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**The Mountains at the End of the World:  
Subcultural Appropriations of Appalachia and the Hillbilly Image, 1990-2010**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Vita</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
History of Hillbilly as Generation X Punk “Alternative” .....	17
An Explanation of Terms: Generation X, Punk, and Appalachia/n.....	22
<b>Chapter 1—Jesco White and the Hillbilly Punk Grotesque</b> .....	<b>32</b>
Anarchy in the Boone County: <i>Dancing Outlaw</i> .....	33
Mainstream Grotesque: <i>Jesco Goes to Hollywood</i> .....	52
Perfecting the Punk Jesco in the Appalachian Art House: <i>White Lightnin’</i> .....	59
False Bill of Sale: <i>The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia</i> .....	71
<b>Chapter 2—Mountain Terror: Pinckney Benedict’s <i>Dogs of God</i></b> .....	<b>75</b>
Vietnam in the Alleghenies.....	79
Wild Boar Uprising and Deep Green Retribution.....	82
<i>Dogs of God</i> as Transethnic Solidarity Literature .....	102
<b>Chapter 3—<i>The Confederate Mack</i> and Raven Mack’s Greater Appalachia</b> .....	<b>117</b>
<i>The Confederate Mack</i> Zine and Predecessors, 1995-2001 .....	120
<i>The Confederate Mack</i> Website, 2001-2003 .....	131
Return to Roots: <i>One Thousand Feathers</i> , 2012- .....	133
“Raven Mack”: An Explication and an Assessment.....	135
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>139</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>145</b>

### List of Figures

- Fig. 1. Entering Boone County, West Virginia.
- Fig. 2. Jesco and Norma Jean’s trailer in *Dancing Outlaw*, between road and wilderness.
- Fig. 3. Babs’s trailer in *Pink Flamingos*, the threat of backwoods anarchy.
- Fig. 4. Pantomime as restrained threat in *Blue Velvet*—Ben sings “In Dreams.”
- Fig. 5. Elvis as control and salvation in *The Dancing Outlaw*.
- Fig. 6. Troubled bridge over troubled waters—Jesco’s *The Dancing Outlaw* introduction.
- Fig. 7. Last biker, last hillbilly, last human—Jesco’s t-shirt in *The Dancing Outlaw*.
- Fig. 8. Just another hillbilly in L.A.—Jesco and the Walk of Fame in *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*.
- Fig. 9. Charles Manson in court (A.P./Wally Fong)
- Fig. 10. Jesco and “friend” at the Pacific—*Jesco Goes to Hollywood*.
- Fig. 11. Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) at the denouement of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*
- Fig. 12. Dominic Murphy's Jesco (Edward Hogg) in *White Lightnin’*—part GG Allin, part Charles Manson, part *Apocalypse Now!*
- Fig. 13. Jimmy Valiant and the cover of *The Confederate Mack* number one.
- Fig. 14. “14 Things that Killed the Good Ole Boy” as originally published on *The Confederate Mack* website.
- Fig. 15. *The Confederate Mack* website logo

## Abstract

THE MOUNTAINS AT THE END OF THE WORLD:  
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Director: Dr. David Golumbia, Associate Professor, Department of English

There is an aversion within the field of Appalachian Studies to addressing the cultural formulations of the Appalachian/hillbilly/mountaineer as an icon of aggressive resistance. The aversion is understandable, as for far too long images of the irrationally and savagely violent mountaineer were integral to the most gross popular culture stereotypes of Appalachia. Media consumers often take pleasure or comfort in these images, which usually occur in a reactionary context with the hillbilly as either a type of nationally necessary savage OR as an unregenerate barbarian against whom a national civilization will triumph and benefit by the struggle.

I bookend my study with two artifacts of Appalachian representation, linked in specific subject matter, but separated by twenty years. The 1991 West Virginia Public Television-produced documentary film *The Dancing Outlaw* quickly became an underground cult classic—an object of both absurdist delight and cultural identification within the punk subculture, particularly among those with both a punk sensibility and personal connections to the Appalachian region (birth, upbringing, residency, ancestry). In 2009, MTV and the resources of its wildly popular *Jackass* franchise revisited the locale and family featured in this earlier

documentary and produced the sophisticated and polished film *The Wild, Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. The core purpose of this project, however, is to examine why Appalachia and/or the hillbilly, as constructed within and across these subcultures, possessed such appeal during this historical moment. My hypothesis is that such appeal lies primarily (but not exclusively) in the negative characteristics of the region and its inhabitants that are represented throughout a variety of subcultural texts: documentary film, art house cinema, niche regional literature, and independent zine publishing and early blogging. For both those identifying themselves as Appalachians/hillbillies (or some related variation thereof) and those “playing” as Appalachians/hillbillies, these images become statements of resistance and survival to challenge the national mass culture and the political ideologies supporting it.

### Vita

Paul L. Robertson was born February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975 in Roanoke, Virginia. He spent his childhood and early adulthood in the Blue Ridge mountain town of Hardy, Virginia. He earned his General Education Diploma (GED) in 1995 and then attended Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke. After a year of coursework, he transferred to Virginia Commonwealth University in 1997. He earned a B.A. in English, with a minor in History, in May of 2000. After working for the VCU Training and Technical Assistance Center for two years, he entered the Appalachian Studies MA program at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. His capstone project involved an internship in the south Wales village of Ystradgynlais. In Fall of 2004 he began part-time work towards the MA in English at the same institution, receiving the degree in December 2010. From 2004-2010, he held a variety of cultural heritage archive and special collections positions, while also teaching Appalachian Studies courses at Appalachian State. From 2010-2012, he was employed by the Carolina Digital Library and Archives at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He began the Media, Art, and Text (MATX) doctoral program at VCU in 2012. While pursuing this degree, he has worked in Special Collections and Archives at James Branch Cabell Library and taught numerous Appalachian and Southern-Literature courses in the Department of English.

## Introduction

*“Subcultures are therefore expressive forms but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives” –Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979)*

The informants and texts in this study do not want the “rural splendor” of Appalachia that provides a comforting and simultaneously reinforcing image for contemporary middle class white America (Satterwhite 27). Instead, the attraction and deployment of their chosen Appalachian images reflects a punk desire for the gothic and the grotesque, the brutalized and the dismissed. Well-tended pastoral environments or “wilderness,” cultivated/mediated under Park Service management, invite outside capital and affluent interest in both recreation and relocation; they are rendered “safe” for mainstream America. Decried as stereotypically denigrating in an expanse of Appalachian Studies scholarship, the vision of Appalachia sought by this oppositional subculture draws from a visual and literary lexicon of media exploitation that associates the Southern mountains with horror and trauma—the persistent popular culture notion of the region and its people as an unreasoning spectrum of violence. Thus, for subcultural media creators and media consumers, long-standing mass media associations of Appalachia with ungovernability (both state and corporate) and outright social anarchy offer a seductive imaginative palette. An Appalachian penchant for destruction, as a place where modern imperatives go to die, makes the region an ideal avatar for survival and resistance in late-capitalism. Appalachia may not emerge from the hills to destroy the broader national society, but that society is righteously destroyed or irreparably hybridized when it intrudes into the mountains.

