

# Moonshine Stories: Shaping Appalachian Public Memory

Wendy Atkins-Sayre\*  
Ashli Quesinberry Stokes\*\*

*This essay adds nuance to our understanding of the meaning of moonshine and whiskey public memories in the Blue Ridge Mountains, accounting for the history, the role in producing messages of resilience in the region, and the problems and possibilities that the contemporary moonshine/whiskey narrative brings to the region. We argue that contemporary rhetorical work surrounding distilling creates and reinforces public memory surrounding Southern Appalachia and that those public memories serve multiple purposes. Many of the contemporary narratives that emerge from the Southern Appalachian moonshine and tourism industry more broadly present a conflicting version of the region. Specifically, mainstream moonshine memories feed into the stories of resiliency in the region, but come at the expense of glamorizing a white, masculine, impoverished, law-breaking culture, eliminating and silencing other characters who play a part in this history and creating limited and unproductive roles for Appalachians. Alternative narratives provide a compelling story of resilience of tradition, regions, and people that create a more productive role for Appalachians. Ultimately, we argue that accounting for everyday rhetorical reflections of public memory is vital because of the significant role of public memory in shaping regions and identities. The case study examined here provides an example of public memory interventions and the potential for creating more nuanced images of cultural traditions.*

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Walking through downtown Pigeon Forge, we knew we were not likely to find carefully refined, nuanced stories of Appalachian life. Home to Dollywood, hillbilly themed dinner theaters, and miniature golf courses, the town attracts millions of visitors each year who are often seeking out experiences they think reflect the region's culture and character. At the tasting rooms of Tennessee Shine Company and Old Forge Distillery, we saw much of what we expected: mason jars of multi-

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\* Wendy Atkins-Sayre (PhD, University of Georgia) is Professor of Communication Studies and Chair of the Department of Communication & Film at the University of Memphis. Her research centers on identity as constructed through discourse, with an emphasis on regional and social movement studies. Her most recent book, edited with Ashli Stokes, explores the American urban/rural divide: *City Places, Country Spaces: Rhetorical Explorations of the Urban/Rural Divide* (Peter Lang, 2020). Co-written with Stokes, *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (University of Mississippi Press, 2016), explores the role that food plays in creating Southern identity. She has also published in *Western Journal of Communication*, *Southern Communication Journal*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Women & Language*, and in many edited volumes. Direct correspondence to [wendy.atkins-sayre@memphis.edu](mailto:wendy.atkins-sayre@memphis.edu).

\*\* Ashli Quesinberry Stokes (PhD, University of Georgia) is Professor of Communication Studies and served as the Director of the Center for the Study of the New South at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte from 2015-2020. A 20-21 Fulbright scholar, she recently completed two books with Wendy Atkins-Sayre. Her research exploring intersections among food, identity, activism, and regions has also been published in a variety of edited volumes, consumer media, and academic journals including the *Southern Communication Journal*, *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, and *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

colored and flavored moonshine, spaces mimicking backwoods shacks, hillbilly souvenirs. Portrayals of the region such as this, as we heard in many conversations, make some Appalachians cringe since it highlights characteristics of the people and the region that are often lampooned. Yet, many others are thankful for the tourist dollars and all that the income brings to the region.<sup>1</sup> After all, the moonshine industry in Southern Appalachia is booming, with 500 plus distilleries in North Carolina and Virginia's distilleries contributing \$163 million to its economy.<sup>2</sup> Distilleries such as Ole Smoky, Sugarlands Distilling Co., Tennessee Shine Co., Call Family Distilleries, and Copper Barrel not only produce massive amounts of the (now legal) moonshine, but also play a large part in the tourism industry in the region. As a recent news article reported, Ole Smoky alone "is pulling in 4 million visitors every year...more than all the distilleries in Scotland, and more than the distilleries on the bourbon trail in Kentucky."<sup>3</sup> Travelers make their way to moonshine and whiskey<sup>4</sup> showrooms in large tourist areas such as Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, but also smaller towns like Dalton, Georgia, and Wilkesboro, North Carolina, to get a taste of the concoctions.

Although not immediately apparent, the moonshine and whiskey narratives in Southern Appalachia include themes of rhetorical resilience, envisioned as rhetoric that strengthens the region through preservation of tradition, fortification of community, and a melding of cultural foodways. For example, the traditions of the liquor come from Scots-Irish heritage and early settlers re-created the liquor for many reasons, but partially as a way to reconnect with the drink traditions that they knew best. Southern Appalachians were also innovative with moonshine production, creating "shine" to sustain their families and communities when in need of a steady income. The story of moonshine—and alcohol more broadly—in the region is complex but is often written off as the story of backwards, barefoot hillbillies making their illegal hooch up in the woods. As Emelie Peine and Kai Shafft write, "It is no coincidence that the cartoon image of the hillbilly that is marketed to tourists in the T-shirt shops and souvenir stands of east Tennessee almost always carries a jug marked with the triple Xs that denote alcoholic content, and that the Tennessee state song 'Rocky Top' has two verses referring to moonshine."<sup>5</sup> Images of moonshine distillers ultimately became "a symbol of what was wrong with Appalachia," earning ridicule from "outsiders" and disdain from some Appalachians.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, whiskey and moonshine also served as a sign of creativity and ingenuity and have continued to serve as a metonym for the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen M. Rosko, "Distilling a Commercial Moonshine in East Tennessee: Mashing a New Type of Tourism," in *Modern Moonshine: The Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 219-242; C. Brendan Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Martin, "Controversy Stirs N.C. Liquor System," *Business North Carolina*, January 1, 2022, <https://businessnc.com/controversy-stirs-n-c-liquor-system/>; Virginia Distillers Association, "Virginia Spirits," <https://www.virginiaspirts.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Erin Carson, "How Ole Smoky Distillery Made Moonshine's Illicit Past into a Tourist Draw," *CNET*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/features/moonshine-an-american-invention-carves-a-path-on-the-right-side-of-the-law/>.

<sup>4</sup> For this essay, we will use the preferred American spelling of whiskey. It is also important to note that although most of the essay will discuss moonshine, we will also include examples of whiskey and occasionally use the words interchangeably. The two products are linked not only through the same distillation processes, but also common histories and traditions in the region; whiskey is aged moonshine, at its most basic. Moonshine is also occasionally used to refer to any illegally distilled products.

<sup>5</sup> Emily K. Peine and Kai A. Shafft, "Moonshine, Mountaineers, and Modernity: Distilling Cultural History in the Southern Appalachian Mountains," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 18, no. 2 (Spring/Fall 2012): 108.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), xii.

In this essay, we add nuance to our understanding of the meaning of moonshine and whiskey public memories in the Blue Ridge Mountains, accounting for their history, their role in producing messages of resilience in the region, and the problems and possibilities that the contemporary moonshine/whiskey narrative brings to the region. We argue that contemporary rhetorical work surrounding distilling serves a vital and varied role in creating and reinforcing public memory surrounding Southern Appalachia and that those public memories serve multiple purposes. Just past 100 years since the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, or “Prohibition Amendment,” went into effect, moonshine continues to be symbolic of a simpler, yet appealing and slightly illicit American past, where imbibing allows enthusiasts to “flirt with danger,” while drinking their “faux country” ‘shine, now flavored with raspberries, doughnuts, and even Moon Pies, likely to the horror of their ancestral distillers.<sup>7</sup> Many of the contemporary narratives that emerge from the Southern Appalachian moonshine and tourism industry more broadly present a conflicting version of the region. Although much of the messaging comes from within Appalachian communities, it is generally targeted at outsiders. Specifically, mainstream moonshine memories feed into the stories of resiliency in the region, but come at the expense of glamorizing a white, masculine, impoverished, law-breaking culture, eliminating and silencing other characters who play a part in this history and creating limited and unproductive roles for Appalachians. At the same time, alternative narratives provide a compelling story of resilience of tradition, regions, and people that creates a more productive role for Appalachians. We will briefly explore the history of moonshine and whiskey in the region, before analyzing the public memories that are created through the old moonshine narrative and alternative narratives. Ultimately, we argue that accounting for everyday rhetorical reflections of public memory is vital because of the significant role of public memory in shaping regions and identities. The case study examined here provides an example of public memory interventions and the potential for creating more nuanced images of cultural traditions.

