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Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon

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Race, Class, Popular Culture, and “the Hillbilly”

In 1930, a Los Angeles string band gained a broad regional following under the name “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Thirty-two years later, the name would reappear as the title of a wildly popular television show. Essentially the same family of savage mountaineers were featured as the Hatburns in the 1921 film *Tol’able David*, the Scraggs of Al Capp’s long-running comic strip *Li’l Abner* (beginning in 1934), and the unnamed mountain rapists of the 1972 movie *Deliverance*. And sixty-eight years after his inception in the early years of the Depression, the lazy, isolated, and cantankerous comic strip mountaineer Snuffy Smith was still appearing in hundreds of newspapers nationwide. As these examples attest, the portrayal of southern mountain people as pre-modern and ignorant “hillbillies” is one of the most lasting and pervasive images in American popular iconography, appearing continuously throughout the twentieth century in nearly every major facet of American popular culture from novels and magazines to movies and television programs to country music and the Internet.¹

Although the hillbilly image has remained relatively unchanged, the meaning of these representations and the word itself have continuously evolved over the past century in response to broader social, economic, and cultural transformations in American society. The key to the “hillbilly”’s surprising ubiquity and endurance from 1900 to the dawn of the third millennium has been the fundamental ambiguity of the meaning of this term and image. In its many manifestations, “hillbilly” has been used in national me-

dia representations and by thousands of Americans within and outside the southern mountains to both uphold and challenge the dominant trends of twentieth-century American life—urbanization, the growing centrality of technology, and the resulting routinization of American life. Consistently used by middle-class economic interests to denigrate working-class southern whites (whether from the mountains or not) and to define the benefits of advanced civilization through negative counterexample, the term and idea have also been used to challenge the generally unquestioned acceptance and legitimacy of “modernity” and “progress.” The media hillbilly thrived during the 1930s in an era of economic and social collapse, but it also reemerged in the 1960s at a time of widespread questioning of the price of “progress” and the social equity of the “affluent society.” Uniquely positioned as a white “other,” a construction both within and beyond the confines of American “whiteness,” the hillbilly has also been at the heart of struggles over American racial identity and hierarchy. Finally, in the same oppositionally dualistic way, southern mountain folk both denounced it as a vicious slur and embraced it in defense of their value system and in celebration of their cultural heritage. Thus, while often dismissed as a debased and trivial “mass” culture stereotype, the hillbilly has instead served at times of national soul-searching and throughout the twentieth century as a continually negotiated mythic space through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to reconcile the past and the present.

This book examines the cultural and ideological construct “the hillbilly” (and its antecedent and fellow traveler “the mountaineer”) rather than the actual people of the southern mountains or even the purportedly “true-to-life” representations of these people in popular literature, photography, and academic studies. Nonetheless, it is, of course, impossible to completely separate these three socially constructed categories—the southern mountain people, the efforts to represent the “real” southern mountaineer, and the image of the “hillbilly”—that have intertwined dialectically throughout the century. As mass media increasingly permeated American culture, the distinction between image and reality became increasingly blurred. Inundated by stereotypical portrayals of shiftless, drunken, promiscuous, and bare-footed people, living in blissful squalor beyond the reach of civilization, many Americans outside the southern mountains came to see little or no difference between the “real” southern mountaineers and their cultural image.

In response to such widespread acceptance of these pejorative portrayals, writers, photographers, and artists who were ostensibly sympathetic to the mountain people created a distinct but parallel construction, the stalwart, forthright, and picturesque mountaineer. But this construct was premised on the same notion of a mythic white population wholly isolated from modern

civilization. As a result, images of noble mountaineers intended to delegitimize hillbilly caricatures actually reinforced these portraits and perpetuated the idea that the southern mountain people were a separate “race” in, but not of, white America. At the same time, many southern mountain folk, often trapped in regional low-paying industrial work or forced to migrate outside the mountains to survive, embraced elements of both the rugged and pure mountaineer myth and the hillbilly label and its implied hostility to middle-class norms and propriety, in the process intensifying the national perception of their status as an American “other.”