In her comprehensive study of Appalachian-themed literary and mass market fiction, *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878*, Emily Satterwhite

discusses at length the longing of cosmopolitan professional white America for a small town, antiquated hearth region that can be accessed both in the imagination and through genealogical claim (1-2). Central to these consumers' regional fetishization is the certainty of "Appalachia as an authentic place" (Satterwhite 5). The texts under consideration in the this project posit a similar longing for Appalachia "as a means to criticize 'business as usual' in modern industrial or postmodern postindustrial U.S. society," but they do so by emphatically positing the region as a demesne of liberating anarchy, unorganized and inarticulate resistance to the dictates of both modern capitalism and the modern state (Satterwhite 2). But these "last free people" (as Hank Williams III dubs them in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*) by dense entwinement of necessity, choice, and willfulness establish that resistance on the grotesque, the absurd, the violent, and the perverse. In this oppositional subculture construction of Appalachia, the region and its people can easily dispense with the constraining proprieties of ordered elite and bourgeois social organization because they were never allowed to participate as potential equals in that system from the beginning. Albert Goldman describes mid-twentieth-century white American fears of a nebulous African American culture in terms that are equally applicable to Appalachian images, an anxiety at "an anachronistic underworld of ruthlessly appetitive and amoral beings who achieved heroic intensities through the violence of their rebellion against the middle class norms" (qtd. in Hebdige 149-50). Leslie Haynesworth further explains why a marginal identification like "Appalachia" holds an appeal to contemporary punk subculture:

Claiming alienation and anomie as its defining characteristics, Generation X culture explicitly locates itself outside the mainstream of American culture. Gen Xers define themselves largely through their rejection of dominant American

values, and typically fashion their identities through the *practices and iconographies* of various ‘oppositional’ subcultures. . . . (41)

Author Pinckney Benedict expresses such direct sentiments in justifying the threatening landscape and detailed violence of his 1994 novel *Dogs of God*. Although born into a family of regional economic and political elites, Benedict identifies with the Appalachian proletariat he purports to depict, declaring that he “may have a vested interest in keeping the tourists out” (“Pinckney”). The battle cry for these forms of regionally or ethnically-associated resistance could be reduced to a bumper sticker—essentially, “Keep Appalachia(ns) Scary.”

If Satterwhite’s *Dear Appalachia* seeks to examine a “sweet land that never was,” and the appeal of that myth for contemporary American literary consumers seeking a domesticated, anthropological preserve-quality Appalachia, then the study that follows argues that these more recent oppositional subcultural uses of the region *do* at least have a more tangible grounding in historical and current sociological realities: capital versus labor in early-twentieth-century mine wars, illegal liquor and drug-trades, general economic depression, environmental devastation, and omni-directional individual and collective violence (177). Although (arguably) couched in sensationalized and exploitative terms demanded by modern media creation, there is far more documentary evidence for these regionally-oriented media manifestations than of the near-fantastical, idyllic image sought by middle-class sub/urban white America. In essence, these subcultural appropriations of the region and its people are closer to *a* truth, if not *the* truth. Reams of historical, sociological, and anthropological research emphasize the mountains of the Southern U.S. as a place of violent economic conflict between an Other-coded population and a hegemonic interest, such as the works of sociologist Wilma Dunaway, anthropologist Helen Lewis, historian John Alexander Williams, and literary scholar Rodger Cunningham (to provide

a very limited sampling). The pastoral images of Satterwhite's study are depicted as either (willfully) oblivious to or *in spite of* the violent micro and macro conflicts that would more accurately characterize the region in the past, present, and (likely) future.

Writers and filmmakers and other media creators co-opting the concept of Appalachia for subcultural purposes want it to remain a problem region in relation to the broader U.S., and they extol Appalachians/hillbillies for persisting as “a volatile insurgent force within North American society to the present day” (Woodard 101). From their perspective, the alleged sociological pathologies of the region, for all the damage done to both individuals and communities, serve as defensive ramparts against more direct and straightforward (more obvious) exploitation by outsiders, and thus make for potent symbols against the perceived sins of contemporary mainstream American life. However, these broader national economic and social imperatives have long been present in the region; Appalachia is very much a part of a globalized capitalist system and the popular culture generation industry that supports it.<sup>1</sup> These homogenizing contemporary realities frequently go unseen or unacknowledged by Appalachian residents and by Appalachian-fetishizing subculturalists alike.

In addressing the political problematics of an idealized-imaginary Appalachia, one has to acknowledge the complicated historical individuals with regional associations who appear frequently in Appalachian/hillbilly subcultural works—perhaps the most salient examples for texts in this study being cult-leader and multiple murderer Charles Manson and global conspiracy/militia movement icon William Cooper. Although not represented in the works studied here, a number of other historically, politically, and socially controversial personalities have southern Appalachian (or southern mountain) associations: pro-Confederate Civil War

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<sup>1</sup> See Dunaway's *The First American Frontier* and J.W. Williamson's *Hillbillyland* for details of a history of Appalachian economic globalization and Appalachian mainstream media representation, respectively.

guerilla and post-war criminal Jesse James, Olympic Park bomber Eric Rudolph, and Nazi hacker Andrew Auernheimer [weev]. Frequently, the appeal of sheer anti-authoritarian outlawry, irrespective of political ideology, overrides all other concerns in the appeal of these personalities. Essentially, it becomes a fetishization of perceived opposition-for-opposition's sake. And while these figures possess an antiauthoritarian cachet on a national level, for those already dedicated to an image of oppositional Appalachia an individual's either claimed or attributed regional connections explain and enhance their appeal—the frequent appearance of Charles Manson's words and images in the texts of this study are firmly rooted in a perception of him as the most extreme Appalachian anti-authoritarian figure. In his *The Confederate Mack* zine and website of the same name, Raven Mack frequently includes both Manson iconography and discourse. Jesco White of *The Dancing Outlaw* and subsequent films identifies, articulately if uncritically, with Manson, tattooing the cult-leader's image onto his back and conflating their respective personalities. Although not a directly assessed text of this study, the Southern/hillbilly Sludge Metal-genre band Sourvein also uses Manson-related imagery (Sharon Tate) for t-shirt art.

When attempting to understand the subcultural appeal of Appalachia, the Generation X punk-industrial-goth craving for apocalyptic anarchy explains much. Although there were underdeveloped rumblings of this throughout the 1980s—punk performer GG Allin's association with Southern tropes, for one—the study that follows argues that the 1991 short documentary film *The Dancing Outlaw* marks a clear discovery<sup>2</sup> and emphasizes Appalachia's connection with a longed-for societal decay. This desire for an ecology of collapse was channeled into two

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<sup>2</sup> “Discovery” is a loaded term in regards to concepts of the Appalachian region and its creation/co-option by a larger national culture—see Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind* for an exhaustive history of this process. The region is created/discovered/recognized repeatedly whenever it meets a discursive need for the larger national culture. The film *Dancing Outlaw* was technically created and aired as an episode of the West Virginia Public Television series *Different Drummer* (1989-91). Since the episode has become a media artifact separate from the series, it is treated in this work as a stand-alone film. Filmmaker Jacob Young himself promotes *Dancing Outlaw* as a discrete film.

distinct and seemingly irreconcilable branches. First there is the dystopian cyberpunk ethos represented by *Blade Runner* (1982) and its media derivatives like the industrial music genre that posits a techno-Darwinian future played out exclusively in a hyper-urban setting. Secondly, there is the image of a wasteland terror ethos born more from *The Road Warrior* (1981) concept of technologically-degraded junkyard hinterlands—wherein the urban has crumbled and the template for survival, such as there is one, owes more to Calvinistic fatalism than the agency allowed by Darwinism.