### **History of Moonshine and Whiskey in Southern Appalachia**

The advertisements for moonshine distilleries often lure people in with the idea of experiencing an “authentic” (authentic to outsiders, that is) part of Appalachian history, learning about family histories and recipes while sipping the forbidden and gazing at the fast cars of the past. As Southern foodways writer John T. Edge explains about moonshine’s renewed appeal, it’s a “hip flask accessory for authenticity seekers,” whereby taking a sip of the no longer illicit spirits is more about participating in a story “embedded in the moonshining mystique” rather than drinking quality spirits.<sup>8</sup> Part of the experience is to imagine life “off the grid,” up in the mountains, experiencing lawlessness and a “devil may care” attitude. Alcohol certainly helps craft the experience, but moonshine in particular sells that image of the region, with moonshiners continually portrayed as “crazed and backward, romantic and rowdy” in popular images since the late 1800s.<sup>9</sup> “Moonshine,” Erin Carson writes, “whose name is often attributed to distillers working in secrecy through the night, has gone mainstream.”<sup>10</sup> Although the tourist-focused messages make it seem as if everyone who lives in Appalachia has a still in the backyard and a muscle car to outrun the law while hauling the goods, moonshine and whiskey have a much longer history in the region.

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<sup>7</sup> John T. Edge, *The Potlikker Papers* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017): 222, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 221-222.

<sup>9</sup> Charles D. Thompson, *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011): 160.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, “Ole Smoky Distillery.”

That history, in fact, is vital to understanding the region. In the forward to Joseph Earl Dabney's *Mountain Spirits*, he notes,

The making, the drinking, and the marketing of corn whiskey are deeply enmeshed in the rural and pioneer Southern mystique, much more deeply than perhaps many Southern social historians have been aware. The fiery beverage has been rooted in the lives of the people in the Appalachian South for over two and a quarter centuries—and long before that in the lives of their ancestors in England, Scotland, and Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the cultural connection to whiskey and moonshine makes both an important part of the foodways story. Whiskey was also a central component of hospitality in the region, serving as a welcoming drink in the home as well as at most major community gatherings. Moreover, moonshine was used as a home remedy for any number of ailments, despite a lack of medical support for the claims.<sup>12</sup> As Thompson sees it, whiskey was a key part of Appalachian culture: “Many a song paid tribute to its transformative power. To most it was considered a God-given right.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond those cultural roots, however, the production of alcohol also served a role that was specific to the region, creating an industry that provided a means for survival in impoverished areas and demonstrating characteristics of ingenuity and innovation through foodways. In an area of the country that has continually been plagued by economic hardship, moonshine production allowed the people who lived on that land to survive and even thrive in some cases. As Daniel Pierce writes, moonshine provided “cash in a generally cash-poor society” and allowed farmers to pay “their tax bills, mortgages, and store bills; bought shoes and school books for their children and new land or homes for themselves; started businesses; and realized genuine benefits from their ‘ill-gotten’ gains”<sup>14</sup> By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than four million gallons were being exported annually, bringing significant incomes to a region that was in dire need of money.<sup>15</sup> Peine and Shafft explain that “moonshining constituted both an economic foundation and a cultural currency that was predicated on a shared understanding of the need for secrecy, and also a surreptitious pride in the community’s own resourcefulness... One horse could haul ten times more value on its back in whiskey than in corn.”<sup>16</sup> Moonshine provided a way for Appalachians to take care of themselves and those in their community, and that independence became a point of pride, despite changes in American society that made distilling taboo. As Thompson writes, “That sweat money made liquor bosses rich, but it also bought and preserved small farms, keeping people out of the mills and mines and on their own land for a generation or two longer, leaving people some independence to determine their own directions and to change their families’ futures.”<sup>17</sup> And, of course, economic stability brings with it the possibility for stronger communities that allow the region to grow, as a whole.<sup>18</sup> While this economic growth came with costs, the pursuit of illegal

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Earl Dabney, *Mountain Spirits: A Chronicle of Corn Whiskey from King James’ Ulster Plantation to America’s Appalachians and the Moonshine Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel S. Pierce, *Corn from a Jar: Moonshining in the Great Smoky Mountains* (Gatlinburg, TN: Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2013), 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> Peine and Shafft, “Moonshine.”

<sup>16</sup> Peine and Shafft, “Moonshine,” 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*, xxix.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel S. Pierce, “Jim Tom Hedrick, Popcorn Sutton, and the Rise of the Postmodern Moonshiner,” in *Modern Moonshine: The Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 50-66.

moonshine sales motivated many Appalachians to embrace this industry, whether they were directly involved or not. Prohibition, of course, significantly affected this industry, forcing distillers further into the shadows and increasing demand, encouraging the rise of speakeasies, and solidifying organized crime, though in Tennessee, five counties are still “dry” today.<sup>19</sup>

Moonshine and whiskey production also demonstrated an innovation in production, using the resources of the land that were abundantly available and the difficult, often dangerous work required to distill the liquor. *The Foxfire Book*, a collection of essays venerating Appalachian traditions, calls moonshining “a fine art,” carefully describing the complicated process, and concluding, “By any standards, moonshining has to be counted as one of the most fascinating mountain endeavors.”<sup>20</sup> The work that went into making moonshine was not consistent with the lackadaisical image often portrayed, with men lazing around the porch and strumming a banjo while waiting for the production to be complete; instead, moonshining was “hard work and required complex strategies for sales networking and clever means of transport.”<sup>21</sup> Creating the instruments that would make distilling possible, securing the ingredients, going through the intense steps of distillation, all while worrying about being discovered by authorities demonstrates an ingenuity and dedication that far exceeds the parodied image of moonshiners.<sup>22</sup>

The popular portrayal of moonshiners also does not recognize the diverse history of the spirit. In fact, moonshine is not even unique to North America, with the word tracing back to 1400s British Isles. Globally, the ingredients change to adapt to the land and people, using “every imaginable fermentable foodstuff into illegal booze.”<sup>23</sup> A variety of Indigenous peoples also contributed to the North American story of whiskey; after being introduced to liquor by Europeans, Cherokee Indians began to produce fermented liquor, initially using it for rituals and medicine. The United States government also attempted to regulate Cherokee production, leading to “one of the first ways in which the Cherokees asserted their nationalism.”<sup>24</sup> The Scots-Irish connection demonstrates cultural migration, but the traditions continued to change as they were influenced by other cultures. The American story of whiskey and moonshine, like many Southern foods, also has ties to enslaved people influencing foodways. As culinary historian Michael Twitty explains it, “American slaves had their own traditions of alcohol production, going back to the corn beer and fruit spirits of West Africa, and many Africans made alcohol illicitly while in slavery.”<sup>25</sup> These connections to enslavement have not been fully folded into the story of whiskey and moonshine, but as Southern foodways research continues to correct forgotten histories, additional links to African culture may emerge. “Slavery and whiskey,” Clay Risen writes, “were inextricably entwined. Enslaved men not only made up the bulk of the distilling labor force, but they often played crucial skilled roles in the whiskey-making process.”<sup>26</sup> Women are also frequently eliminated from the history of Southern moonshine, although they were often involved.<sup>27</sup> As *New York Times* writer

<sup>19</sup> Johnathan Roberts, “100 Years Later, Prohibition’s Legacy Lives on in Tennessee,” *Johnson City Press*, January 15, 2020, [https://www.johnsoncitypress.com/news/business/100-years-later-prohibitions-legacy-lives-on-in-tennessee/article\\_50e6a823-1323-5f7d-85ec-5a473988605c.html](https://www.johnsoncitypress.com/news/business/100-years-later-prohibitions-legacy-lives-on-in-tennessee/article_50e6a823-1323-5f7d-85ec-5a473988605c.html).

<sup>20</sup> Eliot Wiggington, *The Foxfire Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 301, 344.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*, xxv.