Because the hillbilly image/identity has always been a site of contending attitudes toward modernity, it has occupied a mythical far more than a concrete geographic locale. True, producers and audiences alike most often associated this image with the regions of southern Appalachia and the Ozarks. Yet although there has always been great topographical, social, and cultural diversity within and between these two areas, the creators of such images freely combined the two regions into a single fantastical place. Because the physical locale of hillbilly portrayals is often unclear or unstated, in the minds of many, the image is not confined exclusively to these two regions, and the label has historically been applied to literary and cultural figures from upstate New York to western Washington State. Indeed, most cultural consumers, to the extent they considered the matter at all, conceived of “hillbillyland” as, at best, an amorphous area of the upper South and, more often, as anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and economy.²

What defines the hillbilly more than geography are cultural traits and values. In this regard, “hillbilly” is no different than dozens of similar labels and ideological and graphic constructs of poor and working-class southern whites coined by middle- and upper-class commentators, northern and southern. These derisive terms were intended to indicate a diet rooted in scarcity (“clay eater,” “corn-cracker,” “rabbit twister”), physical appearance and clothing that denoted hard and specifically working-class laboring conditions (“redneck,” “wool hat,” “lint head”), an animal-like existence on the economic and physical fringes of society (“brush ape,” “ridge runner,” “briar hoper”), ignorance and racism, and in all cases, economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment (best summed up by the label “poor white,” or more pointedly, “poor white trash”). Many of these derogatory labels were used interchangeably as putdowns of working-class southern whites, especially those who had migrated to southern and midwestern urban centers. But they were also reappropriated by some as badges of class and racial identity and pride. “Hillbilly,” “redneck,” “cracker,” and recently even “poor white trash” have all been embraced to mark an “oppositional culture” against a hegemonic middle-class culture and the relative gain in status of African Americans and

other minority social groups. Nor are the humorous elements of the word and image “hillbilly” unique; all these labels (even one as crude as “poor white trash”) historically had ostensibly comical overtones, not only for middle- and upper-class whites in positions of authority but also, in a different context and with a different intent, for working-class whites.³

“Hillbilly” is the most long-lived of these rural working-class slurs and the one most widespread in popular culture. It was the only one of these terms adopted as a label for what would later be called country music; the only one used to denote a genre of cartoons and comic strips; the only one to appear in the title of a television series (one that also became one of the medium’s most popular and influential shows); and arguably the most prevalent of these terms in motion pictures. Its prominence partly stemmed from the fact that most Americans saw it as *primarily* a benignly humorous (if somewhat condescending) term and characterization. Even “redneck,” though increasingly used as a comical term beginning in the mid-1970s and moving more fully into that camp with the success of Jeff Foxworthy’s “You might be a redneck . . .” joke books and comedy routines, nonetheless continued to carry a connotation of virulent white racism to a far greater extent than did “hillbilly.” Yet, “hillbilly” could also evoke degradation, violence, animalism, and carnality, as well as more positive conceptions of romantic rurality, cultural and ethnic purity, pioneer heritage, and personal and communal independence and self-sufficiency. Indeed, I argue that through most of the twentieth century “hillbilly” remained the most semantically malleable of these labels and therefore the term that resonated most broadly with audiences both nationally and in the southern hill country.

The continuous popularity and ubiquity of the hillbilly portrait stems from the dualistic nature of this cultural conception: it includes both positive and negative features of the American past and present, and incorporates both “otherness” and self-identification. These dualisms allowed these images to gain popularity not only with a “mainstream” nationwide audience but also with many in southern mountain society who embraced the positive features of this identity while rejecting its negative aspects. On the one hand, “the hillbilly” personified characteristics associated with the nation’s founders and settlers, which many Americans saw as endangered by a modern, industrialized, and increasingly atomized society. Such elements included the pioneer spirit; strong family and kin networks ruled by benevolent patriarchs; a clear sense of gender roles; a closeness to nature and the land; authenticity and purity; rugged individualism and a powerful sense of self; and the “horse sense” of average people as opposed to scientific and bureaucratic ways of thinking.

On the other hand, each of these features could be defined by its nega-

tive flip side in order to evince the anachronistic incompatibility of such values to twentieth-century America. The pioneer spirit could also reflect social and economic backwardness; strong kin connections might mean inbreeding, domestic violence, and bloody feuds; rugged individualism could also be interpreted as stubbornness and an inability to adapt to changing conditions; closeness to nature could stand for primitiveness, savagery, and sexual promiscuity; and purity and common sense might actually indicate ignorance and a reliance on unscientific and dangerous childrearing, medical, dietary, and religious practices. Thus, “the hillbilly” served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the “mainstream,” or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society.