The actual figures of this Appalachian subcultural moment/movement—Raven Macks, Hank Williams III, Mamie Whites—are strikingly resistant to co-option by mass-media concerns that recognize the appeal of rebellious Appalachia as a cultural commodity. When opportunities to engage with and economically profit from a national popular culture come knocking, these figures either stubbornly reject the offer in direct terms (Mack), prove so unmanageable by would-be production handlers (Jesco and the other members of the White family), or some combination of the two (Williams).<sup>3</sup> Such recalcitrance forces mass media—often through the genre of reality television, niche printing houses, and small supposedly independent record labels—to develop simulacra of these individuals. The result is counterfeit goods, the occasional “real” hillbilly willing to pantomime authentic misery and rage for an expanding audience. In the later years covered by this study, a number of gap-bridgers emerge, media images and products that do not quite subsume the concept of Appalachia in mainstream, socially conservative-leaning dictates like Satterwhite’s popular fiction. They instead posit it as an acceptable liberal *alternative*—as in, resistance of “expressive essence” to “commodification

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<sup>3</sup> While Hank Williams III is not an explicit focus of this study, his role as the White’s interlocutor in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* places him in the picture. As the grandson of American music icon Hank Williams, Hank III attempted in his early career to conform to mainstream country music; after a few recordings in this genre, he has turned exclusively to hard edged country and punk.

and the concomitant risk of ‘selling out’” to the mainstream—appropriately shorn of the uglier aspects inherent in the extreme subcultural figures discussed here (Aaron Fox 165).<sup>4</sup> Examples of this more genteel, socially low-stakes co-option include the “Americana” or “Alt-Country” music genres—performers like Gillian Welch, Jason Isbell, and Bad Livers. Americana and Alt-Country do not give themselves over to the complete nihilistic degeneracy and excessive violence of other Appalachian-referential music genres like Sludge Metal, though it still may fall short of commercial success.<sup>5</sup> Efforts like the Adult Swim/Cartoon Network television series *Squidbillies* (2005-present) take the sting out of a subcultural Appalachian critique by using grotesque physical humor, hyperbole, unsubtle situational absurdities, and the fantastical potentialities of the animation medium. Indeed, there may be a hierarchy at play here. On a foundational level, there is a hardcore Appalachian subculture that emerges from and continues more-or-less outside the mainstream: the Whites, Mack, Benedict, the Sludge Metal music genre. These figures and their texts may, on occasion, flirt with some degree of material success and broader acknowledgement, but generally remain obscure. Disaffected youth with regional/familial connections to Appalachia, the South, or a generalized rural working class begin to take pride in their own socio-cultural currency as abused, downtrodden, civilizational outsiders, becoming the consumers, emulators, and maintainers of the subculture’s media avatars. This role has precedence, however briefly, in a more militant manifestation of the 1960s/70s countercultural movement: the Young Patriots, a grassroots/street-level organization dedicated to defending and empowering impoverished Southern/Appalachian economic migrants

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay on fetishized early-twenty-first century Americana music “‘Alternative’ to What?”, Aaron Fox notes the difficulty in adequately defining what we mean by “alternative” as a subcultural designator: “Its attachment to existing already dense and replete cultural tropes (like ‘music,’ ‘lifestyle,’ and ‘medicine’) multiplies the difficulties—and the futility—of specifying the content of an alternative essence or of any particular field of alternative practice” (165).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that violence is completely absent from the Alt-Country/Americana genre. However, when it does occur, it is very limited in scope (the personal) and often placed in a non-specific far-past construct.

to Chicago, emulated the Black Panther model (and formally allied themselves with both the Panthers and the Latinx-oriented Young Lords) (Sonnie 67). Although Young Patriots members may have consciously resorted to some stereotypical regional-class symbology—the Confederate battle flag, ripped jean jackets, “greaser” hairstyles—as both an indicator of group solidarity and as a militant threat to established economic power structure, their presentation was undoubtedly rooted in a recognition that adequate signifiers of their identity were already in place or available.<sup>6</sup>

A second tier of relative nicety, literate and clever, yet still supposedly unflinching in the use of regional representation, attempts to encompass a “full” vision of the region with a niche, but recognizable, market: Americana musicians like Gillian Welch and Drive-By Truckers, *Squidbillies*, films like *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), and the literary works of Appalachian-associated poets and novelists like Ron Rash and Charles Frazier. In this category we clearly see two avenues for the consumption and emulation of Appalachia: irony and sincerity. Many of these creators engage in a form of winking hillbilly-pantomime of excess, what Aaron A. Fox describes eloquently as a “management of irony” with “forms of appropriation and presentation suggestive of...blackface minstrelsy” and a “theater of poverty” (182-83).<sup>7</sup> When combined with Satterwhite’s taxonomy, we have a complicated matrix of cultural consumption and appropriation. There is a distinction to be made—when the disaffected suburban white kid dons the trappings of African American-born hip-hop, only the most culturally insensitive and deluded of individuals would think that this makes her/him “black.” Yet in an ironical benefit of “whiteness,” white skin allows the wearer to “play” at crossing class

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<sup>6</sup> See Sonnie and Tracy’s *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most salient example of this problem is the rockabilly band Southern Culture on the Skids—renowned for dressing in “white trash” drag and flinging fried chicken and other low-class Southern/Appalachian-foodstuffs into audiences of affluent college students.

in a *downward* direction, just as it can allow, in a racist-capitalist society for an individual to materially and socially cross class in an *upward* direction. If the disaffected suburban white youth cannot, reasonably, claim to be African American as a badge of his frustration with middle class society, he can at least try at (and possibly succeed at) claiming a degree of Appalachian-ness to express that disaffection. He cannot discomfit “the Man” by pretending to be African American (which results in a farce in the best circumstances) but he can do so by claiming to be an uncouth rustic living by a code that disavows modernity because he could conceivably be one.<sup>8</sup>

Towards the conclusion of and immediately after the period this study explores, there emerges a reductive, narratively-direct, politically reactionary, financially lucrative, popular culture co-option of Appalachian rebellion: reality television projects like *Buckwild* (2013), *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-17), and *Duck Dynasty* (2012-17), television dramas like *Justified* (2010-15), and the music genre of country rap/hick-hop. The figures in these examples manage to be clean-cut by grooming standards (*Buckwild*, *Justified*), very well-appointed in regards to material possessions (*Buckwild*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Justified*), devoid of the threatening (violent) excess so common to the subcultural hillbilly (*Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*), and/or so obviously divorced from the “real” Appalachia or the “real” white southern underclass (all of them, but particularly *Justified*). Indeed, *Duck Dynasty* and country rap become sites of extreme right political and ideological rhetoric, with some hodgepodge of homophobic, anti-immigrant, misogynistic, anti-cosmopolitan, hyper-capitalistic, and globally imperialistic tropes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There is an intersection with “biker culture” here; the outlaw biker is *almost* as big a boogeyman to middle class white respectability as the “urban” Black. Perhaps significantly, there is a noticeable overlap between the constructed physiognomy and material attire of the hillbilly and the constructed physiognomy and material attire of the outlaw biker. In some instances, they are interchangeable figures.