<sup>22</sup> Mickie Meinhardt, “Stories in the Shine,” *Bitter Southerner*, June 30, 2020, <https://bittersoutherner.com/2020/stories-in-the-shine-west-virginia-moonshine-moonshiner-appalachia>.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin R. Kosar, *Moonshine: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Izumi Ishii, “Alcohol and Politics in the Cherokee Nation Before Removal,” *Ethnohistory*, 50, no. 4 (2003): 672.

<sup>25</sup> Risen, “Jack Daniel’s.”

<sup>26</sup> Risen, “Jack Daniel’s.”

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender & Southern Food* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

and “whiskey authority” Clay Risen writes, “For years, the prevailing history of American whiskey has been framed as a lily-white affair, centered on German and Scots-Irish settlers who distilled their surplus grains into whiskey and sent it to far-off markets, eventually creating a \$2.9 billion industry and a product equally beloved by Kentucky colonels and Brooklyn hipsters.”<sup>28</sup> In short, moonshine is not unique to Appalachia and the production is certainly not limited to white men, but the often-circulated public memory surrounding moonshine does not typically include any messages of diversity.

Given the role that moonshine played in so many characteristics of Appalachian culture, the shift to viewing distilling in a negative light is perplexing. Indeed, it took an organized effort to criminalize the production and make the process taboo. In the 1870s and 1880s, moonshiners were still portrayed by many “as heroic symbols of defiance of federal authority.”<sup>29</sup> In the early 1900’s, however, prohibition of distillation and sales in the region changed an important way of life for many Appalachians who had grown used to ready access to moonshine and other liquors, as well as the economic benefits that grew alongside those creations. As Bruce Stewart argues, this reform represented a major turning point for the region.<sup>30</sup> Whereas before, moonshiners were viewed as community entrepreneurs, the Prohibition movement brought with it a portrayal of distillers as corrupt, amoral, and even violent. Despite the popularity of the drink in the South, whiskey makers were portrayed as being a significant part of the societal problem that was sketched out in Prohibition campaigns by government agencies as well as community-based organizations. Over eleven years after the end of the Civil War, whiskey-making was declared illegal and this change “made a product of presidents and missionaries into the contraband of criminals.”<sup>31</sup> The move to criminalize distilling was heavily rhetorical, shaping the way that outsiders viewed the Appalachian livelihood through language centered on illegality and sin. Beyond Prohibition, public campaigns to undermine the role of moonshine in Appalachian culture continued. Perhaps most symbolic of this type of work was a 1967 pamphlet, “The Incredible Moonshine Menace,” published by Licensed Beverage Industries, Inc.<sup>32</sup> The front cover tells the reader that moonshine is a “Destroyer of Health and Life,” a “Breeder of Crime and Corruption,” and a “Colossal Tax Swindle,” and includes a “salute to the moonshine fighters,” that is, the Internal Revenue Bureau’s Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division, and implores “Every American” to join in the “war on these callous criminals.”<sup>33</sup> Arguing that the “old stereotyped moonshiner—barefoot, awkward and amusing—went out with the buggy whip,” the authors used the pamphlet to demonstrate that moonshine had become a big business in the region and brought with it crime, seediness, and evil.<sup>34</sup> Over time, then, the image of moonshine, distilling more broadly, and the Appalachians who were involved in the enterprise shifted from accepted to vilified in some circles.

Although the portrayal of moonshine varies, it is not surprising that the history of moonshine and whiskey is frequently invoked in public reflections on mountain culture, whether at a tourist spot along the highway or in businesses within the region that target travelers. Much of the modern

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<sup>28</sup> Clay Risen, “Jack Daniel’s Embraces a Hidden Ingredient: Help from a Slave,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/dining/jack-daniels-whiskey-nearis-green-slave.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Pierce, “Jim Tom Hedrick,” 51.

<sup>30</sup> Stewart, *Moonshiners*.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Licensed Beverage Industries, *The Incredible Moonshine Menace* (New York: Licensed Beverage Industries, Inc., December 1967).

<sup>33</sup> Licensed Beverage Industries, *Incredible Moonshine*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Licensed Beverage Industries, *Incredible Moonshine*, 5.

role of moonshine and whiskey in the region is bound up with popular images and memories surrounding the region. Given the rhetorical work that goes into creating regions,<sup>35</sup> it becomes important to account for these everyday portrayals of Appalachians and the influence that those images have on those in the region as well as outside of the region. The stereotypical portrayal of Appalachians told through moonshine narratives makes the region and the people easier to dismiss as inconsequential and victims of their own creations but also has a larger impact on how we view Southern identities, including race, class, and gender.

### Public Memory and Regional Identity

Public memory is both the memory of publics and the publicness of memory, influencing much of what we remember about historical events through the way we discuss and visually portray history, creating “multiple, diverse, mutable, and competing accounts of events.”<sup>36</sup> Because rhetorical work in this area focuses on texts that are “out in the open,” not appearing in private conversations, much of the research explores more formal types of rhetoric, public memorials, and similar sites.<sup>37</sup> But public memory research also accounts for the more transient and fleeting sites of public memory, including media and other types of popular culture.<sup>38</sup> As Chandra Ann Maldonado has recently argued, it is important for public memory scholarship to focus more attention on “non-dominant historical narratives” and to do so using various methodologies that allow for gathering more texts and more diverse texts.<sup>39</sup> For example, Maldonado suggests that public memory scholars account for aspects of stories that fall outside of “official” historical reflections, including accounting for “individuals/visitors who bring their own experiences into the commemorative space as extensions of those memory networks within the commemorative situations.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Bodnar explains that public memory is formed through both expressions of “cultural leaders or authorities,” as well as “vernacular culture,” that represents a wider swath of individuals.<sup>41</sup> Rhetorical scholarship has not always accounted for these elements, but as Maldonado continues, it is the public reflection on the texts that makes the work more accurate, because “memory and commemorative work does not exist within the vacuum of academic discourse; they are public discourses that continue to shape the way that we live.”<sup>42</sup> Including additional elements of reactions to these narratives helps uncover the impact of the public memory. In this essay, we analyze both the official, corporatized narratives of moonshine as well as the more vernacular—moving beyond the larger corporations and to the ways that alternative narratives stemming from smaller distillery

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Atkins-Sayre and Ashli Q. Stokes (Eds.), *City Places, Country Spaces: Rhetorical Explorations of the Urban/Rural Divide* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020); Douglas R. Powell, *Critical Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jenny Rice, *Regional Rhetorics: Real and Imagined Places* (New York: Routledge Press, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Kendall R. Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>37</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17-44.

<sup>38</sup> Zachary Sheldon, “Public Memory and Popular Culture: Biopics, #MeToo, and David Foster Wallace,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 29, no. 2 (2021): 65-78.

<sup>39</sup> Chandra Ann Maldonado, “Commemorative (Dis)Placement: On the Limits of Textual Adaptability and the Future of Public Memory Scholarship,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 24, no. 1-2 (2021): 239-252.

<sup>40</sup> Maldonado, “Commemorative,” 246.

<sup>41</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13-14.

<sup>42</sup> Maldonado, “Commemorative,” 249.

spaces, their owners/distillers, and community members discuss moonshine. Both approaches contribute to circulating public memories.

