid.

sympathetic to victims of the crisis because of the demographics of the areas that were being hit hardest and how they'd been portrayed by the media:

> White people are dying from opioid overdoses at a much higher rate than black and Latinx people, and the problem has been concentrated in predominantly white areas, free of the drug-abuse stigmatization attached to many low-income black and brown neighborhoods. West Virginia, New Hampshire, Kentucky, and Rhode Island are among the states with the highest opioid-overdose death rates, where most people impacted are lower-income white families — the type of people who are politically typecast as the hardworking, blue-collar workers of "real America." [155]

This is a keen point to make, as it hints at how awkwardly Appalachia sits at the intersection of class and race in America. While there is validity in noting that the media responded in a less reactionary manner to a crisis in poor white communities compared to communities of colour, many in Appalachia were also indignant in their belief that media and political attention reached a crescendo once it had infiltrated middle-class white communities, the respectable suburbs of metropolitan cities.[156] Their white privilege may have afforded them a certain level of media sympathy but many nevertheless took umbrage at the patronizing and fatalistic approach of certain pieces of journalism that covered the epidemic in Appalachia.

In May 2017, for example, *The Guardian* published a piece by Chris Arnade on aforementioned Portsmouth, Ohio for its "Addiction in America" series, titled "The Pill Mill Of America: Where drugs mean there are no good choices, only less awful ones." It opens much like countless Trump Country pieces and the 1960s tropes they borrowed from, reading:

> Portsmouth, Ohio, once known for making things (steel, shoes, bricks), is now known for drugs, and labeled by some as the "pill mill of America". The city peaked at 40,000 people in 1940, and as it emptied of factories and jobs – some made

[155] Ibid.
[156] Roger Bate, "The New Middle Class Worry: Opioids not war," *Aeideas* December 13, 2018 https://www.aei.org/health-policy/the-new-middle-class-worry-opioids-not-war/.

> obsolete, some moved away – it also emptied of people and hope. Now it is a town half the size, filled with despair and filling with drugs.[157]

Residents were offended and responded in a piece for grassroots journalism organisation 100 Days in Appalachia: "It [the *Guardian* piece] described a community flat on its back, completely helpless. It was a problematic example of parachute journalism. It's certainly true that Portsmouth was one of the first and hardest hit by the opioid crisis. That also means that it has spent the most time addressing it."[158] The main objection was that such pieces focus solely on the bleakness without ever covering the many community-led projects fighting back and problem solving on the micro level. While many may counter with the argument that small bits of 'good news' just aren't as compelling, this overly determinist narrative robs Portsmouth residents of their agency– a recurring problem with reporting not just in Appalachia but in a range of disadvantaged environments. As Sarah Baird, the creator of the Shoelace database that aims to improve national coverage of small communities in the US, attests: "These stories cause actual consequences for these communities not only in how the nation perceives them but how they perceive themselves."[159]

Naturally, the emergence of journalism focussed on the opioid epidemic in Appalachia eventually overlapped with the rise of the Trump Country genre (overdose deaths hit a record high in 2017) and therefore it was somewhat inevitable that reporters started looking for heavy-handed points to connect the two.[160] Some were content to simply use the analogy of Trump as analgesic but some looked harder for a tangible link. In December 2016,

[157] Chris Arnade, "The Pill Mill of America: Where drugs mean there are no good choices, only less awful ones." *The Guardian* May 17, 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/17/drugs-opiod-addiction-epidemic-portsmouth-ohio.

[158] Jack Shuler, "Don't forget the Beauty: Appalachian town pushes back against national narrative of despair." 1*00 Days in Appalachia* May 31, 2019 https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2019/05/31/dont-forget-the-beauty-appalachian-town-pushes-back-against-national-narrative-of-despair/.

[159] Matthew Sedacca, "Better local journalism by local reporters is goal of new database" *The New York Times,* November 18 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/18/business/media/shoeleather-local-reporting.html.

[160] Jessica Y Ho "The Contemporary American Drug Overdose epidemic in International Perspective", *Population and Development Review,* March 18, 2019.

as hand-wringing over Trump's triumph was at its height , NPR ran a segment interviewing Shannon Monnat of Penn State University who authored a study showing Trump had performed well in areas worst affected by the opioid epidemic.[161] The newsworthy appeal of the research is obvious but Monnat's study explicitly states that "this relationship should not be interpreted as causal."[162] Yet the interview largely used conjecture over the link between Trump and opioids as its jumping off point to reflect on the media's imperceptive response to problems in rural America with Simon Scott asking at one point: "So on top of everything else, those of us who report politics and live in a bubble - we missed the importance of the opioid epidemic?"[163] In addition, Monnat's study is billed as having found a link between counties in economic distress, their opioid overdose rate and support for Trump which played perfectly with the "calamity thesis" many journalists were keen to use to explain Trump's victory; it appeared to provide hard, statistical evidence that neglect of the white working class and their problems had handed Donald Trump the presidency. However, Monnat said this in a brief of her research:

> In Appalachia, the relationship between mortality and Trump's performance actually appears to be stronger among the least economically distressed counties but much of Appalachia suffers from significant economic distress. Therefore, even the least distressed counties in Appalachia are among the most distressed nationwide.[164]

This is a throwaway remark that is actually problematic and telling in equal measure. Firstly, the least distressed counties in Appalachia are *not* among the most distressed in the country. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, even counties like Allegheny in Pennsylvania, the subject of more than one Trump Country piece, are classed as

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[161] Simon Scott, "Study: Communities Most Affected by Opioid Epidemic Also Voted for Trump," *NPR December 20 2016* https://www.npr.org/2016/12/17/505965420/study-communities-most-affected-by-opioid-epidemic-also-voted-for-trump

[162] Shannon M. Monnat, 'Deaths of Despair and Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election', Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology and Education Research Brief, The Pennsylvania State University (2016)

[163] Simon Scott, "Study: Communities Most Affected by Opioid Epidemic Also Voted for Trump,"

[164] Shannon M. Monnat, 'Deaths of Despair and Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election'.