<sup>9</sup> For possibly the densest (and most insufferable) example, see Colt Ford’s 2012 track “Answer to No One” and the associated music video.

While Pinckney Benedict's novel *Dogs of God* was published by the Nan A. Talese imprint of Doubleday and his subsequent short fiction by a prolific regional press, he comes nowhere near the readership and popular acclaim of perhaps the most commercially and critically successful Appalachian-affiliated contemporary writer, Ron Rash.<sup>10</sup> Rash's 2008 bestselling novel *Serena* resulted in a big-budget 2014 Hollywood film adaptation, starring A-list actors Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper.<sup>11</sup> The novel presents a fairly straightforward narrative of early-twentieth-century environmental devastation (logging) in the Southern mountains and it makes a resonant critique of ecological destruction and labor exploitation born of rampant Gilded Age capitalism. But there is no overt rebellion, no anarchic defiance against these dictates. Yet Rash's most subculturally "oppositional" novel *The World Made Straight*, which includes Benedict's themes of the contemporary Appalachian drug-trade, hyper-violence, and historic memory as a surrealist narrative device, received nowhere near the critical and financial acclaim of *Serena*.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps significantly, *The World Made Straight* also resulted in a 2015 screen adaptation by an independent production company, starring Alt-Country figurehead Steve Earle. Yet the film still manages to be a straightforward depiction of a young man and his community beset by serious but still easily recognizable social issues. Rash's fiction and the films it inspires are, from the perspective of those desiring a subcultural Appalachia, *conventional*—fit for domesticated consumption.

Leslie Haynesworth, in her essay suggests 1994 as the year that punk supposedly completed its evolution into a wholly popular culture/mass media form (45-46). With it the

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<sup>10</sup> Though she is still actively writing, the success of Lee Smith (another example of market acclaim for an Appalachian writer) peaked decades earlier.

<sup>11</sup> The film was a financial and critical failure.

<sup>12</sup> There are numerous setting, plot, and characterization similarities between Benedict's *Dogs of God* and Rash's *The World Made Straight*, but with the former veering into surrealism, excess, and the absurd, and the latter remaining fixed in literary Realism and Naturalism.

traditional punk aesthetic and the traditional punk stylings, including the inherent cosmopolitan Anglo-British associations, attained a degree of social normalcy. This chronology conforms to the parameters of my thesis—the ascent of the subcultural/oppositional hillbilly icon in the early 1990s. If disaffected white American youth looked to construct a new punk subculture to replace the now-normalized old, if punk is all about “not giving a fuck” in the American social imagination, then who gives less of a fuck than the down-and-out Southern-Appalachian hillbilly? At least some punk bands in the mid-1990s claimed that punk was a blue-collar form, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary (Haynesworth 47). So perhaps we were witnessing an attempt to take the music back to its class-derived roots. And since region and class are often conflated in an American context, an admixture of the two becomes central to an emerging aesthetic. Indeed, in some instances certain artists attempted reclamation projects from both a punk subcultural angle and an ethno-regional angle—Hank Williams III, scion of country music’s foundational personality—artistically balanced and integrated the two separate genres: taking country back to its outlaw, outsider origins and doing likewise for punk/hardcore. He did significant work in destabilizing a distinction between regionally-coded working class aesthetics (hillbilly) and urban-coded punk/hardcore aesthetics previously conceived of as at odds with each other. Hank III emphasizes this simultaneous distinction and integration in the structure of his live performances: the first act as degenerate old-school country rebel Hank III; the second act as a rabid punk performer in the band Assjack.

A secondary question in this study concerns the sequence of subcultural allegiance and recombination. For an adherent of punk Appalachian style, which comes first: the appeal of normative punk (in its cosmopolitan and/or Anglophile trappings) or the appeal of Appalachia-as-rural-anarchy-resistance? Or can the two stylistic modes develop in tandem? For the cultural

producers in this study, the evidence does not suggest an easy answer. Jesco White seems willing to participate in whichever popular culture and/or subculture that comes calling, provided there is media exposure and possible monetization involved: from West Virginia Public Television, to the *Roseanne* show, to Hank Williams III, to MTV. Much of Mack's writing details his struggle with understanding his own cultural placement, at various times borrowing from Southern white working class rurality and hip-hop, hardcore punk, heavy metal subcultures. Indeed, Mack (perhaps like many) sought to deny his own cultural background by recourse to subculture(s), yet found himself essentially back where he began.<sup>13</sup> Owing to the complicating factors of class (upper) and education (Ivy League MFA), Benedict is even a more nebulous prospect in this regards—the body of his work and brief comments in interviews suggest that he never contemplated writing material that was not regionally-focused (Benedict Interview).

In *Dear Appalachia*, Satterwhite notes two categories of readers for whom Appalachian-themed neo-pastoral popular fiction holds appeal. First, there are Outsiders who see the exotic seductiveness for any number of reasons: critique of modern post-industrial life, paradisiacal wilderness beauty, rugged but polite individualism—the list goes on. Second there are Insiders, cultural consumers for whom all the forgoing characteristics hold appeal, with the added significance that they have some intimate connection to the imagined region themselves—often current or former residence in the area and/or genealogical connections to the region. These are useful distinctions and as applicable to the following study as they are to Satterwhite's work. But whereas Satterwhite's consumers might place a "Blue Ridge Parkway" window sticker on their late model sport utility vehicle, the nostalgic subculturalist referencing their perceived past or

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<sup>13</sup> Mack's conflict relates to Traci Carroll's observation of Generation X's frustration that "all the good history has already been taken"—the lament of white kids seeking a subculture and attempting to identify with Black and other racial/ethnic minority culture (203).

their present-future allegiance places a “tattooed white trash” bumper sticker alongside any number of punk/metal/anti-authority signifiers on their poorly maintained late model sedan.<sup>14</sup>

There are precursors, prophets of this articulated Appalachian subcultural affinity. Novelist and short story writer Harry Crews wallowed in Southern working-class white depravity with his work and his personal presentation—although he did receive critical and commercial acclaim during his lifetime. Dorothy Allison arguably reached her professional peak during the years of this study with her work positing lower class Appalachian/Southern origins as a theoretical site for sexual liberation and hegemonic resistance. Yet while also an influence and a reference to some Appalachian subculturalists, Allison received widespread literary recognition and lucrative benefits from her 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* and the subsequent film adaptation. Punk performer GG Allin, although born in the mountains of New Hampshire (“Appalachian” in geologically technical terms), embraced Southern white working class pantomime through his creative association with North Carolina punk band Antiseen, themselves adherents of “white trash” spectacle via Confederate iconography and professional wrestling references. Filmmaker John Waters celebrates middle class fears of “white trash” throughout his 1970s oeuvre, particularly in the films *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) and *Desperate Living* (1977). Yet his works of that time lacked an articulated Appalachian/Southern regional specificity.