Public memory serves different rhetorical functions, but most relevant to this consideration of Appalachian remembering is the role that it serves in influencing regional identity. The narratives that are articulated through various texts ultimately form a “construction that forwards an at least momentarily definitive articulation of the group,” allowing for a sense of connection and belonging.<sup>43</sup> What public memory scholarship must explain, Blair, Dickinson, and Ott argue, is to determine the endpoint of these identities—what groups they create, what narratives they uphold, and so forth.<sup>44</sup>

Significantly, many scholars point out that whiteness is an assumed part of public memory and is often not explicitly discussed unless it is directly relevant to the narrative. Although misrepresentations of race in narratives are also damaging, it can be equally problematic to leave out details that may lead people to read history in a different way. As John Lynch and Mary Stuckey explain, “Public memory is a competition because it involves the creation of meaning about the past.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, our memory of history is formed as we embrace some aspects of the narrative while also choosing to ignore (or not be exposed to) other facets. Because the narrative surrounding past events is often centered on white men, other stories and characters are left out. Whiteness, G. Mitchell Reyes argues, serves as the “invisible hand of official public memory.”<sup>46</sup> That is especially true in the South where, “whiteness has historically served as the default identification associated with the term ‘southerner’,” Patricia Davis points out.<sup>47</sup> Tourism and popular culture—some “official” and some “vernacular” voices—contribute to these “white washed” stories of the South, serving as a “constitutive component of memory environments” and influencing readings of Southern narratives.<sup>48</sup>

Erasure also occurs with socioeconomic status; stories are largely told and remembered devoid of class experience, generally erasing details of economic struggle. Moonshine history, however, provides an exception to the dismissal of class. In many public iterations of the history, stories of poor Appalachians are included as an important part of the narrative. In most cases, however, poverty is both a motivator for the distilling and also a defining characteristic of Appalachians. The inclusion of class markers is mainly used to sell the region to outsiders; tourists, those with the means to visit the area, buy the products, and take those poverty stories back to their friends and family, while laughing about the hillbilly mystique. The consequences of that narrative are complex, with benefits stemming from the tourist economy, but also damages to the region as it continues to be portrayed as a caricature, thereby opening the door for continued Southern stereotypes that harm all Southerners.

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<sup>43</sup> Carole Blair, Greg Dickenson, and Brian L. Ott, “Introduction,” in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction,” 14.

<sup>45</sup> John A. Lynch and Mary E. Stuckey, “‘This Was His Georgia’: Polio, Poverty and Public Memory at FDR’s Little White House,” *Howard Journal of Communications*, 28, no. 4 (2017): 392.

<sup>46</sup> G. Mitchell Reyes, “Introduction: Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity,” in *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity*, ed. G. Mitchell Reyes (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Patricia G. Davis, *Laying Claim: African-American Cultural Memory and Southern Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>48</sup> Kristan Poirot and Shevaun E. Watson, “Memories of Freedom and White Resilience: Place, Tourism, and Urban Slavery,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 45, no. 2 (2015): 91-116.



Because public memory acts in a constitutive manner, creating an inviting role for individuals through the narratives, it can create a sense of community and shape a worldview, thus potentially wielding great rhetorical power, if used in the right way.<sup>49</sup> Public memory research accounts for not only what is included in memory but also what is excluded. The rest of this essay will look more closely at the public memory messages that are developed through moonshine narratives, paying attention to both contemporary mainstream and alternative versions.

### **Moonshine and Public Memory: Playing on Appalachian Stereotypes**

Studies that explore the foodways of Appalachia without attending to moonshine omit an important part of its culture. As we travelled across the region,<sup>50</sup> especially in areas that target more tourist traffic, however, we began to realize that dismissing the role of moonshine in the story of Southern Appalachia would be a mistake. Moonshine offers the ability for Southern Appalachians to resurrect the sense of entrepreneurship and pride in producing a now wildly successful product but also the opportunity for tourists to engage with part of the South they may once have mocked, but now find valuable. Moonshine and other spirits now serve as instruments of their drinkers' appreciation for "artisanal goods and farm-to-table connections."<sup>51</sup> Moonshine is also what distillers can sell quickly while waiting on their bourbon to age appropriately—it's a more immediate return on investment that shows some financial savvy. Because of this product popularity, most tourist locations (especially in East Tennessee) include references to moonshine and sell products made from moonshine, including jellies, maple syrup, and barbecue sauce. Many restaurants in Southern Appalachia, especially upscale restaurants, have recently begun to feature moonshine-based cocktails. And as we travelled through the region, we also saw nuances, as with most origins, in the history of moonshine and its place in Southern Appalachia. In particular, moonshine and whiskey have a spotlight role in public memory surrounding the region, telling the story of crafty and determined mountaineers outsmarting and outrunning authorities. The scene includes ramshackle structures buried deep in the woods and fast-moving cars carrying illegal liquor across the region, featuring white men living their best lives (despite economic challenges) in the thick of this scene.

The individual character that is central to public memory surrounding moonshine is the hillbilly. He is portrayed as the overall-wearing, corn pipe-smoking, banjo player who speaks broken English with a heavy Southern drawl. As one Tennessee distillery owner stated, "There are too many people from this area playing into the hillbilly stuff, everyone around here portrays us as

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<sup>49</sup> Amy Heuman and Catherine Langford, "Tradition and Southern Confederate Culture: Manifesting Whiteness through Public Memory at Texas A&M University," in *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity*, ed. G. Mitchell Reyes (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) 120-144.

<sup>50</sup> In this study, we undertake rhetorical fieldwork, as we have in previous studies of Southern food (see Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre, *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016)). Although rhetorical critics have accounted for the different symbolic meanings of the variety of food practices that create food culture, the move toward rhetorical fieldwork helps better understand the relationship between food and identity. Analyzing traditional rhetorical texts such as restaurant websites, farm tour brochures, and menus demonstrates how food and ingredients are valued and encouraged to be understood by diners in particular ways. Examining "alternative" texts such as food festival stands, gas station lunch counters, church suppers, and farmers' markets through *in situ* methods suggests how people receive, adopt, adapt, and perpetuate these identity-shaping experiences. Fieldwork helps explore how one type of text influences another and suggests how people's preconceptions guide the meanings that are generated.

<sup>51</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 225.

hillbillies and make it into their product.”<sup>52</sup> Rosko claims that this image of Appalachians is “capitalizing on and a perpetuation of an inauthentic narrative of the region.”<sup>53</sup> The allure of this portrayal of Appalachians is that it sells; tourists happily consume the image. As Kristen Baldwin Deathridge writes, “The marketing in all of Pigeon Forge is over the top and an assault on the senses, often catering to customers who seek a caricature of mountain people. ‘Hillbilly’ tourism has grown in Pigeon Forge since the opening of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1930s, and many people love the area for its kitsch, not in spite of it.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, Mark Roberts argues that this embrace of the hillbilly image on the part of Appalachians, what he calls “hillbification,” acts as a “kind of guerilla warfare, where regional people utilize the enemy’s weapons—in this case, hillbilly stereotypes—to combat, or reverse, identity attacks.”<sup>55</sup> Motivation aside, the stereotypical image of Appalachians is widespread.

The stereotypical moonshiner is almost always a man, even though, as Elizabeth Engelhardt points out, women also engaged in moonshine production to increase their economic opportunities when options were often limited.<sup>56</sup> Bourbon, whiskey, and moonshine are all associated with men, from the creation to the selling, and even to the drinking of the distilled beverages. Bourbon, Seán McKeithan says, “has been written indelibly into the history of the white masculine South, by Percy, Faulkner, and our fathers, through advertising and through our consumption, for centuries.”<sup>57</sup> Even though there were women who distilled and sold moonshine, they rarely appear in stories told about the underground industry and are even less likely to appear in the lampooned image of the whiskey maker. The men in these narratives are criminals, but their actions are dismissed with a wink and a nod, knowing that many in the community questioned the laws that placed them in that role. Historically, violence that accompanied moonshining was often ignored, with community members often overlooking “other forms of illegal and abusive behavior which took their toll on family and community life.”<sup>58</sup>

One of the most venerated moonshiners, Marvin “Popcorn” Sutton, exemplifies this very image. As we travelled through the tourist heavy Pigeon Forge and Sevierville, we talked to local shop owners and distillers, asking them about their views on moonshine. Sutton’s name came up frequently, with some lamenting his untimely death by suicide said to have been in reaction to federal charges related to illegal distilling and future prison time. His story is almost always recounted in discussions about moonshine in Appalachia, acknowledging the central role that he has in the larger narrative. His 1999 self-published book (*Me and My Likker*), videos providing instructions on moonshining, and numerous souvenirs centering on his persona all drove interest in his life. In 2008, a documentary (*The Last One*) brought national attention to Sutton and led to even more attention.<sup>59</sup> As Pierce writes, “Popcorn gave his fans what they wanted: the quintessential, bearded salty, overall and flannel-shirt wearing, ‘meddlin’ guvmint’-hating, good-old-boy

<sup>52</sup> Rosko, “Distilling,” 352.