'competitive' placing them in the top 25% of counties nationally.[165] It's troubling that a rural sociologist would continue to perpetuate sweeping generalisations about a huge region of the country. Additionally, that Donald Trump performed better in the less economically distressed counties of Appalachia where opioid mortality was high is an important kernel of information that should not be dismissed. The national narrative that poor white, Appalachians voted in their droves for Trump often did not square with such facts but this was frequently ignored. For example, in a particularly vitriolic article (previously mentioned in the introductory chapter), Kevin Williamson railed against the 'white underclass' he believed responsible for Trump (despite being a Republican, himself). He said: "Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin."[166] But he was castigated for this by Alec MacGillis, for the nastiness of the sentiment but also, crucially, for his inaccuracy. MacGillis wrote:

> (Wiliamson) mischaracterizes the typical Trump voter. As exit polls show, the candidate's base is not the truly bereft white underclass Williamson derides. Those Americans are, by and large, not voting at all, as I'm often reminded when reporting in places like Appalachia, where turnout rates are the lowest in the country. People voting for Trump are mostly a notch higher on the economic ladder—in a position to feel exactly the resentment that Williamson himself feels toward the shiftless needy.[167]

The journalistic conflation of opioid abuse and Trump support is a symptom of the fundamental lack of understanding of several issues surrounding the 2016 election, not the least of which is the nature of addiction. It would be fair to surmise that people in the throes of opioid addiction had bigger concerns than turning out for Donald Trump at the ballot box. This erroneous characterisation gives credence to something Elizabeth Catte maintains about

[165] "County Economic Status in Appalachia FY 2020," Appalachian Regional Commission, accessed September 25 2019, https://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=149.
[166] Kevin D Williamson, "Chaos in the Family, Chaos in the State: The White Working Class's Dysfunction" *National Review*, March 17, 2016 https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/03/donald-trump-white-working-class-dysfunction-real-opportunity-needed-not-trump/
[167] Alec MacGillis, "The Original Underclass", *The Atlantic,* September 2016 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/the-original-underclass/492731/

Trump Country journalism–-that the genre and the concerns of people it portrays are actually something of a smokescreen for more middle-class American concerns, concerns of the more comfortable masquerading as opinions of the truly impoverished. She argued: "What we know now, of course, is that these narratives employed a sleight of hand that used working class people to illustrate the voting preferences of white middle-class and affluent individuals."[168]

The Trump Country Genre

Catte identified and examined the Trump Country genre in her book, devoting an entire chapter to its existence and problems. She explained that she first became aware of the style in February 2016 when the *Vanity Fair* piece "I'm in West Virginia to understand Donald Trump", by John Saward came to her attention.[169] Catte goes on to cite many other examples of the genre and in my own research I've come across a veritable collection of pieces that fit the bill, both pre- and post-election. Indeed, it was the spike in Trump Country journalism that first piqued my interest in the region in 2016 and led to the inception of this project.

But notably, Trump country pieces conform to a wider global pattern in journalism. As shock election results and right-wing populist movements have rattled several western countries in the latter half of this decade, journalists have produced hasty profiles of otherwise often overlooked areas deemed responsible for or key to understanding a sea of change in the heartlands. Joe Kennedy identifies a trend in British journalism that reached fever pitch during a similar time period to the US, as the country was consumed with the Brexit vote and result. He wrote:

[168] Catte, What You're Getting Wrong, loc 249.
[169] John Saward "I'm in West Virginia to understand Donald Trump", *Vanity Fair* February 2016 https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/02/donald-trump-supporters-west-virginia.

> The obsession with 'legitimate concerns' and ministering to the wounded pride of the British rust belt has given rise to a whole new genre of journalism. Very often, pieces in this vein begin with a brief snapshot of the town's one-time industry, a closed glass factory or a canal clogged with rubbish and weeds that once took local products all the way to the sea.[170]

Indeed, this trope is clearly transatlantic. As we've seen and will continue to see, many of the Trump Country long-reads set their scene with the description of a now down-at-heel town with reference to previous industrial glory days. Similarly, during the lead up to French elections in 2017, French journalists left Paris and ventured to 'Le Pen country' en masse, to places such as Henin Beaumount, a post-industrial region of the country's North East, to vox pop previously left-wing steelworkers about their switch to the far right.[171] [172]

Of course, many of these pieces were often seemingly borne of noble intentions. Indeed, Catte surmises the attraction of Trump Country pieces in an increasingly bizarre election season thus: "Sandwiched between email servers and Access Hollywood outtakes, Appalachians stood ready to offer human interest stories that demystified, or so the press assumed, the appeal of a distinct type of political annihilation."[173]As the Trump phenomenon went from a media joke to an increasingly possible reality, journalists began to self-flagellate for their collective ignorance of the American heartlands where they believed Trump was thriving. Talking to Poynter about election reporting as the 2016 cycle wound down, editor-in-chief of *The Texas Tribune* Emily Ramshaw embodied this attitude, saying: "It's easy to sit in our ivory towers and make 'educated' guesses about who the frontrunners are. It's another thing entirely to step out of D.C. and New York, to step off of the campaign buses and out of the debate halls and absorb the frustration and resentment of the underprivileged,

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[170] Joe Kennedy, *Authentocrats*, 64.

[171] 'Vox pop' in journalism refers to short interviews with members of the public on the street.

[172] Jean-Louis Manard, "Marine Le Pen fait sa rentrée politique à Hénin-Beaumont", *Hauts de France* March 8, 2017 https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/marine-le-pen-la-france-n-est-pas-une-terre-d-asile-psychiatrique-7798299077.