The distinction, the demarcation, on which this study depends is some sense of an articulated Appalachian-ness on the part of the media creator—a hillbilly claim that occurs in the early 1990s, in the wake of *The Dancing Outlaw*. And that this need not be done through an actual anthropological stated association, such as “I am an Appalachian!”—indeed, such a

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<sup>14</sup> Hebdige notes a similar distinction in the representational longings of punks origins: “The safety pins and bin liners signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced and exaggerated or sympathetically assumed....” (115).

simplistically articulated claim is far more likely from one of Satterwhite's informants. Instead, White associates himself with "the mountains," Confederate iconography, and West Virginia.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in interviews Benedict's West Virginia origins are invariably mentioned and his work is almost exclusively regionally-set. Mack's Appalachian associations are more subtle and complex. In his zines, Appalachia is a laudable regional concept—an idealized place to live. Much more frequently Mack alludes to the "Southside" Virginia region associated with the geologic Piedmont. Yet in later years he bills himself (like a professional wrestler) as from/residing in "Greater Appalachia" and writes more about his paternal family connections to Grayson County, Virginia—an area often included in several definitions of the Appalachian region.<sup>16</sup>

One factor in the appeal of Appalachia as a concept to Generation X punk subculture sensibilities lies in a perceived regional association with both physically destructive nihilism and passive nihilism.<sup>17</sup> The "slacker" designator/subculture often synonymous with the named Generation X culture allegedly takes a passive form of cynicism and disdain, almost aristocratic in its detachment and simultaneous overt self-consciousness, "the allegations that this generation is lazy, dysfunctional and anti-intellectual" (Cohen 10). But there is also a craving for a destructive nihilism that can be both passive and active—perhaps what we might label political

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<sup>15</sup> West Virginia is unique as the only U.S. state in which the entirety is claimed by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). There are precious few state and regional definitions that do not correlate West Virginia with core Appalachia—geologically, historically, and culturally.

<sup>16</sup> Mack almost certainly acquired this terminology from Colin Woodard's 2011 book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, which posits the largest territorial definition of Appalachia of any study the author has yet seen.

<sup>17</sup> It is a persistent temptation to use "punk" and "Generation X" interchangeably—the notion that punk is somehow responsible for the discontent and rage at the heart of an overarching Generation X definition (Cohen 22). We have to work from the given that any conception of a "Generation X" (or the half-dozen other sobriquets assigned to the age-cohort) is an essentializing media construction, with only the most tenuous and contested of sociological underpinnings. What interests us here is that members of this generation have a conception of themselves as such and hew to both an overall generational ascription of traits, and the rhizomatic subcultures that depend on that base.

nihilism in its nineteenth-century Russian Nechayevian sense—that creates and/or awaits a tabula rasa situation for fulfillment. While the White family explicitly articulates no connection to this philosophical/ideological perspective, it appears frequently in Benedict’s work and discourse: the prominent Jeremiah 15:3 epigraph to *Dogs of God* and his contention that “Nothing will keep the [wild] hogs out. They will be the inheritors of the Earth” (Atwell).<sup>18</sup> Mack’s *The Confederate Mack* writings, often referencing millennialist-conspiracist rhetoric, overflow with desires for Apocalyptic-collapse and the attendant perseverance of a rural underclass in the face of such an event. When subscribing to such desires, the idea of a blasted Appalachia and the violent, savage, but also lazy, hillbilly figure has an appealing traction. Add to this one-hundred-plus year-old stereotypes of the Appalachian mountaineer as inherently fatalistic and often possessed of an overwhelming death drive, and theological commitment to the Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity, in which humanity is inherently base and dissolute, and one sees ready parallels to a constructed late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century nihilistic worldview.

Multiple problems results from subscribing to this oppositional Appalachian pessimism, and overtly politically discomfiting signs and symbols appear throughout. In the absence of articulated statements of resistance, what are we to assume when Mamie White’s bar, in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, prominently displays a “Friends of Coal” bumper sticker on the door? On one-level, community support for the mono-industry that employs (or rather, employed) numerous laborers is understandable, likely rooted in a signaling of working-class association and solidarity. However, both inside and outside the Appalachian-Allegheny coal belt, mining is unquestionably responsible for environmental degradation, public health

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<sup>18</sup> “I will appoint over them four kinds, says the Lord: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy.”

crises, and grotesque income inequalities—the very circumstances that directly affect the White family. With frequent appearances, to the point of becoming a commonplace, the Confederate battle flag appears throughout the White family documentary films and repeatedly in *The Confederate Mack* zine. Progressive-minded defenders of Appalachian cultural identity rail against such imagery in their contentions of a historically Unionist, anti-slavery region, even if historical revisionism calls that contention into question.<sup>19</sup> The same demographic, represented by regional studies scholars like Cratis D. Williams and regional fiction writers like Chris Offutt, will go as far to insist that Appalachia is definitively *not* a part of a historical-cultural South.<sup>20</sup> Yet the Confederate battle flag does have a (limited) history as a symbol of regionally-associated, Left-oriented militant resistance—the Young Patriots in 1960s Chicago “adopted the Confederate flag as a symbol of southern poor people’s revolt against the owning class” (Sonnie 75). We are left with the ground-level reality that regardless of academic pedantry, for a myriad of reasons, some benign, many unsavory, the Confederate battle flag was/is in widespread use as a signifier of (Southern) Appalachian identification. The question for this study is that if political articulation of these problematic images is not coming from the “texts” themselves, then how are the consumers using these symbols, and the texts that often reproduce them, to make a political or ideological statement that may run counter to the uses of those symbols by the reactionary right?

Countercultural progressives in the 1960s and 70s sought to build something with the concept of Appalachia—to draw from what they perceived as the region’s already established organic social cohesion. Often that project drew on Appalachian-related iconography, as with

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<sup>19</sup> Noe’s “‘Deadened Color and Colder Horror’” and Inscoc’s “The Racial ‘Innocence’ of Appalachia” are both excellent representations of these efforts.

<sup>20</sup> Both Williams and Offutt are Appalachian Kentuckians by birth and insist that the region is distinct from the Confederate South.

decidedly urban and northern-based folk musicians; occasionally it involved the geographic region itself, as with the back-to-the-land and/or commune movement. From the countercultural perspective, Appalachia was a ready-made and preserved (albeit under threat) folk culture right in mainstream America's economic and regional basement. The Generation X punk subculture of this study approaches Appalachia as a powerful symbol of not just perseverance (like the 1960s counterculturalists), but of active resistance; the region does not just survive, it destroys. Contemporary Appalachia, despite the discourse of social science, is not in need of improvement, especially as that improvement might come from mainstream America. From a downtrodden, nihilistic perspective, Appalachia is perfected in its squalor and detritus, in the "backwards" recalcitrance of its people—the "asceticism born of suffering" that punk valued from its inception (Hebdige 63). Appalachia will not pour down from the hills to wreck polite American WASP society, but it will outlast that society. And it will lay waste, sooner or later, to the tentacles of that society that dare attempt to penetrate the backwoods.