<sup>53</sup> Rosko, “Distilling,” 352.

<sup>54</sup> Kristen Baldwin Deathridge, “Heritage Spirits in Heritage Spaces,” in *Modern Moonshine: The Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 256.

<sup>55</sup> Mark A. Roberts, “The Performing Hillbilly: Redeeming Acts of a Regional Stereotype,” *Appalachian Journal*, 30, no. 1 (Fall 2010), 81.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Seán S. McKeithan, “Every Ounce a Man’s Whiskey? Bourbon in the White Masculine South,” *Southern Cultures*, 18, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 17.

<sup>58</sup> Stewart, *Moonshiners*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Pierce, *Corn from a Jar*.

moonshiner topped off with a pork-pie hat with a racoon's penis bone stuck through the crown."<sup>60</sup> Sutton "resembled a daguerreotype from an indeterminate Appalachian past."<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the stereotype of moonshiners is connected to some more accurate portrayals (as we will explore in the next section), even if it becomes exaggerated.

At the same time, another part of the narrative that is central to the drama surrounding moonshine is the authority figure—the revenueurs who collected taxes, the police who chased down the cars, the federal agents who took axes to the stills and burned down structures to prevent future distilling. While moonshine was and is a part of Appalachian tradition, it also symbolically acts as a "a generations-old middle finger to the establishment"<sup>62</sup> and "the contrarian uncle who lurked in the back of the national liquor cabinet, the rude, young, law-flouting spirit that never grew up."<sup>63</sup> Illegal moonshining provided mountaineers with a sense of identity, placing them in the role of the lawbreaker. That illegality also created an alluring story to outsiders; it became common to "romanticize the life of the moonshiner as a modern-day Robin Hood, an outlaw who defies the oppressive forces of 'guvmint' and simply exercises his God-given right to make a little liquor."<sup>64</sup> At Call Family Distillers in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, for example, visitors can try Uncatchable Moonshines named after Willie Clay Call, who outran the law delivering to Winston-Salem and Charlotte; or, sample its Forbidden Fire Whisky, first distilled by Lutheran Minister Reverend Daniel Call behind his general store.

Aside from the authorities, moonshine brings with it a great distrust of outsiders of any sort, creating a climate of suspicion, with Appalachians always on the look-out for informants.<sup>65</sup> As secret production happened in many parts of the region, it was common to meet strangers with a wary eye or even a shotgun. During our travels, moonshine jars were frequently brought out for a taste once we gained trust; sometimes they came from a back room, sometimes from underneath a counter, but always with a twinkle in the eye of the one offering a sip. These Appalachians took pride in the role that moonshine has in the region's history, although acknowledging the sense of taboo surrounding the alcohol. Secrecy and taboo continue to be a part of the public memories surrounding moonshine. Our research allowed us to experience a bit of being accepted as part of this tight-knit community when offered a sip on the sly, but this allure continues to draw in tourists, too, who feel slightly rebellious drinking liquor that is now legal and taxable.

Yet another part of the moonshine narrative centers on poverty. Not only is the distiller himself shown as struggling to survive, but he is also surrounded by a community facing the same issues. Although there is some historical truth to this portrayal, as previously discussed, the common image of the moonshiner is not intended to sympathize with this economic issue, but to mock the ways of the hillbilly, perpetually poor because of a lack of intelligence. The souvenirs on display at Tennessee Shine, for example, laughingly portray crude instruments meant to mimic modern technology or to highlight a lack of education. The "hillbilly flip phone" is a piece of wood, a "lucky lottery scratcher" is a piece of wood with a penny attached, the "hillbilly scratcher" is a piece of wood with a corncob attached. Poverty is something to lampoon, with outsiders laughing at the expense of Appalachians. While class issues are a part of public memory in this case, the focus on this memory quality hurts more than helps those facing deficiencies.

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<sup>60</sup> Pierce, *Corn from a Jar*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 221.

<sup>62</sup> Carson, "Ole Smoky."

<sup>63</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 221.

<sup>64</sup> Pierce, *Corn from a Jar*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Pierce, "Jim Tom Hedrick"; Stewart, *Moonshiners*.

Similarly, the location of moonshining in public memory speaks of class and, specifically, classlessness. Most of the distilleries in the region connect their products to the history of the region, often using old, existing buildings, and outfitting them to accommodate their needs or bringing in pieces of “authentic” Appalachia into distilleries and tasting rooms.<sup>66</sup> This historical connection is effective because “visitors crave authenticity. People have choices for where they visit, and they want ‘real’ historical experiences.”<sup>67</sup> Although it’s hard to connect the new and polished distilleries with the barns, shacks, and lean-tos that housed much of the moonshine production of the past, the designers do their best to signal authenticity through distressed wooden shelves, hardwood floors, rocking chairs lining the entry porch, and crudely written signs denouncing “revenuers” and other “outsiders.” Ironically, some of these distilleries spend a great deal of money trying to replicate a crude, classless scene.

The public memory narrative that we encountered at many of the tourist-heavy distilleries is a familiar image of Appalachians, unfortunately. If this memory acts in a constitutive fashion, though, the question is what kind of community it has the potential to create, what sense of belonging it might bring to Appalachians. Although the moonshine industry in Southern Appalachia has grown beyond the ‘shine of the past, much of the mainstream industry still builds from images of that history.<sup>68</sup> The stereotype emphasizes resilience in limited ways—outwitting authorities and outsiders, successfully distilling corn despite the difficulty of the process, providing a means of income for families and communities that might have had no other options—but this narrative does not communicate the strong resilience message that is possible through the story of moonshine; it creates a limited and unproductive role for Appalachians.

### **Changing Moonshine Stories: Alternative Appalachian Narratives**

Despite the prevalence of many of these essentialist stories, there are alternative narratives surrounding moonshine and whiskey in the region that create more productive sites of resilience and push against the damaging narratives. These alternative public memories have always existed but rarely make their way to more popular imagining of moonshining. Instead of stories from “craft” or community distillers more likely to focus on regional traditions or family histories, mass produced distillery marketing reaches much larger audiences. Many of today’s “craft” or community moonshine distilleries, in fact, work to “combat what they perceive as negative stereotypes of the region, choosing instead to promote a narrative of moonshine that embodies tradition, craft, and resourcefulness.”<sup>69</sup> These sites can create the ultimate “neolocalism” feel, fitting into the food narratives centered on usage of local resources and connections to the people and the land of the region.<sup>70</sup>

The moonshiners portrayed in these settings may not be dramatically different than the cartoonish images in many touristy mountain towns, still sometimes featuring older white men in overalls. The difference in these stories is that visitors get a more nuanced understanding of the characters. We visited Copper Barrel Distillery in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, for example, and learned a great deal about the distiller—Buck Nance. Before taking a behind the scenes tour

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<sup>66</sup> Deathridge, “Heritage Spirits.”

<sup>67</sup> Deathridge, “Heritage Spirits,” 247.

<sup>68</sup> Helen M. Rosko, “Drinking and (Re)Making Place: Commercial Moonshine as Place-making in East Tennessee,” *Southeastern Geographer*, 57, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 351-370.

<sup>69</sup> Rosko, “Distilling,” 231.