The hillbilly image’s duality grew out of and was inextricably linked to its white racial status. Much recent scholarship has correctly complicated notions of white racial identity and illuminated the historical construction and significance of “whiteness” in its American context. Historians and other scholars have explored the way various European ethnic groups used claims to whiteness to gain social and economic privilege and to define and disempower nonwhite racial “others.” They have also highlighted white fascination with African-American culture and the interconnectivity of “black” and “white” racial and cultural categories. Yet these authors have focused less on the contested nature of white identity itself. The evolution of “the hillbilly” offers a fascinating and revealing insight into the internal conceptual divisions within the broad category of “white America.” Despite their poverty, ignorance, primitiveness, and isolation, “hillbillies” were “one hundred percent” Protestant Americans of supposedly pure Anglo-Saxon or at least Scotch-Irish lineage, which countless commentators of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, greatly concerned by waves of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, took pains to prove. Thus, middle-class white Americans could see these people as a fascinating and exotic “other” akin to Native Americans or Blacks, while at the same time sympathize with them as poorer and less modern versions of themselves.⁴

This status of the “white other” generated concern and interest from religious, social, and political reformers throughout the twentieth century. To the mountain folk’s would-be redeemers of the Progressive Era, their “hard shell” Protestantism and pioneer ancestry were both a ready explanation for their supposed primitiveness and a potential salvation for a nation threatened by non-Protestant invasions as well as the enervating forces of mass industrialization and bureaucracy. Similarly, midcentury critics and defenders of the

southern mountain people saw them respectively (and at times simultaneously) as the vestiges of a dangerously atavistic culture or as the guardians of a rugged individualism and traditional ways of life. Their advocates of different decades consistently argued that these latter qualities were desperately needed as an antidote to the ills of modern America, whether the conformist tendencies of the 1920s, the economic crisis of the 1930s, or the mindless consumerism of the post-World War II “affluent society.” During the War on Poverty of the 1960s, images of impoverished and exploited white Appalachians also provided “cover” for liberal politicians promoting government aid programs primarily designed to benefit urban nonwhites.

The hillbilly’s whiteness, however nondefinitive, was also central to its longevity in popular media, for it allowed the image to serve as a seemingly apolitical site for often highly charged political struggles over the definition of race, class, gender norms and roles, as well as the nature of mass culture. Because producers could portray images of poverty, ignorance, and backwardness without raising cries of bigotry and racism from civil rights advocates and the black and minority communities, the crude and often negative hillbilly stereotype continued long after cultural producers had abandoned previously accepted yet equally offensive and racist stereotypes. Similarly, images of hillbilly families and kin networks could be used both to challenge supposed norms of male breadwinners and submissive female domesticity and to uphold these “traditional” gender roles by negative example. For critics of mass culture who saw it as a corrosive force that pandered to the lowest common denominator and undermined “legitimate” art, the hillbilly was the perfect symbol of worthless “kitsch.” While at times condemning the crudely stereotyped nature of hillbilly portraits in country music, comic strips, film, and television, these critics also denounced the consumers of such images as mindless rubes and interpreted the huge audiences some of these characterizations garnered as conclusive proof of the mass media’s inherent baseness and national cultural decline. Regardless, millions of viewers and listeners embraced the image and conception of the hillbilly because it allowed them to come to terms with the ambiguities in their own lives in a time of rapid and often disorienting change. Thus, for over a century, the hillbilly’s ambiguous signification allowed it to resonate in strikingly distinct ways with reformers, cultural creators, disseminators, critics, and popular audiences both within the southern mountain region and the nation as a whole.⁵

Each chapter of this book centers on the construction of “the hillbilly” in a particular (usually nonprint) medium and in separate but overlapping time periods and shows how each cultural format—shaped by institutional constraints, the personal attitudes of producers and creators, and popular expectations—transformed its identity and meaning.⁶ Illuminating the multi-

faceted and contested nature of the shape-shifting, historicized “hillbilly” and its inextricable linkages to large-scale historical processes and events, I strive to do justice to sociologist Richard Dyer’s recognition of the “complexity of representation” with its “unequal but not monolithic relations of production and reception . . . [and] its tense and unfinished, unfinishable relation to the reality to which it refers and which it affects.”⁷

Chapter 1 traces the pre-twentieth-century literary and visual antecedents of the hillbilly representation in America through the separate but overlapping traditions of the New England rustic yokel, the poor white of the southern backcountry, and the mythic frontiersman of Appalachia and Arkansas. Although authors and social commentators used the conception of the mythic mountaineer in varying ways, in all cases, they ignored the reality of late-nineteenth-century economic and social upheaval in the region and instead defined the hill folk as a people forever trapped in an unceasing past. Chapter 2 follows the evolution of the word and the image of “hillbilly” from its first appearance in print in 1900 to the end of World War I, concentrating in particular on jokebooks and the new mass medium of motion pictures. Though the meaning of the hillbilly began to take on more explicitly comical overtones by the mid-1910s, “hillbilly” remained a relatively uncommon and thoroughly ambiguous label throughout this era.