### **History of Hillbilly as Generation X Punk "Alternative"**

The Appalachian region and its inhabitants have been used as cultural touchstones since at least the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> They have been variously depicted in popular mass media as hopeless rustic buffoons, irredeemably deviant savages threatening white Anglo-Saxon civilization, and/or as the last, best hope of preserving pre-industrial white racial vitality and purity. Usually a chronologically swerving morass of all three and more. Since the image of Appalachia and the Appalachian became a distinct subject of scholarly inquiry in the mid twentieth century, most studies have focused on the region's symbolic relationship to the broader

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<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*.

popular U.S. national culture. A preoccupation with this perspective occurs with good cause, as the Appalachia/n image has a long history of mass-produced, heavily commoditized material goods: ceramic privy bric-a-brac, moonshine jug seasoning-shakers, novelty coonskin caps, and the like. The image also appears in a broad spectrum of popular media: novels both "literary" and "pulp," network television programming (sitcoms, documentaries), and film. This wealth of cultural production fed and continues to support a substantial body of scholarship concerned with the mass media Appalachian image. Canonical works like Cratis D. Williams' "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction" (literature) and J. W. Williamson's *Hillbillyland: What the Mountains Did to the Movies and What the Movies Did to the Mountains* (film), and more recent scholarship like Anthony Harkins' *Hillbilly: History of an American Icon* (mass media) and Emily Satterwhite's *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878* explore the popular culture uses (and abuses) of the region. A working knowledge of popular culture Appalachian figuration and appropriation is necessary for an understanding of the punk-oppositional appeal of the region, as "much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media" (Hebdige 85).

The 1960s witnessed the appropriation of Appalachian imagery by the countercultural movement. The Folk Revivalists sought out obscure regional musicians and attempted to emulate their material and performances. Political and social radicals of various Leftist orientations sought to plant the seeds of their movement in the Appalachian region—quite literally in the agricultural sense of the back-to-the-land movement and ideologically in the work of the Highlander Folk School and the VISTA program. As with the aforementioned popular cultural appropriations of Appalachia, these countercultural relationships with Appalachia were filled with an inconsistent mix of both respect and disdain. Referencing the manner in which

subcultures simultaneously build upon and reject their predecessors and rivals, this study must account for the 1960s counterculture contributions to images of Appalachia, as providing some of the ideological and representational foundations for the subcultural viewpoints at the center of an oppositional regional identification.

The one counterculture era work that most conforms to parameters of subcultural works in this study is Gurney Norman's serially-published 1971 novel, *Divine Rights Trip*. A product of the eastern Kentucky/southwest Virginia border region, Norman spent years immersed in the counterculture of 1960s California (not unlike the Appalachia-to-California journey of Charles Manson). With *Divine Right's Trip*, Norman attempts to reconcile what he perceives as two profoundly interconnected aspects of his identity and personal history—on the one hand, California counterculture hippie vagabond, on the other, eastern Kentucky hillbilly. Norman seems acutely aware of the seeming cultural disparity between these two images. Yet the novel posits that the two identities, while not seamless in the struggle for integration, flow naturally one into the other. In a conclusion worthy of a Shakespeare comedy, the novel ends with a marriage ceremony in which dozens of residents from each community—rural, coal-ravaged eastern Kentucky and cosmopolitan hippie Altamont-devastated California—join in celebration of their community similarities. The image is pleasing, if dubious. Yet it is one of, if not the, first fully articulated image of Appalachia as a potential site of American subcultural identity.

For the Generation X subculture, the 1990s was a decade of existential anxiety coupled with a yearning born of those fears—the potential for societal collapse was simultaneously dreaded and longed for. The inauguration of George H. W. Bush engendered a fixation with a “New World Order” and an “End of History” that seemed to confirm the fears of conspiracy-minded ideologues on both the extreme Left and the extreme Right. Some vaguely defined

exploitative, rabidly capitalistic, soullessly technocratic, global economic and political hegemony felt very close at hand—a functioning dystopia prophesied a decade earlier by the likes of Phillip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut. The counterbalance of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc was spent as a challenge to U.S. cultural-capital expansion. Despite the potential for economic boon, there remained a sense, probably a residual legacy of early 1980s Cold War annihilation anxieties, that civil, humanistic society could/would collapse at any moment—perhaps not in a vaporizing mushroom cloud of atomic annihilation, but in a simultaneous evolution-reversion to a digital technology infused neo-feudalism, peppered with incremental environmental ruin and complete devaluation of human dignity and possibly even human life. As elaborated by the simultaneous fantasy-nightmares of Cyberpunk cultural production (literature, film, music), the Earth of the very near future would be a contrast of overpopulated and technologically garish city-states, surrounded by detritus-covered hinterlands in which ensavaged humans or their mutated progeny scraped out a violent and clannish existence. In a combination of lived economic reality and cultural perception, the southern Appalachians had been in such a state since the dawn of the *twentieth* Century.

The hillbilly is an emblem of the brutalization, sometimes willful and self-inflicted, sometimes enacted on him by the agents of society at large, of the flesh. Greil Marcus, in seeking to understand punk culture, notes “a desire to be both polluted and polluting” to “not merely identify with death and disease” but “to be contagion” (82-83). Nominal Appalachian GG Allin made these sentiment the foundation of his performance persona. Professional wrestling of the late 1970s and throughout the 80s, a performative genre remediated by Antiseen (music) and Raven Mack (writing), revels in similar displays of mortification and visceral co-mingling. In an Appalachian context, such bodily violence often takes the form of a garish, lovingly cataloged

folklore. For instance, the uncle in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* details his extravagantly grotesque gunshot wounds. Benedict's *Dogs of God* protagonist Goody receives and visits merciless beatings in his profession as a bare-knuckle underground fighter. The Generation X punk subculture exults in a near-identical contempt for the body, a hatred of the corporeal form: mosh pits, scarification, body modifications as diverse as piercing and metal implants. Similarly, the hillbilly brutalizes and breaks himself, or offers up himself to be brutalized and broken by others, willfully and with disregard.

Part of my goal in this project is to posit why the existing representational constructions of Appalachians/hillbillies are well-positioned to appeal at this historical moment. I am interested in how, specifically, the hillbilly might fit into the kind of late twentieth-century societal and existential anxieties that appear in non-Appalachian works like Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* and the subsequent film adaptation, the off-shore "Spaghetti Westerns" of the 1960s and '70s, the *Mad Max/Road Warrior* film series of the 1980s, and the musical phenomenon of urban gangster rap in the 1990s. I seek to explain why the mountaineer becomes a prime candidate for an image of societal rebellion, the personification of a mythically idealized desire for resistance (violent if necessary) against a vaguely-defined authority.

Subcultural Appalachia is not clean, not pristine—dirty, wrecked, defiled, hoarded—punks want the blasted landscape, the threat of junked cars, trailers, mobile homes sinking back into the earth but, as Benedict in *Dogs of God* and Mack in *The Confederate Mack* speculate, it is not that Appalachia is being permanently defiled; instead these objects/intruders of industrialization are being claimed and modified on the terms of the regional landscape, re-configured to serve the region's ends; they have, in a word, "lost," washed up and futile in their efforts.