<sup>70</sup> Rosko, “Drinking.”

of the distillery, our “Spirit Guide,” Anna, had us sit down to watch a documentary about the history of the business. The introductory video explains that the distillery emerged when Vermont native George Smith decided he wanted to continue his family’s rural traditions and eventually settled on opening a bourbon distillery in the small North Carolina town. As an outsider, he sought input from locals and was soon directed to talk to Buck, who ultimately became his business partner. Buck, however, convinced George that good moonshine could have as much taste complexity as bourbon and would yield a faster product. Almost ten years later, George and Buck have a successful business, with a second site scheduled to open in nearby Blowing Rock, North Carolina. The savvy business decision that the two made was guided by advice from Buck, who in some ways mirrors the stereotype of a moonshiner: white, male, overall clad, with a Southern drawl. And yet, we learned that Buck was far more than the cartoon hillbilly. Previously working for NASCAR as an engineer (a noteworthy connection, given the historical linkage between moonshining and NASCAR), Buck was charged with designing the fastest cars possible. As Anna walked us through the distillery, she explained that Buck had handcrafted all the steel-based equipment, working from drawings that his father brought back from World War II. Buck outfitted the former furniture manufacturing warehouse to accompany the distillery equipment, using his engineering background and handcrafting skills to work around pre-existing parts of the space. While he was initially resistant to change and expanding with a “business guy coming up from Charlotte,” recounting, “Oh Lord, I ain’t getting in on that end of it,” he quickly changed his tune when he realized that it was a better financial option.<sup>71</sup> At first glance, Buck was everything that you might imagine in a moonshiner based on the kitschy public memory narrative, but the distillery went out of its way to tell more of his story. Whether the portrayal was completely reflective of his lived experience is not clear, but the rhetorical choices of the distillery to portray him in that way disrupted the story of the backwards, uneducated hillbilly. In fact, positive portrayals of Appalachians who look and sound like the stereotypical moonshiner but who break that stereotype otherwise, not only contribute to public memory surrounding moonshine, but also disrupt typical signifiers of poverty and may circulate alternative approaches to class. Indeed, there is now a vibrant “moonshine economy,” where savvy businesspeople tap into this old hillbilly mystique to sell a very economically successful product.<sup>72</sup>

There is also a burgeoning market in celebrating the diversity of moonshine and whiskey history, for example, recognizing African and African American connections to the distilling process. Most notably, Jack Daniel’s distillery, one of the biggest names in the whiskey-making business, began in 2016 to embrace the origin of their product more publicly as connected to Nathan “Nearest” Green, mentioned earlier. As the company tells the story, Jack Daniel learned to make whiskey from a local minister and Nearest Green (then enslaved) prior to the Civil War and later hired Green to work at the distillery after the Civil War. The company proudly proclaims that “Jack Daniel not only never owned slaves but he worked side-by-side with them,” employing a member of the Green family at the distillery since its inception and still today.<sup>73</sup> Although the details of this Jack Daniel’s story continue to emerge, acknowledging the significant role that Green played is an important signal.

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<sup>71</sup> Buck Nance, “The Foundation,” last accessed July 22, 2022, <https://copperbarrel.com/about-us/>.

<sup>72</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 224.

<sup>73</sup> “How Jack Daniel Came to Make Whiskey,” Jack Daniel Distillery, last accessed January 23, 2022, <https://www.jackdaniels.com/en-us/vault/how-jack-daniel-came-make-whiskey>.

Since the story about Green broke, Uncle Nearest Distillery, has started selling whiskey using Green's recipe.<sup>74</sup> As we previously described, Green's story is on full display in the new Uncle Nearest Distillery, breaking away from the typical touristy stories of recipes handed down between (white) relatives. Nearest Green is the first recognized Black distiller in the region and the family histories that are told in the glamorous distillery space highlight a very different story of whiskey-making. As we drove up and began walking into the former horse barn turned welcome center, we noticed that the tourists arriving at the same time were primarily African American, that the portraits that lined the entry hallway featured Black family members, and that the placards placed throughout the area told a different version of the whiskey story, blending the Scots-Irish customs frequently told at other Southern Appalachian distilleries with stories of enslaved people bringing distilling techniques from Africa. One sign explains, "Whiskey came to America with the Scotch and Irish, but the technique of producing it here, was dependent on enslaved people who brought cultural knowledge of distilling & purifying water & alcohol through charcoal." Souvenir T-shirts were scattered around the room exclaiming, "I Am Making Black History" (as opposed to the "Powered by Moonshine, High Octane Redneck Fuel" T-shirts on offer at Tennessee Shine). That day, visitors were delighted to hear that the company CEO and founder, African American Fawn Weaver, was making a visit and would sign purchased bottles. Tourists lined up to get pictures taken with Weaver, who started what the company claims is the "best-selling African American founded spirit brand of all time," her vision of privileging Green's story energizing the experience throughout the entire tour.<sup>75</sup> But the story of the distillery was told not only through Green but also through women of the temperance movement and suffragists, emphasizing the roles that African American women played in both of those movements.

More recent narratives also include women in the story, recognizing the role that they always played in the history. As Elizabeth Engelhardt points out in her analysis of women in moonshine literature, this taboo setting for women opened up more possibilities to "explore gender roles during a period of shifting definitions. Moonshine characters wrestled with new gender roles and the implications of strong women who were not confined to domestic spaces or domestic foodways."<sup>76</sup> Although Engelhardt's work centers on fictional depictions of women, her argument also applies to the lived world of moonshine and whiskey creation. Historically, Mahalia Mullins, East Tennessee moonshiner, fit this description. Her story began as folklore in the late 1800s and is still celebrated through the Tennessee Vacation tourism web site and through her preserved cabin in Sneedville, Tennessee. Mullins was said to be "catchable, but not fetchable" because of the mountainous terrain leading up to her cabin as well as her weight.<sup>77</sup> Stories that go beyond the surface, however, explain that she was a single mother of many children, and that moonshine allowed her to provide for the family. Recent stories also point out that Mullins was considered "Melungeon, a [derogatory] name given to families of Black, white, and indigenous descent who settled in parts

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<sup>74</sup> Clay Risen, "When Jack Daniel's Failed to Honor a Slave, an Author Rewrote History," *New York Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/dining/jack-daniels-whiskey-slave-nearest-green.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Dominique Fluker, "How Fawn Weaver Created Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey from Hidden History," *Forbes*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominiquefluker/2022/03/09/how-fawn-weaver-created-uncle-nearest-premium-whiskey-from-hidden-history/?sh=5239237ffea9>.

<sup>76</sup> Engelhardt, *Mess of Greens*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> "Mahala Mullins' Moonshine Cabin," Welcome to Tennessee, last accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.tnvacation.com/local/sneedville-mahalah-mullins-moonshine-cabin>.

of Central Appalachia beginning in the late 1700s,” and most likely fell subject to discrimination.<sup>78</sup> Despite the racism and sexism that she likely faced, Mullins became recognized as one of the most revered moonshine distillers in the area, with buyers coming from near and far to bring back some of her creation, said to be masterfully flavored with local apples.<sup>79</sup>

Uncle Nearest is proud to highlight women’s roles in the distillery. One placard in the showroom includes a drawing of Victoria Eady Butler, explaining that she is “the first African American Woman Master Blender at a major brand & great, great granddaughter of Nearest Green.” Her talent in making whiskey, they explain, “was undoubtedly inherited.” At Copper Barrel, we learned that our guide, the co-owner’s niece, was not only deeply involved in the production of whiskey at the main location but would soon be taking over as master distiller of a new location set to open in the future. Anna was excited to become a part of the distillery story but explained to us that she had to convince her Uncle Buck (co-founder of the company) that a woman could distill, starting with turning the water on and off and eventually slinging a bag of sugar over her shoulders to show she wasn’t averse to or incapable of manual labor. She would become a part of the modern moonshine story, although it took effort on her part.

Part of the “bad boy” image of moonshining has also changed with the legalization, although still requiring permits, and widespread production. Distilleries are not only out in the open, but they are featured in travel brochures, central to many Appalachian towns, serving as an anchor to the tourist industry. As Erin Carson writes:

It’s a far cry from the days when moonshiners hid their illegal stills in the woods. No one a hundred years ago would’ve dreamed of placing their operations a few yards from the sidewalk on the main drag of one of Tennessee’s biggest tourism towns, where the Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum and a replica of the Space Needle vie for your attention. And no moonshiner would have a gift shop to flaunt the enterprise.<sup>80</sup>

The villains in these narratives, like the illegal moonshiners, have been relegated to the past. Given the economic boom that the industry has experienced and the global emphasis on using local resources for food and drink, the creators and consumers of moonshine and whiskey have changed. Most of the moonshine producers at this point aren’t “hillbillies” but “Urban, middle-class professionals, or ‘hipsters’ who brewed or distilled alcohol as a hobby and decided to leave their jobs to open distilleries.”<sup>81</sup> These aren’t “dumb hillbillies” then, but savvy businesspeople who work “the other side of Thunder Road,” offering white spirits featuring “open-pollinated corn,” “Appalachian Spring Water,” and historically accurate peach flavored shine.<sup>82</sup> And because distilling has been featured as an important part of Southern Appalachian culture, there is an eager audience taking part in the tradition. The tourists for this kind of adventure continue to flock to the region, seeing moonshine as “‘cool’ and ‘edgy.’”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Katie Myers, “The True(ish) Story of Tennessee Moonshiner Mahalia Mullins,” *West Virginia Public Broadcasting*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.wvpublic.org/section/arts-culture/2021-04-19/the-trueish-story-of-tennessee-moonshiner-mahalia-mullins>.