[173] Catte, *What You're Getting Wrong,*

the uneducated."[174] After the shock result of 2016 there was a great sense amongst whole swathes of American society of having missed something and been taken by surprise, of being out of touch and naive. This was perhaps most acutely felt among journalists whose whole raison d'etre is to be on the pulse of cultural and political trends. While many Trump Country reporters were hamfisted and lazy, individually many of the pieces were not always without merit or moments of nuance. But the problems with the genre as a whole are myriad. Catte's main bone of contention was the assumption that Appalachia was even Trump Country to begin with. While reports as early as 2015 indicated that Trump was popular in parts of Appalachia, few were ever bellwether or swing states on which the election was likely to hinge. We now, of course, know that it was Midwestern states such as Wisconsin, where the crucial shifts and trends that would grant Trump his shock victory, were taking place. But think pieces from such areas were few and far between in comparison to the spate of dispatches from Appalachia. Yet even if we take Appalachia's casting as Trump Country at face value, there is much to unpack.

Without exception, the intended audience for the Trump Country pieces always seemed to be people who weren't Appalachian themselves. The genre seemed to exist purely to explain Appalachians to coastal elites, posing serious questions about what and whom journalism is for. Catte argues that the genre is dominated by this characteristic, saying: "Pundits explained our socioeconomic realities to one another under the guise of educating a presumed audience of coastal elites whom they argued, had become hardened to the plight of the forgotten American."[175] The assumption constantly appeared to be that the audience was as unfamiliar with the areas visited for the piece as the journalist, as with the type of people interviewed, their struggles and viewpoints. In one particularly graceless exchange captured

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[174] Kristen Hare and Alexios Mantzarlis, "How the 2016 campaign changed political journalism" *Poynter.* November 8, 2016 https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2016/how-the-2016-election-changed-political-journalism/

[175] Catte, *What You're Getting Wrong,* 23.

on camera for CBS piece, 'The view from Trump Country', journalist Ted Koppel chaired a post-election roundtable at a West Virginia diner with Appalachian voters. It included a young woman who didn't vote at all and a couple who voted for Hilary Clinton and were perfectly articulate about why, yet Koppel felt the need to ask why "the people down here in McDowell county were so much smarter than everybody else, so much smarter than us in New York and Washington and Los Angeles and Chicago. What did you know that we didn't know?"[176] Here, Koppel actually refers to his presumed audience as 'us' before listing major metropolitan cities to really bring the point about metropolitan obliviousness home, demanding in an arguably condescending manner that a cross section of Appalachians explain the Trump phenomenon to urban America. The inference here is that it is amusing to suggest that residents of rural West Virginia would be 'so much smarter' than residents of the major US cities. Such reporting was clearly intended to only to be consumed by urban audiences; ordinary Appalachians were posited as the other, harking back to the well-worn trope of Appalachia as a strange and different place.

McDowell County as epicentre

But by this point in 2016, residents of McDowell County were likely used to the intense media attention. If Appalachia was cast as ground zero of Trump Country in this period, then many journalists seemingly craved an even deeper dive into the belly of the beast. As a result, the tiny county in West Virginia became the poster child for Trump country. Elizabeth Catte remarked, "During the 2016 presidential campaign, McDowell County became synonymous with 'Trump Country.'[177] Despite a population of just over 18,000 people, McDowell County attracted a staggeringly inordinate amount of news

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[176] "The view from Trump Country", YouTube video, 00:08:25, "CBS Sunday Morning," November 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vC2SgL4tpE.

[177] Catte, *What you're getting wrong*

coverage in the 2016 election cycle, much of it even international. Israel's *Haaretz* headlined their McDowell County piece "Far from the American Dream in West Virginia,"[178] Canada's *National Post* declared "There are few better places to understand how Donald Trump could become the U.S president than McDowell County", while *The Guardian* in the UK used a video segment to explain "Why the poorest county in West Virginia has faith in Donald Trump."[179][180] Situated in the coalfields of Southern West Virginia, McDowell fulfilled virtually all the attributes the media were so keen to assign to Appalachian Trump Country as a whole. It regularly features in the top ten poorest counties in the entire United States; in 2015 it had the tragic accolade of the highest number of drug induced deaths in the country; and of 3,142 counties in the United States in 2013, McDowell County ranked 3,142 in the life expectancy of both male and female residents.[181][182] It also has a shrinking population with photogenic Americana relics of previous boom times, such as abandoned 1930s era main streets and decrepit 'mom and pop' shops, that satisfied the narrative of an American Dream in decline that journalists were so keen to highlight. Most of the coverage was defined by brief video segments that made much of the run-down imagery of the area, usually contrasted with archive footage from a more prosperous era. *The New York Times* labelled it a "rural Detroit."[183.] Crucially though, the nexus of the attention was the notion that "Donald Trump was more popular in McDowell County than anywhere else in America," as claimed by *The Guardian* in a short film as part of their *Anywhere But Washington* series, based solely on the

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[178] Haim Handwerker, "Far from the American Dream in West Virginia," *Haaretz* July 24, 2017 https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-far-from-the-american-dream-in-west-virginia-1.5433539

[179] Catte, *What you're getting wrong*.

[180] Paul Lewis, Tom Silverstone and Adithya Sambamurthy, "Why the Poorest County in West Virginia has faith in Trump," *The Guardian* 13 October, 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/oct/12/west-virginia-donald-trump-supporters-mcdowell-county-poverty-video.

[181] Rose A. Rudd, "Increases in drug and opioid overdose deaths 2000-2014," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* January 2016.

[182] County profile: McDowell County, West Virginia http://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/files/county_profiles/US/2015/County_Report_McDowell_County_West_Virginia.pdf (Accessed Sept 6 2019).

[183] Trip Gabriel, "50 Years into the War on Poverty, Hardship Bites Back".

fact that Donald Trump received 90% of the Republican vote in McDowell, in the West Virginia primary.[184] As has been stated previously in this thesis, Donald Trump did receive strong support across swathes of Appalachia.[185] But West Virginia's Republican primary takes place in May, and by May 2016 Donald Trump was the only Republican candidate not to have withdrawn from the race and was the presumptive nominee. In addition, that 90% was just over 700 votes in real terms.[186] Thus, calling McDowell the place where Donald Trump was most popular in America is shaky and problematic.