### **An Explanation of Terms: Generation X, Punk, and Appalachia/n**

This project uses three terms with complex, multitudinous meanings that vary across popular media and scholarly applications. The use of “Generation X” in this study draws from the parameters of Strauss-Howe generational theory, as described in their book *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584-2069*. In their formulation, “Generation X” (alternately labeled “Generation 13”) consists of Americans born between 1961 and 1981, essentially the children of the Baby Boom generation (another well-known, but imprecisely defined demarcation). From a social sciences perspective, Strauss-Howe is very problematic as an example of pseudo-Sociology. It does not account for significant factors within generational spans, for example: race, class, and ethnic-origin. But as the concern of this work is cultural perceptions and cultural constructs, Strauss-Howe’s attributes conform to the popular *image* of Generation X—alienation, doubt, and mistrustfulness characteristic of an archetypal “nomad” in search of an ideological home and a sense of domestic security.<sup>22</sup> For our purposes, the most salient Strauss-Howe Generation X detail is that the generation “comes of age”—enters their mid-20s adulthood—at some point within the time-frame (1990-2010) of this study.

Much scholarly and popular culture writing about Generation X tends to view the designator as not a social science demarcation, but a subcultural designation in and of itself. In a similar way, *Appalachia* is a cultural concept versus a social reality. Jason Cohen, Michael Krugman, and Evan Dorkin’s *Generation Ecch!*, published in 1994 and therefore well within the confines of this study, is representative of a popular culture attempt to profit from subcultural understanding. This self-referentially farcical book describes Generation X as “the horrifying

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<sup>22</sup> That the theory even suggests archetypes, which places it in the problematic realms of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell.

afterbirth of the baby boom” and “a bunch of rebellious losers” bent on “ascribing significance to meaningless” (Cohen 9, 10, 10-11). On the scholarly front, the 2003 anthology *Genxegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (sub)culture* attempts to define the subculture from multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives. Essays in the volume seem to align, broadly, with Strauss-Howe’s “nomad” designator and the restless individual and societal dissatisfaction the image evokes, that Generation X subcultural identification is born in part from “the increasing prevalence of part-time, temporary work [that] creates a feeling of anonymity and infinite replaceability in the labor market” and a simultaneous “anger without and articulated ideology” (Carroll 203, Nehring 71).

For the purposes of this work, Generation X and punk are not synonymous, though mass media may well conflate the two, or at least posit punk as a subdivision of Generation X, or vice versa. Dick Hebdige’s straightforward yet comprehensive definition of punk, formulated in the late 1970s and published in his *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, is the one on which this study depends. Hebdige variously describes the punk ethos as one in which “The perverse and the abnormal were valued intrinsically” and an attitude that “undermined every relevant discourse” (107, 108). Punk stylings coalesced around “the most sordid of contexts” and “willful desecration and the voluntary assumption of outcast status....characterized the whole punk movement” (107, 110). Punk, in essence, holds middle class social and economic values in contempt and conceives of resistance in terms of rhetorical and physical aggression, both outwardly and towards the self. It involves a negation of received or customary meanings and symbols. And perhaps most importantly, it accepts a (perceived) subaltern status and redeploys that identification as a site of resistance.<sup>23</sup> Regarding the interplay of punk and generational

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<sup>23</sup> An extremely problematic stance within the context of this study, and in many other instances of the relationship between Generation X-as-punk and minority/underprivileged demographics: "the so-called alternative position of

constructs, the algebraic analogy is as follows: punk is to Generation X as the hippie counterculture is to the Baby Boom Generation—a subcultural manifestation unique to that generation in its formation but not its persistence. Thus we have Generation X hippies and Millennial Generation punks, but we do not have hippies without the Baby Boom, nor punks without Generation X. Yet these subcultural/countercultural moments, the punks and hippies, through mass media and popular culture co-option (and commodification) become associated with the broader generations from which they emerge.

In response to Robert Schenkkan's critically successful 1992 play *The Kentucky Cycle*, an esteemed group of Appalachian-affiliated academics from multiple disciplines produced a collection of scholarly retorts to what they perceived as further denigration of the regional image. Much like what the Southern Agrarians' 1930 *I'll Take My Stand* did for an intellectual self-consciousness of Southern (white) identity, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* presented coherent evidence of an intellectualized Appalachian (white and African-American) identity—a statement of a people and a purpose. Historian Ron Eller, in the call-to-arms that opens the volume, posits the book as “a symbol of a growing sense of identity within Appalachia” (x). Yet as the essays that followed attested, that identity was neither monolithic nor easily essentialized (in stark contrast to the aforementioned Southern Agrarians). Pieces addressed and occasionally debated with each other over issues like redneck jokes, African-Americans in Appalachia, coalfield labor issues, and AIDS. In the process of presenting such an identity-based political statement, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* proved that

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1990s white male youth culture is in fact a position appropriated from the truly alternative or marginalized of American culture—women, African-Americans, lesbians and gays, and the poor” (Harris 270).

“Like other American minority groups, Appalachians resist classification” (Eller xi). Subsequent researchers with less personal investment in the region astutely recognized

the postmodern turn taken by scholars in [Southern Studies and Appalachian Studies], a turn stamped by a variety of ‘destabilizing’ and ‘decentering’ analytical impulses. Though more pervasive and much more self-consciously seen in Appalachian Studies, both fields have so thoroughly problematized the internal coherence of their subjects of study in recent years that the very reality of ‘the South’ and (especially) ‘Appalachia’—at least as realities beyond myth, image, and representation—sometimes seems doubtful. (Griffin and Thompson, 298)

Yet the existence of works like *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* seems to somewhat give the lie to this contention that Appalachian scholars do not, at least in part and at least in contradiction to their best non-essentialist intentions, still adhere to at least some passive form of group, ethnic construction.

The concept of an ethnic Appalachian category appeals because the region, in its most attractive media depictions, is “wielded, at least in part, as a means to criticize ‘business as usual’ in modern industrial or postmodern postindustrial society” (Satterwhite 2). Scott Romine in *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* echoes and amplifies this sentiment—in regards to the South as a whole, yet equally applicable to the cultural currency of Appalachia:

the South’s cultural and economic ‘backwardness’ relative to the U.S. nation has, ironically enough, placed it in the avant-garde of contemporary cultural poetics. In short, the South was telling stories about the assault on its culture well before such stories....operated as a kind of grand narrative in an age supposedly without

them: the assault of the local by the global; of place by tourism; of history by the museum; of the real by the simulacrum; of authenticity by mechanical reproduction; of coherent space by time-space compression; of depth by surface; of value by consumerism (4)

Whether there is an ethnic/geographic Appalachia, by any criteria, or if these notions are a miasma of popular culture desire, social programming, and political showmanship is in the end secondary to the potential of such a posited Appalachia and posited Appalachians as a counterstatement of resistance to globalized neo-liberal excess. As with many cultural constructions involving group identity, this potential can be (and has been) used for reactionary purposes. Indeed, regional scholars like Henry Shapiro and David Whisnant would argue that Appalachia as a named concept was born of a late nineteenth and early twentieth-century powerbrokers' desires to reinforce white American nationalism (*Appalachia on Our Mind, All that is Native and Fine*). But "Appalachian" and its association with disenfranchisement, the Labor Movement, and internal colonization from the coastal metropole (North and South), more so than many of the other ethnic/regional identifications to which Americans of Western European decent might subscribe, emerges as a ready-made counterstatement to American corporatism. I suspect that countless scholars of Appalachian representation would agree with Satterwhite that, at base, Appalachia is a "tool to critique dominant assumptions" (8). To further borrow from Romine's argument regarding Southern imagery and identification, the notion/construction/identity of Appalachia and Appalachians can be "deployed" properly, to worthwhile judicious ends (105).