<sup>79</sup> Myers, “True(ish) Story.”

<sup>80</sup> Carson, “Ole Smoky.”

<sup>81</sup> Bruce E. Stewart and Cameron D. Lippard, “The Revival of Moonshine in Southern Appalachia and the United States,” in *Modern Moonshine: The Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>82</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 223-224.

<sup>83</sup> Stewart and Lippard, “Revival,” 12.

The reason for distilling also changed slightly in these alternative stories. Much of what makes the modern-day moonshine and whiskey trend appealing is the relationship to the history of the region. Some Southern Appalachian distillers place an emphasis on the importance of their work to this history. As one distiller notes, “My whole idea is the art of making whiskey is being lost, and if I’m able to pass that down and showcase the art of making whiskey, that’s important.”<sup>84</sup> Heritage tourism appeals to many travelers who may see white whiskey as a “symbol of Americana, a product that is ‘authentic’.”<sup>85</sup> Drinking moonshine (and all its related liquors) provides a visceral connection to the land, so touristic experiences at distilleries let the visitor feel that they are in tune with the regional heritage. As McKeithan explains it, “Bourbon drinking can serve as a bridge into the past, allowing a drinker to tap into centuries of culture with a simple consumptive act.”<sup>86</sup> Beyond the connection to history, this quintessential drink also provides a way to perform a Southern role: “Bourbon remains a piece of masculine identity that southerners can ‘put on,’ much like overalls, a seersucker suit, or a North Carolina twang.”<sup>87</sup> Although the role is limited in many ways by expectations of what it means to be a whiskey-drinking Southerner, it shows the role of moonshine/whiskey in creating identity.

Although the economic reasons for producing moonshine are not completely removed from the explanations in the old narrative, there are differences in this part of the story that also offer alternative identities/constitutive possibilities. The move to legalize the production of moonshine in 2009 not only shifted the story away from the messages of illegality and morality that have been connected to the drink, but it also energized the economy in Southern Appalachia, allowing moonshiners to become entrepreneurs/savvy businesspeople and to massively increase their scale of production. Making a quickly produced “white whiskey” allows distillers to make a profit while waiting for the barrel-aged whiskeys and bourbons to be ready for sale.<sup>88</sup> Distilleries in Southern Appalachia and nearby parts of North Carolina have “sold millions of cases of ‘white lightning’ since 2010” and, although there has been a slight decrease in popularity in recent years, tourism surrounding moonshine is still very strong.<sup>89</sup> John T. Edge writes of the interest in moonshine, “As craft distilling boomed, moonshine, its little brother, attempted a transition from lowest common denominator drunk fuel to aspirational artisan beverage.”<sup>90</sup> The rise in craft distilleries in America, following the wine and fine beer booms that happened, has also found its way to Appalachia.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps ironically, the moonshine industry has formed a strong connection to many local governments, working together to bring in tourist dollars and “earning their support for what can be a controversial business option in small towns.”<sup>92</sup> Although there may be some initial community hesitation, small towns see distilleries as helping to develop tourism economies. Copper Barrel’s President and CEO George Smith was named a Main Street Champion, for example, for his help in revitalizing North Wilkesboro.<sup>93</sup> As Rocky Mount, Virginia’s, town manager Matt Hankins ex-

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<sup>84</sup> Rosko, “Distilling,” 233.

<sup>85</sup> Stewart and Lippard, “Revival,” 12

<sup>86</sup> McKeithan, “Every Ounce,” 7.

<sup>87</sup> McKeithan, “Every Ounce,” 8.

<sup>88</sup> Stewart and Lippard, “Revival of Moonshine.”

<sup>89</sup> Stewart and Lippard, “Revival,” 1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Edge, *Potlikker Papers*, 222.

<sup>91</sup> Stewart and Lippard, “Revival.”

<sup>92</sup> Deathridge, “Heritage Spirits,” 256.

<sup>93</sup> NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, “North Wilkesboro – George Smith,” March 19, 2019, North Carolina Department of Commerce, <https://www.ncmainstreetandplanning.com/post/north-wilkesboro-george-smith>.



plains the role of distillery tourism in historic moonshine capital Franklin County, although moonshine production may sometimes conflict with “small town” community values, it is more likely seen as a way to bring in tourist dollars: “Franklin County — whether people like it or not — has the reputation of producing really great distilled spirits ... So now we have somebody that’s going to capitalize on that heritage and that reputation.”<sup>94</sup> Neighboring town Boone’s Mill Mayor Ben Flora also supports the industry development, arguing that moonshine is a “distinctive Franklin County heritage product that is now wondrously legal,” adding humorously that the distillery really just produces “a Virginia agricultural product.”<sup>95</sup> Instead of hiding away this regional creation, many of the distilleries focus on the pride connected to the craft of distilling, highlighting the people and places that allow whiskey and moonshine to be celebrated.

Today, alternative moonshine narratives also tell a different story of the place where these distilled products are made. While almost all distilleries focus on the history of the moonshine recipes and traditions, the smaller distilleries often focused more intensely on the land itself, sometimes claiming connections to the very land that they sit upon. The emphasis on land can be used for tourism purposes, “using their individual rootedness to represent” the region, “but they are also working to sell the region with each jar of moonshine sold from their distillery.”<sup>96</sup> Distilling provides another way to connect to local products, making it attractive to food advocates seeking local-made products, but also providing Appalachians and Southerners a point of pride that is more productive for the people and the region.<sup>97</sup>

Taking a step back to what some consider the “original moonshine of the colonies,” we visited the Holman Distillery outside of Moravian Falls, North Carolina, where they make what the owner calls the “only true applejack” in the United States. The liquor is created by freezing, rather than boiling, apple cider, gradually scraping off ice layers until what is left is a higher concentration of alcohol. Although Prohibition made this cultural staple a thing of the past, applejack was a popular choice in the Blue Ridge Mountains for many years.<sup>98</sup> We wanted to see how the distillery was bringing back this regional tradition. After driving on winding mountainous roads through numerous apple orchards, farmland, and sparse houses, we met with John Holman for a private tasting of his creation. He walked us through the history and mission behind his business, frequently centering on the location and resources of the land. He explained that, because his distillery sits in a valley with no farms and few houses even above his land, the water that he uses from the land is pure and that purity makes his products even more land-influenced and flavorful. When he started his business, he initially made a drink based on muscadine grapes, common to the area. Soon after starting to sell his creation, though, he had an eye-opening conversation with someone who asked, “What are muscadines?” He knew then that the message of the product would be lost if people couldn’t recognize the ingredients. “Who doesn’t know what apples are, though?” he asked. Determined to make a pure and historical-based drink, he settled on applejack and soon began to develop a process that would create an apple concentrate, not a separation (setting it apart from other similar products). Importantly, John emphasized that each batch of applejack is different, completely dependent on the taste of the apples each year. We sipped on his different variations of applejack, noting the differences in the experiences depending on the order of the drinks and

<sup>94</sup> Casey Fabris, “Virginia County Bets on Moonshine Tourism in Rural Region,” November 7, 2015, *Skift*, <https://skift.com/2015/11/07/virginia-county-bets-on-moonshine-tourism-in-rural-region/>.

<sup>95</sup> Casey Fabris, “Virginia County Bets on Moonshine Tourism.”

<sup>96</sup> Rosko, “Distilling,” 361.

<sup>97</sup> Thompson, *Spirits*, xxvii.