The media were also seemingly excited by the fact that in 2008, McDowell was one of a handful of West Virginia counties that had voted for Barack Obama before becoming the apparent capital of Trump Country in 2016, playing into the calamity thesis narrative.[187] If an area could swing so hard in just eight years, surely there had been some sort of acute crisis ignored by, or unknown to, coastal elites. The *CBS* McDowell piece managed to list all these factors in just the intro of their segment which opened with archive footage from the county's glory days accompanied by the voice over of Ted Koppel, reading:

> McDowell County in West Virginia echoes to the sounds of 'used-to-bes'. There used to be a 100,000 people in the county, back when the coal mines ran three shifts a day, that's another used to be. (...) JFK carried the county, carried the state, folks here used to be staunch Democrats.[188]

Most of the McDowell Country pieces were sympathetic, if sometimes slightly condescending, to their subjects. And indeed, many of the same subjects made appearances in several different reports, a sign of the same 'fixers' being involved with different reporters

[184] Paul Lewis, Tom Silverstone and Adithya Sambamurthy, "Why the Poorest County in West Virginia has faith in Trump" *The Guardian* October 13 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/oct/12/west-virginia-donald-trump-supporters-mcdowell-county-poverty-video.

[185] 2016 US presidential map by county and vote share: https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/ (accessed 9 September 2019).

[186] Catte, *What You're Getting Wrong*, 30.

[187] See introduction.

[188] "The view from Trump Country", YouTube video, 00:08:25, "CBS Sunday Morning," November 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vC2SgL4tpE.

and the shrinking, incestuous nature of contemporary reporting.[189] Ed Shepard, a nonagenarian who has clung on to his dilapidated rural gas station for over 65 years, featured in a raft of interviews with the likes of *The LA Times*, *The Guardian* and CNN dating back several years before the election. Virtually every appearance is set up to imply that the journalist in question has stumbled across this affable yokel for the first time, yet by the aftermath of the 2016 election he was actually a seasoned talking head. Interestingly, *The Huffington Post* caught up with Shepard for a post-election Trump Country piece and he told them, "I didn't vote in this election. Whoever goes to the White House will do whatever he/she wants to do and won't give a damn about us."[190] The star of an inordinate amount of Trump Country pieces didn't even vote at all, let alone for Trump. In an interview about the phenomenon Elizabeth Catte quipped, "I call them minor coal-country celebrities, people who get recycled throughout these pieces."[191] McDowell is a sparsely populated rural area, but there's no reason why the same interviewees should recur in several different segments for national and international publications and broadcasters, especially if their only qualification to comment on the election is that they live in the county. Bluntly, it exemplifies the laziness of some of the journalism that was produced in the period, with so much of it tediously derivative and unquestioning. Once on outlet deemed McDowell the capital of Trump Country (and it's difficult to ascertain where the first McDowell Trump piece originated) it seemed journalists were only keen to perpetuate and emulate this rather than interrogate it at all.

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[189] A 'fixer' is a person hired by a foreign correspondent or a media company to help arrange a story. Fixers will most often act as a translator and guide, and will help to arrange local interviews that the correspondent would not otherwise have access to.

[190] Sam Levine, "This county gives a glimpse at the America that voted Trump into Office," *Huffpost US* November 18, 2016 https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/mcdowell-county-trump_us_582f18dde4b030997bbefa0d?ri18n=true

[191] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica* March 7, 2018 https://www.guernicamag.com/elizabeth-catte-appalachia-isnt-trump-country/.

Indeed, often the only noticeable difference in the pieces is the perceptible shift in attitude between those published pre- and post-election. Despite the plethora of McDowell County-focussed Trump Country pieces pre-election insinuating that the county's issues were a relatively recent problem in an area taken for granted by Democrats as a loyal base, post-election there were the usual rumblings that the people 'stuck' in these areas were a lost cause and needed to move on, as Kevin Baker tentatively voiced:

> It is impossible not to feel the pain of the people in McDowell County. But the hard fact is that employment in our coal industry did not peak in 2010, or the 1980s, or the 1970s, but the 1920s, when there were nearly 800,000 coal miners. This number has declined precipitously since the Second World War—there are only about 83,000 left in the whole country.[192]

An online comment on the aforementioned CBS piece dated not long after the election, manages to get several Appalachian stereotypes into one post: "Here's a crazy thought, instead of hollering about the good old days, how about getting off the mountain dew and going back to school and learning a new skill other than how to tunnel underground and catching black lung?"[193] It's possible the author of this comment had always held these prejudiced frustrations with the people of the region but it also overtly encapsulates the resentment that flared up in the aftermath of Trump's victory. While the intention of many pre-election Trump Country pieces may have been to sympathetically shine a light on a neglected people turning to a racist, sexist demagogue in their desperation for a better standard of living, when this demagogue unexpectedly triumphed, that narrative backfired. And because of the sheer number of Trump country pieces and the drip effect they had seemingly had on the public consciousness, it was the people of Appalachia, especially the

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[192] Kevin Baker, "The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless White Mind", *The New Republic,* March 18, 2017 https://newrepublic.com/article/141435/eternal-sunshine-spotless-white-mind

[193] "The view from Trump Country", YouTube video, 00:08:25, "CBS Sunday Morning," November 13 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vC2SgL4tpE.

likes of McDowell County residents, who were seen as the architects of his victory, despite evidence to the contrary.[194] [195]

The post-election doubling down on the aspersion of McDowell and Appalachia in general as the epicentre of Trump country only exacerbated this. So too did the lack of substantial context or nuance applied by the media to counterbalance that narrative. For example, as Clio Chang asserted, "In the wake of the election, very few reporters rushed to black working-class or immigrant neighborhoods to see why residents had turned out in such small numbers."[196] It's a pertinent point, and one that is best illustrated by an electoral map compiled by a redditor and amatuer cartographer Philip Kearney in the wake of 2016. The map shows what 2016 would have looked like if 'nobody' was a candidate, demonstrating the level of apathy that was arguably the real story of 2016.