The next three chapters center on the construction of the image in different media during the Depression years of the 1930s—the hillbilly’s cultural epicenter—and its aftermath. Chapter 3 examines the central role of “hillbilly” in commercially recorded rural white music from its origins in the early 1920s through World War II. Both a fabrication of music industry producers and promoters and an outgrowth of a tradition of farcical performances by folk musicians, the “hillbilly” label was ambivalently accepted by musicians and fans alike as long as the image evoked a nostalgic sense of a mythic mountaineer. By the late 1930s, however, the growing power of a derisive hillbilly stereotype led musicians and the burgeoning country music industry to gradually abandon the image and label for the more unambiguously positive cowboy identity and “country” label. Nonetheless, as “hillbilly” and string-band music became interwoven in the popular imagination, its meaning shifted from one denoting only threat and violence to one that primarily signified low humor and carefree frivolity. Chapter 4 analyzes the appearance in 1934 of three cartoon characterizations that would shape the graphic image of the hillbilly for decades to come: Paul Webb’s *The Mountain Boys* cartoon in *Esquire* magazine, Billy DeBeck’s character “Snuffy Smith” in his *Barney Google* comic strip, and Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner*. Emerging in the depths of the Great Depression, this burst of hillbilly imagery reflected not only public fears of economic collapse and social disintegration but also the sudden

popular fascination with all aspects of mountain ways of life and the increasing importance of the entertainment industry. By crystallizing long-developing conceptions of mountaineer backwardness and social degeneracy and presenting a more sanguine vision of the durability of the American people and spirit, these images mirrored the complicated mix of emotions and attitudes of Depression-era audiences. Chapter 5 focuses on the depiction of the hillbilly in motion pictures, the dominant media of the midcentury, from 1920s silent films through the postwar *Ma and Pa Kettle* series. Strongly influenced by other media portrayals, including Broadway plays, Webb's cartoons, and country music and vaudeville performers, film presentations of mountain folk followed the same trajectory as other media, moving from a near-exclusive focus on violence and social threat to a growing emphasis on farcical comedy. With the advent of an era of postwar prosperity, the hillbilly image lived on only in the domesticated version the Kettles embodied and on the fringes of the film industry. Yet, later films would show that early-twentieth-century conceptions of mountain folk as depraved savages remained just under the surface of this supposedly light-hearted fare.

My last chapters examine the postwar hillbilly and its uses and meanings, paying particular attention to the early 1960s, when the mountaineer, largely absent from public consciousness for nearly two decades, reemerged on the national stage. Chapter 6 considers television programs of the 1950s and 1960s (particularly *The Real McCoys*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and the phenomenally successful *The Beverly Hillbillies*) that featured hillbilly characters and settings. Generally dismissed as crude entertainment aimed at rural and small town audiences, these shows reflected social concerns about the massive postwar migration of Appalachian mountain folk to Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic industrial cities, as well as the renewed attention paid to impoverished and isolated white mountain folk living in the midst of "the affluent society." By presenting hill people as colorful inheritors of folk traditions or as safely domesticated comic buffoons, who remained morally upright despite the venality that surrounded them, these programs helped alleviate public concerns about economic and social inequality by both minimizing the plight of the people of the southern mountains and portraying their poverty as simply another aspect of their folk culture. The epilogue examines the continuing importance of the hillbilly conception in the American imagination, ranging from the enormous influence of the book and film *Deliverance* (1972) and its aftermath to the diverse permutations of the hillbilly in cyberspace. By the late twentieth century, the image's former prominence had indisputably waned, a result of the steady decline of a rural populace that had historically represented both threatening and foolish backwardness to the urban public, the growing cultural and political influence of southern mountaineers both within and out-

side the mountain region, and the increasing unacceptability of broadly defined racial and ethnic stereotypes. Nonetheless, such diverse examples as the Hillbilly Days festival in Pikeville, Kentucky, contemporary country musicians who proudly call themselves and their music “hillbilly,” caricatures of President Bill Clinton, and various permutations of “the hillbilly” on the Internet all suggest that the term and image still resonated as an ambiguous marker of both social derision and regional and personal pride.

Finally, I close with a postscript on the remarkable plan to resurrect *The Beverly Hillbillies* as a “reality” show and the reaction to these plans by people in and beyond the southern mountains. Whether it materializes or not, such programming proves yet again that over a century after its first appearance in print, “hillbilly” continues to serve as a mythic cultural space through which Americans struggle to define themselves and their heritage.