<sup>98</sup> Julia Moskin, “America’s First Moonshine, Applejack, Returns in Sleeker Style,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/dining/drinks/applejack.html>.

the flavors that still lingered on our tongues. With the green apple applejack, John noted, “It tastes like green!” and we had to agree. Many distilleries emphasize the land and climate affecting the product, but when you stand on site and view what is being described, it makes the explanation even more powerful and adding to the feeling of authenticity.

Similarly, Uncle Nearest Distillery frequently referenced the importance of the land to the taste of the whiskey. Signs in the distillery explain that Lincoln County, where the whiskey was historically made and is now produced again, “became known for the good quality corn grown here,” has a unique set up with “creek water flowing through miles of limestone,” and holds the ground water at a perfect temperature. The land is featured even more prominently in a video on the web site and played as part of the tour that tells the story of Uncle Nearest. The film opens with the narrator staring across a grassy field, slowly walking up to a house owned by the Green family. The narrator steps into the house, noting that it sits on “a special piece of American land,” and continues to tell the distillery story as he looks out the window. The camera moves to a slow shot of a creek flowing over limestone and a sugar maple tree (used for charcoal filtration) while the narrator tells us that he (Green) “gave birth to Tennessee whiskey” on this land. The implied message is that although Green brought the techniques, it was both a combination of his skills and the land itself that led to the creation. The land that is described in these narratives is far removed from the stereotypical image of the mysterious mountainous woods hiding illegal undertakings; instead, distilled goods from the area are lauded as a reflection of a strong cultural tradition and the best qualities of the land.

Comparing these differing narratives, then—the damaging public memories and the stories being told by many of today’s smaller distilleries—provides a clear image of the differences in the types of Appalachian citizen that can be constructed through rhetorical renderings of the role of distilling in Southern Appalachia. In this final section, we discuss the implications of these different identities on offer.

### **Public Memory in Southern Appalachia Considered**

When exploring the role of moonshine memories in shaping popular images of Southern Appalachia, it becomes more apparent why analyzing public memory of this sort matters. These mainstream images of moonshine and whiskey production in the region are continually used to represent the region. Outsiders—tourists and those living outside of the region—see the reflection of these hillbilly stereotypes as part of the image of the region, even when they recognize it as a caricature. At the same time, many Appalachians exploit this imagery knowing that it meets tourist expectations. Given the prevalence of these public memories, it is necessary to examine them closely to understand the region more fully.

There is no doubt that the mainstream moonshine narrative is harmful to the region because it does not accurately reflect the complexity of the story of moonshine and whiskey creation in Southern Appalachia. This more nuanced version of the story should be embraced in order to challenge stereotypes of the region. Public memory based on this mainstream narrative also does not create an identity that is productive to the region. Aside from the problematic imagery of the region in the “hillbilly” narrative, the damaging portrayal of the region does not provide an identity that can be embraced by residents, nor does it emphasize a long-term survival strategy. In other words, this is not a resilient role for Appalachians.

Alternative public memories that offer more complex stories of moonshine still have a connection to the stereotypical moonshine-making hillbillies; these new stories do not completely shatter

the story of Southern Appalachia and distilling that is often exploited by the mainstream tourism industry. Subtle shifts in the stories, though, provide more productive alternative roles for Appalachians, ones based on qualities that are already there, but not typically featured. Accounting for the variety of groups that have shaped moonshine and whiskey history in the region thus not only reflects the history more accurately but also makes an important intervention into the white, male narrative that is generally privileged in Appalachian public memory. Modern stories fold in not only the Scots-Irish connection that is so often told, but also highlight the role of Indigenous and enslaved people who were a significant part of the creation of the Appalachian tradition. Alternative narratives also present a very different image of Appalachia as place. The role of the land is central to this story, with the argument that moonshine and whiskey are meant to be made in this region because of the particulars of the land (as opposed to merely acting as an effective “hiding place” for illegal distilling); the water sources, soil, and other regional ingredients are all said to be essential to the final taste.

These alternative narratives, then, offer important signs of resilience. The celebration of diversity brings more Appalachians into the story of the region and connects more groups together in meaningful ways. Changes to the traditions and recipes surrounding moonshine and whiskey also display adaptability, folding different aspects of history and culture into a creation so vital to the region’s story. Creatively using Southern Appalachian resources is also innovative, allowing the region to bring in much needed tourist money, while also celebrating the diverse culture and history of the region and placing an emphasis on the importance of the land itself. In essence, bringing in a more robust understanding of the history and production of the product—folding that into the public-facing narratives—would elevate the status of distilling in the regional story.

Beyond our understanding of the specifics of the moonshine memories, though, this analysis also leads to conclusions about public memory more broadly. First, the moonshine example shows the importance of accounting for everyday images and memories, knowing that banal rhetorical messages can often be more powerful than overt construction of narratives. These are “public discourses that continue to shape the way that we live,” as Maldonado explains, but they are often overlooked.<sup>99</sup> Moonshine memories highlight the impact that public memory in the form of popular culture can have on regional identity.

Second, this example demonstrates how powerful public memory can be in shaping regions and identities connected to those regions, influencing how “outsiders” view a region, but also the roles that “insiders” enact based on those narratives. Public memory provides “a symbolic connection with the group and a sense of belonging.”<sup>100</sup> Whether examining the mainstream moonshine narratives or alternative stories, there is an opportunity to connect with the region and to each other through this history. Importantly, this example emphasizes how important it is to create a productive sense of belonging through public memory and since public memory is selective, it is worth asking what narrative is being put forth and what kind of role it is creating for the region and its people. Beyond Southern Appalachian identity, it would be fruitful to think about other regions that are defined by stereotypes—Texas and its “Lone Star State,” gun-shooting cowboy imagery or New York City and the stereotypical rude city-dweller, for example.

Third, this case isolates an example of an intervention into a problematic public memory, showing individuals who are intentionally (in some cases) fighting against inaccuracies. With public memories, there is no simple way to replace damaging narratives with alternatives that tell a fuller story of the history; instead, competing narratives become a part of the flow of ideas and

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<sup>99</sup> Maldonado, “Commemorative,” 249.

<sup>100</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction,” 7.

may slowly alter public memory. As Blair, Dickinson, and Ott point out, “groups tell their pasts to themselves and others as a way of understanding, valorizing, justifying, excusing, or subverting conditions or beliefs of their current moment.”<sup>101</sup> Narratives that are more intentional in shaping public memories and identities that are productive for a region are noteworthy in their overall contribution to public thought.

Fourth, the narratives surrounding moonshine and whiskey provide an example of public memory that accounts for race and class in a way that many do not. In this case, those memories are both destructive and constructive in other ways. The mainstream moonshine stories ignore race (defaulting to white) but place a heavy emphasis on class as an explanation for why Appalachians historically chose to participate in the illegal creation and sale of moonshine. Although there is attention to class, it is primarily used as a “punching bag,” offering up “hillbillies” as sacrificial lambs, too dumb to join the middle class. The alternative narratives are more intentional about examining race—pointing out the complex and diverse history of distilling in the area. Class is also often a part of these narratives, but there is more nuance in pointing out how moonshine provided for important economic stability for the region. Not only is it important to explore how powerful these kinds of alternative narratives can be in region formation, but it is also important for scholars to continue searching for race and class representation in public memory. More significantly, our public memory research should continue to explore how and why certain negative constructions of identities can continue to be more appealing and the impact of those identities.

Although it is easy to laugh off stereotypical images of moonshiners and hillbillies in the public memories, this essay sought to explain the significance of these narratives to the shaping of regional identity. Even before the Prohibition Act increased attention to their efforts and demand for their products, distillers weren’t just lazy men lolling around on porches, but innovative men and women from a variety of cultures and histories finding ways to provide for family and community and celebrating an important part of the regional history and land. As we note the more than 100 years since the passage of the 1920 Prohibition Act, a more inclusive narrative of the regional point of pride offers much more to the region in telling the story of resilience—preserving tradition, fortifying community, and melding cultures—in Southern Appalachia.

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<sup>101</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction,” 6.