[194] Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's time to bust the myth: Most Trump voters were not working class", *The Washington Post,* June 5, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/.

[195] Nate Silver, "The mythology of Trump's Working Class Support," *Fivethirtyeight,* May 3, 2016 https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-mythology-of-trumps-working-class-support/.

[196] Clio Chang, "Ending the empathy gap", *Jacobin* March 2017 https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/frank-rich-response-new-york-magazine-trump-ryan-chaffetz-obamacare/.

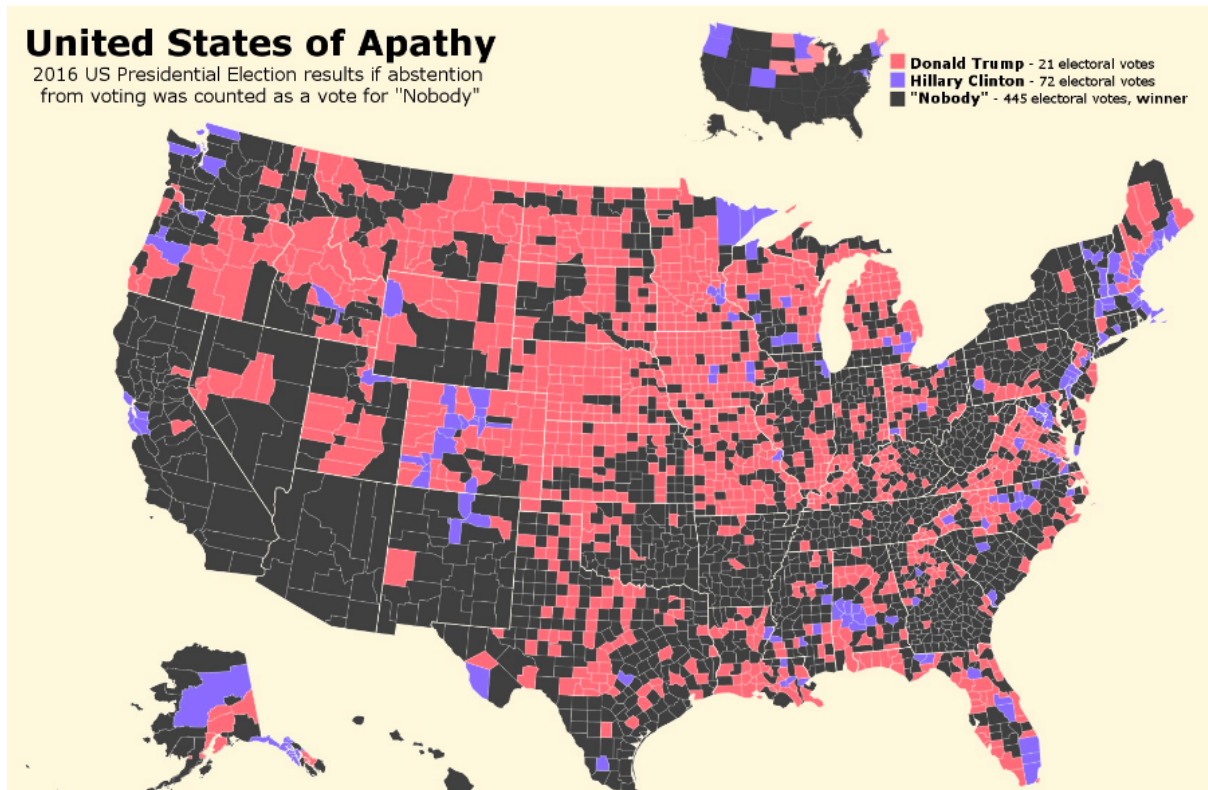

Fig 1

As we can see, despite swathes of the Midwest and Great Plains still emerging as Trump Country even with this new variable, the central Appalachian region that formed the focus of the Trump Country genre, and West Virginia in particular, is characterised largely by a remarkable level of apathy. Even in many of the Trump Country pieces, reporters appeared to struggle to find the level of Donald Trump fandom and adoration among ordinary residents they were often projecting. In a pre-election piece for Politico, Keith O'Brien vox popped steelworkers and coal miners in Appalachian Pennsylvania. He did, indeed, find support for Trump among them, but many of them qualified that support with expressions of disappointment in the Democrats and caveats showing they weren't enamoured with Trump's unpleasant persona. A typical example reads: "Trump says he's for coal, and Hillary hates

coal—and that's a shame. Because, in my opinion, he's a little nuts. She's more qualified. But if she wants to take my job—then, no."[197]

Makala Jabali labels the pre- and post-election idea of a mythical 'Trump Country' as a fundamental 'misreading' of the 2016 election, saying: "In 2016, Trump won key battleground states not because of some large-scale shift among white voters from Obama to the Republican Party, but because more Democrats stayed out of the voting booths entirely."[198] But the crucial conversation around voter disengagement that supplied a far more nuanced narrative of 2016 was largely eschewed in favour of the pervading idea of Appalachia as Trump Country and it was left to just a handful of journalists and amateur cartologists to make these important distinctions. Essentially, the chief problem with the Trump County genre is that, as Catte argued, they are "narratives of omission."[199] Often it is what wasn't said and who wasn't included in these profiles that makes them problematic. And the absence of a conversation on voter apathy that should have accompanied many pieces on Trump in Appalachia is just one of many omissions. If Appalachia's only presence in the media is when Trump or opioids are being discussed, regardless of its relevance to these national issues, then it's inevitable that pre-existing stereotypes of the region are simply going to become further entrenched. The ratio of Trump country pieces to, for example, those on the West Virginia teachers' strike speaks volumes. As Catte suggests, "We have to question why there are so many articles about Appalachia and Trump, and so few articles about progressive people in Appalachia."[200] And the answer is not "they don't exist."

The real industry in decline?

[197] Keith O'Brien "Uprising in the Rust Belt" *Politico* June 24 2016 https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/coal-country-democrats-donald-trump-2016-213988.
[198] Malaika Jabali, "Joe Biden is Not a Blue-Collar Candidate", *Jacobin,* May 2019 https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/05/joe-biden-presidential-primary-working-class.
[199] Regan Penaluna, "Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Is Not Trump Country," *Guernica*, March 7, 2018.
[200] Ibid.

Compounding , or even arguably causing, the current issues with media portrayals of Appalachia, are wider crises in journalism itself. While struggling to make a sustainable business model work, newsrooms and news organisations are rapidly shrinking and as a result many regions across the globe are increasingly neglected, journalistically. Journalist Anjun Sundaram remarks, "The Western news media are in crisis and are turning their back on the world. We hardly ever notice. Where correspondents were once assigned to a place for years or months, reporters now handle 20 countries each. As the news has receded, so have our minds."[201] While this may seem a strange critique to cite with regards to Appalachia after previously outlining the excessive attention the region has recently received from the media, it is relevant. The attention Appalachia suddenly received in 2016 was actually a symptom of the lack of a sustained and curated national journalistic investment in the region in the years previously. None of the major national newspapers have regional bureaus anywhere in Appalachia and according to those on the frontlines, the relationship between regional and national journalism has eroded almost completely.[202] So when Appalachia was deemed relevant again, seemingly overnight, the necessary community knowledge and ties were not there and outlets were forced to send parachutists into the region, resulting in much of the problematic coverage we've seen.

Steven Waldman, the president of media organisation Report For America, even argued that the staggering delay in recognising the opioid epidemic itself was a result of such problems with journalism, saying: "If there had been earlier coverage of the opioid problem and a better connection between national and local media, we would have seen this as a national problem sooner."[203] While 2016 catapulted Appalachia back into the national

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[201] Anjan Sundaram, "I watched the western media turn away from explaining the world" *The Guardian,* August 17 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/17/congo-reporting-media-war-anjan-sundaram.

[202] Matthew Sedacca, "Better local journalism by local reporters is goal of new database" *The New York Times,* November 18 2018.

[203] Ibid.

consciousness, it also cast attention on the state of American journalism. And despite worryingly despotic attempts to brand journalists 'enemies of the people' by the current president, most of the criticism regarding the coverage of 2016, actually came from journalists themselves. Tracie Powell, founder of All Digitocracy, was particularly scathing in her reflection:

> Journalists have failed us in providing the context of deep divisions that persist in this country, and the way they are being exploited and played out in this election. Whether journalists are afraid to tackle such deeply-rooted conversations, or just ill-equipped, mainstream news media's actions, or inaction, has been to our democracy's detriment. [204]

Her two hypotheses, that either journalists were reluctant or unable to delve properly into the necessary issues that characterised the 2016 election are compelling, and evidence suggests that truth is a combination of the two. And diversity, or lack thereof, in the nation's newsrooms is a big factor in both.

At the outset of this chapter, we saw how journalists in the 1960s clumsily offended Appalachian residents of Kentucky with their encroachments and voyeuristic portrayals of rural poverty. The inference at the time and in the years since was often that there was a class conflict between the parachute journalists and their subjects. Of course, this was a valid reading of the situation in many instances. But what's compelling is that in comparison to contemporary journalism, the industry back then was notably less socially exclusive. In 1960, nearly a third of reporters and editors had never attended a single year of college.[205] In 2015, only 8.3 percent could say the same. That year, 46 percent of adults 25 and older nationwide had never attended a university. Discussing media elitism, Andrew McGill said: "There's little question the journalistic class has diverged sharply from the country it covers."[206]

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[204] Kristin Hare and Alexios Martzalis, "How the 2016 campaign changed political journalism," *Poynter*, November 8, 2016.

[205] Andrew McGill, "How the Media became Elitist," *The Atlantic,* November 9 2016 https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/fixing-americas-nearsighted-press-corps/508088/.

[206] *Ibid.*

Additionally, According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in May 2017, about one in five news reporters in the United States worked in the metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles or Washington. Naturally, this is rarely the fault of individual journalists, many of whom will be reluctant transplants to these cities themselves, but of the shrinking and centralising of the industry. Similarly, many journalists endeavour to be inclusive in their work but are impeded by the time and geographical limitations the current model of journalism forces on them. But nevertheless, the result is a dent in the quality of national journalism. Katherine Miller, political editor at BuzzFeed News, noted that lack of diversity in newsrooms mattered in years dominated by stories such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of Latino voters and the blue-collar vote. “Anyone can report on these things, obviously, but having people familiar with these things on a deeper level adds so much to coverage, reaches big parts of the country and opens up new stories for everyone on a political staff.”[207]

In Appalachia, like many other marginalised and misunderstood communities, many people have long regarded national media coverage with derision and a frustration that Appalachian voices are sidelined in stories about Appalachia. As West Virginian journalist Elaine McMillion Sheldon said: “Rarely people like myself are the ones that control our narrative.”[208] But despite the fatalistic stereotype often foisted on them, plenty of people in the region are proactively trying to wrestle back control of their own stories. Appalshop, a media resource in the mountains of Letcher county, Kentucky was, rather ironically, founded with War on Poverty money in 1969 as the Appalachian Film Workshop. Filmmaker Elizabeth Barret recalls joining the company in the 1970s and for the first time feeling agency over how her people were represented with images and words.[209] Now known as Appalshop,

[207] Hare and Martzalis, “How the 2016 campaign changed political journalism”.
[208] *Parts Unknown: West Virginia.* Anthony Bourdain. New York: CNN, 2018.
[209] *Stranger with a Camera.* Elizabeth Barret. .

the organisation makes everything from films to podcasts on the region on subjects as diverse as the traditional Appalachian art of quilting or access to contraception in rural areas. The national attention that 2016 brought to the region only reinvigorated their resolve to tell their own stories but crucially, while such local media can of course be consumed by anyone, an important part of their ethos is not to focus on pandering to the fickle interest of outsiders but to help Appalachians see positive stories about themselves.[210]

Similar grassroots journalism projects such as *100 Days in Appalachia* also launched in direct response to the flurry of interest and misrepresentation that 2016 brought. Working out of the Media Innovation Center at West Virginia's Reed College, the organisation explains the impetus for their work thus: "Weary of the influx of bus tours and parachuting journalists seeking insights into rural America, we launched 100 Days to push back on the national narratives that had reduced our region to a handful of narrow stories."[211] *100 Days In Appalachia* also operates an open-source, co-publishing model that allows its content to be shared with regional, national and international media in an effort to "amplify missing voices and unique perspectives" from the region.[212] In further positive developments with regard to the collaboration between local and national media, a recent investigative journalism project that brought about the release of a secret database showing the extent of pharmaceutical companies irresponsibility in promoting addictive painkillers in communities now ravaged by the drug epidemic was a joint coup for the local West Virginia paper, *The Gazette Mail*, and heavyweight national, *The Washington Post.*[213]

It remains to be seen how much this journalistic pushback will effectively counter the Trump County genre and the legacy it will continue to have on the American consciousness.

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[210] "Our story", *Appalshop* https://www.appalshop.org/about-us/our-story/ (accessed Sept 30, 2019).
[211] Dana Coester, "What is Appalachia and why should you care?" *100 Days In Appalachia,* April 18, 2018 https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/.
[212] *Ibid.*
[213] Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn, "How has your community been affected by the opioid crisis, help us understand the data on the pain pills," *The Washington Post,* July 18, 2019

As we have seen, the tropes the genre promoted did not begin in 2016 and arguably part of the appeal of this type of journalism to parachute reporters covering Trump support was that the stereotypes were easy to fall back on, they already existed and circulated in society so playing up to them was not difficult. But what of the appeal to the audiences? In both the lead up 2016 and the aftermath, the appetite to see images of Appalachian poverty in relation to Donald Trump was strong. Although we can critique the parachute journalism many respectable news outlets engaged in, it was very much a case of supply and demand. These stories kept coming because they performed well; they were shared widely online and consumed in large numbers. This concise remark from Elizabeth Catte, to date the foremost critic of this type of journalism, perhaps surmises the appeal of the genre best: “I think it’s a basic kind of psychological desire that there is a place where everything that’s toxic and not progressive can be compartmentalized.”

Though regional divides in the US are very real, they are arguably self-perpetuating and the issues the Trump Country genre stirs up are evidence of this. Thinking of Trumpism as a geographical place, and an alien one at that, is an easier concept for many on the American left to deal with than to perhaps confront their unremarkable suburban Republican father who voted for Trump in spite of his racism and sexism for the potential tax breaks. The Trump Country genre is characterised by a disingenuous conversation about class and poverty, using images of rural poverty as an explanation for something (the ascent of Trump) that actually resulted from obscene wealth and greed. People in Appalachia have been told they’re poor and powerless for most of recent history; it is baffling for them to suddenly be told they are solely responsible for one of the biggest American political upheavals in living memory.

One of the few recent examples of journalism involving an outsider visiting Appalachia and not falling into the condescending parachutist role is *Parts Unknown: West*

Virginia made by the late food journalist Anthony Bourdain. The film was the first dispatch in a long time appreciatively received in the region.[214] Over the opening shots of the natural beauty of the mountains state, he says: “It was always too easy to come and gawk at West Virginia. To make it the poster child for whatever the agenda of the moment was. Lazy depictions of hillbillies and hicks tucked into isolated hollers. But this is not poverty porn. Don’t feel sorry for these people.”[215] Outside journalists should still be welcome in Appalachia, but like Bourdain, they should learn to slow down and actually listen.

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[214] Jelisa Castrodale, “Anthony Bourdain made marginalised communities like mine feel worthy.” *Vice* June 18, 2018 https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/3k4jb8/anthony-bourdain-made-marginalised-communities-like-mine-feel-worthy.

[215] *Parts Unknown: West Virginia.* Anthony Bourdain. New York: CNN, 2018.

Conclusion

Appalachia: America's eternal whipping boy?

I first conceived of this project in the summer of 2017, when Donald Trump had only been in office just over six months. My knowledge of Appalachia was limited to a combination of historical images from The Great Depression, The War On Poverty and, crucially, the new imagery circulating in what I would come to know as "Trump Country" journalism. I took the Trump Country pieces at face value and was enthralled with the idea of a mythical "real America", defined by rural poverty, that existed off the radar of most urban dwelling American liberals. It seemed that this white working class region was the key to understanding the contemporary American political climate. But through undertaking the research that came to fruition in this thesis, I quickly learned that there was a much deeper and convoluted story of Appalachia than the one we were being told at the time. One that actually had far more interesting things to say about the United States than the narrative of a forgotten, angry tribe of poor white people, voting against their interests to spite progressives.

The 2016 presidential election brought a range of issues that had previously simmered under the surface to the fore. One of them was, undoubtedly, class. In the wake of the shock result a common diagnosis of the Democrats' loss was that they had "abandoned their base." There was certainly an element of truth to this statement, but not in the way it was always intended. If it meant that the Democrats, and Hillary Clinton's campaign in particular, took working class voters for granted, or at the very least failed to engage them sufficiently, then there is certainly evidence to bolster that assertion. Her comments on the campaign trial categorising households earning $250,000 (in the process of pledging not to raise their taxes) as middle–class is one particularly egregious example of her ignorance or indifference to the

reality of working–class Americans lives. [216]And after her misguided (but also widely misquoted and deliberately misconstrued) comment that Trump supporters were "deplorables", it seemed Americans suddenly wanted to talk about class, despite a centuries long aversion to topic.[217] But much of the discourse that arose was characterised by either disingenuity or evasion. Rather than talk about class in an organic sense; who had capital and who didn't, why that was grossly unfair , systemically ingrained and needed confronting, the conversation was largely skewed to one about a cultural and regional civil war within the United States. Class, instead, became a place and that place was Appalachia.

If Appalachia came to be synonymous with "white working class", it was evident that segments of both the left and the right relished this and saw talking about Appalachia as an opportunity to unburden themselves from having to think or talk about race. The right's investment in the existence of a "white America", working class or otherwise, has always been transparent, and is especially so at a time when the Alt Right is on the rise. But certain factions on the American left also doubled down on their championing of a "neglected white working class", encapsulated perfectly for them by their narrow view of the Appalachian region.[218] If the white working class were neglected, then who were they neglected in favour of? Wall Street and "the 1%"? Or urban minorities? There's a huge distinction, obviously. And if the former then why mention whiteness at all? Because to talk about "class" through the prism of Appalachia in an attempt to absolve oneself of talking about race, is still talking about race. Race is impossible to separate from class, and whiteness is not separate to race; it *is* a race.

[216] Patrick Caldwell, "Hillary's Strange Definition Of Middle Clas," *Mother Jones* .November 20 2015 https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/11/hillary-clinton-middle-class/

[217] Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History Of Class In America (*New York: Penguin, 2016.)

[218]

This belief that talking about race is a separate issue to talking about class is part of what Sean McElwee referred to when he posited that much of the 2016 discourse exemplified a “false dichotomy of economic equality versus identity politics.”[219] But in practice, this dichotomy was not always false. Or, at least, proponents of “identity politics” and those who centred economic equality did clash on the political stage even if McElwee was correct that their ideologies were not actually, logically, at odds.

It would be remiss to produce an entire thesis centered around the 2016 election and not mention Bernie Sanders- the man who was at the centre, and arguably continues to be at the centre, of the rift in the Democratic Party. His populist, grassroots leadership campaign tapped into a largely genuine class conflict in the United States and of course made the Democratic primary of 2016 more tempestuous and bitter than anyone originally predicted. In the wake of the fiercely fought 2016 primary, and now his 2020 campaign, Sanders and his supporters have come to be seen as one side of this dichotomy with more centrist, liberals perhaps as the opposing “identity politics” counterpoint. Blame arguably belongs to both sides for the perpetuation of this false dichotomy as I, personally, am reminded when I engage with socialists who disparage important movements for women, LGBT people and other minorities as “identity politics”; a toothless, narcissistic form of politics; indulged and pandered to by centrist liberal politicians because they are aware it can often happily co-exist with neoliberalism. Similarly, when I engage with social liberals with perfect intersectional credentials who tell me that socialist movements that centre the working class have problems with racism and sexism and therefore are incompatible with the modern American left, I am struck by the irony of them having internalised the aforementioned problematic notion that the term “working class” is synonymous with “white and male”. This dichotomy has been

[219] Jon Favreau interview with Sean McElwee *The Wilderness Crooked Media* Podcast Audio Sept 4 2018 https://crooked.com/podcast/chapter-12-the-party/.

even further entrenched by political tropes and caricatures such as “the Bernie bro”; online sexist, condescending socialists who attacks women and minorities in defence of their idol, Bernie Sanders. Like many stereotypes, there is some truth to this; the 2016 election did definitely bait misogynists on the left as well as the right. But statistical evidence increasingly shows that Sanders supporters are one of the most diverse groups in the field including many people of colour and women. [220] And as a result the criticism is increasingly starting to seem like a bad faith attempt to detract from a conversation about class.

But this was an election, and this remains a political landscape, characterised by bad faith. We have seen that in this thesis through the countless cultural representations of Appalachia that have been used as fig leaves; a memoir that purported to be a refreshing class analysis but was actually a recycling of long debunked racist and cultural poverty tropes, a genre of journalism that purported to give a voice to the voiceless that actually largely put words in their mouth and misrepresented them in an attempt to have them take the fall for the sins of far wealthier people. Frustratingly, Americans *do* seem to want to talk about class and often seem to think that’s what they are doing. But in lieu of a mainstream blueprint for how this conversation might look, they are increasingly sucked into disingenuous cultural arguments by “authentocrat” politicians and a media that is happy to sustain them. And this is what happened with Appalachia in recent years.

Elizabeth Catte doesn’t like to think of Appalachia too much as region culturally distinct from the rest of the United States because of the racial baggage this notion seems to collect. That is her prerogative, of course. But there *is* an Appalachian culture that is apolitical and not necessarily synonymous with ethnicity, too; a culture that has produced its own folklore, cookery and various customs. And it should be protected and recognised as

[220] Carl Beijer, “The Quiet Death Of The Bernie Bro Myth,” *Jacobin.* August 17 2019 https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08/bernie-sanders-white-bernie-bro-race-2020-democratic-primary-pew-poll.

unique without having to be lectured to by third generation Appalachian venture capitalists who live in Silicon Valley about what their culture is and isn't.

At the same time, much of what ails Appalachia is what ails the rest of the country and thus positing Appalachia as unique detracts from that and allows it to be stigmatised. Many of the people who gawked at the poverty in Trump Country journalism or *Hillbilly Elegy* are likely to only be a few pay packets removed from such poverty, themselves. Micheal Harrington remarked that "America had the best dressed poverty in the world," but parts of Appalachia like poor, rural parts of any region or country have for a long time looked *physically* poor and this imagery has played a big part in the idea of the region as uniquely tragic. But poverty doesn't always look like this; it can look like middling suburbs with people working three jobs to pay the rent on a small family home or it can look like young millennials working bar jobs in cities for years while hoping to one day get a "proper job" with holiday pay and healthcare. Many of the "coastal elites" are nowhere near as elite as they're repeatedly told they are. If the conversation could focus on what these seemingly disparate people actually have in common rather than the superficial cultural and regional divides we currently see, then perhaps Appalachia would stop being a fascinating "other" or emblematic of a "forgotten working class" to wider America. The working class have been forgotten, but they're not all white men hiding in hollers. The real forgotten working class includes women, people of colour LGBTQ people and the full cross section of American society. As another election draws near and the likes of the *Hillbilly Elegy* film look well timed to muddle the conversation once again, Americans would do well to heed this and not lose sight of it in the incoming melee.

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