The contention that, from the standpoint of popular culture, Appalachia is a more concentrated version of the South, amplifying its worst attributes, finds voice in Jim Goad's

shrill popular history *The Redneck Manifesto*: “Appalachia is often viewed as the South in the extreme, a distilled South, what tar heroin is compared to a poppy-seed muffin” (87). A 2002 sociological study of distinctions between Appalachia and the South expanded on this argument: “Both the popular entertainment and news media have for decades [viewed Appalachia as part of the broader South], often casting Appalachia, in the words of Lili Corbus Bezner, as ‘the most extreme version of popular southern stereotypes.’ ‘Appalachia,’ according to John Shelton Reed, ‘has always served as the South’s South’” (Griffin and Thompson 301). In *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, Eller is more measured and erudite:

Appalachia may likely have replaced the benighted South as the nation’s most maligned region....the South has risen in stature in recent years, and the new ‘Sunbelt South’ now rivals other regions as the symbol of American economic and cultural progress. Not so Appalachia. Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. (ix)

Distinguishing “Appalachia” from the broader “South” can become more of an exercise in (pop)cultural semantics and less of an argument about designators with legitimate, if somewhat tenuous, relevance to the Humanities or the Social Sciences. Indeed, Romine, in describing how the South becomes “a field of desire” in popular culture, posits that “the South” is “a noun that behaves like a verb” (11). The verb then becomes an adjective. So too with Appalachia/n. In other words, a disheveled, white individual with a thick Southern accent encountered in the Piedmont South, a coastal area of the South, or even in a Northern urban center, might be casually referred to by a sophisticate as “Appalachian”—not with the

forethought that s/he was a current or former resident of, say, Boone County, West Virginia, but in the sense that the term is conceived of as a droll and intellectualized descriptor. A suburban home in a state of disrepair and poor maintenance, anywhere in the U.S., might be referred to as “Appalachian chic” or some other clever label denoting regional poverty (“Ozark,” “Allegheny,” “Kentucky”). I argue that “Appalachia/n” is becoming a more commonly used, but no less generalized, adjective in popular discourse than “hillbilly” was formerly (Eller ix). Almost as if it adds a pseudo-social-scientific luster to the wag that uses it. It also adds the air of the exotic, an impetus towards addressing ethnic specificity but with far from noble ends—someone might complain that the culinary practices of their new Eastern European neighbors are distasteful, but it adds a level of urbane humor if they specify (regardless of accuracy) that said neighbors are Moldavian (or Bulgarian or Serbian).

Certain writers, critics, and academics who readily claim an Appalachian identity go out of their way to disavow connections between Appalachia and the broader South, usually couching their distinction in Civil War-era allegiances and the cultural factors that they believe responsible for them (slavery, immigration patterns, self-sufficiency/subsistence). Chris Offutt takes to task misled Kentucky residents “flying the Stars and Bars and swearing that the South would rise again. They forgot that Kentucky was never truly part of Dixie” (260). Recognized founder of the Appalachian Studies field, eastern Kentucky native Cratis D. Williams, unambiguously pronounced a distinction between Appalachia and the South in the 1998 biographical documentary *Cratis Williams: Living the Divided Life*. Memoirist John O’Brien describes the region as “a mountainous seam between the North and South” and thus not a part of either (61). Such distinctions may help explain why “Southern and Appalachian Studies have,

with few exceptions, largely developed in isolation from each other” a circumstance which is “deeply unfortunate and....hard to understand” (Griffin and Thompson 300, 301).<sup>24</sup>

Regarding Appalachian ethnicity, the popular linkages of “Appalachian” to whiteness can too easily become an only slightly nuanced shorthand for “Southern white”—particularly an individual whose accent is particularly thick, whose grammar is far from standard, and whose economic indicators are poor. In other words, when you are talking about an Appalachian, it is taken for granted you are talking about a white individual. As Griffin and Thompson detail by replacing the term “Appalachian” with “white Southerner” in the titles of several scholarly Appalachian-related works, highlight race in such a way comes across as semantically distasteful, off-putting, and politically problematic, yet one could “hide” the same or similar studies using the more palatable “Appalachian” (302-03). Appalachian as an identity or as a label seems to call for less unpacking than the identity or label of “Southern”—the former has a specificity and a well-codified set of popular culture tropes on which it relies. Rightfully so, in a cultural context one has to explain what one means by “Southern.” Is it being used in a positive or negative light? Is there a pointed racial connotation? Which social conventions and demeanor does the term reference? Far less demands are made of the “Appalachian” label: “Appalachia [can] usefully qualify ill-considered generalizations about ‘the South’” (Griffin and Thompson

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<sup>24</sup> I confess to a vague awkwardness when I conflate Appalachia and the South in academic conversations—sometimes worrying that my audience might think that there is no distinction between the two, at other times feeling awkward because “The South,” quite correctly, seems too broad a topic to tackle and therefore needs the specificity of Appalachia as a field. My conclusion is that Appalachia is part of the South. But we would be better served to use Scott Romine’s critical classifications “of micronarratives and the microSouths they sustain” (17). Dispense with the notion of a monolithic South, usually born of *Gone with the Wind* cultural fallout. Instead, recognize that there is an Appalachian South, a Gallic/Bayou South, a River South, an Urban South, and any other number of flexible combinations waiting to be configured and put to interpretive use. Yet I agree: “So strong are these analytical and interpretive parallels that in their application and exposition one could often substitute ‘Appalachia’ for ‘the South’ (and vice versa) with virtually no one the wiser and no real damage done to the substantive argument” (Griffin and Thompson 298).

296). To be more explicit, “Southern” persists with a reactionary tinge that “Appalachian” lacks—to circle back to the above, first, question, “Appalachian” has the sanction of an ethnic label that “Southern” is, perhaps justly, denied.

Each of the personalities in this project have intersecting and conflicting identities that in their own opinions or in the opinions of others, render an exclusively Appalachian identification questionable in one respect or another. Jesco White and his family are consistently surrounded by the iconography of the Confederacy—a historic political entity and persistent ideology that had a fraught relationship with much of its (claimed) mountainous territory for the duration of the Civil War and the years that followed, not least the wartime secession of the Whites’ West Virginia from Confederate Virginia. Pinckney Benedict was raised in, by regional standards at least, landed wealth and affluence. He attended private boarding school and received an Ivy League education. While he firmly situates himself as a product of Appalachia/West Virginia, he acknowledges that much of his subject material is drawn from his observations of regional life, not his personal lived-experience with it. Raven Mack was born and raised in the area of Farmville, Virginia, a locale geologically not considered Appalachia, and he writes candidly about his struggles with issues of class and cultural authenticity in relation to receipt of a university education. These points of contention tacitly acknowledge the malleability of Appalachian identity, as if no one factor or even combinations of factors—birth in an inconsistently defined geographic region, social class, tastes, education—can provide a definitive categorization.

None of the texts under consideration in this study depend on the hillbilly isolated in the archaic confines of a pastoral Appalachia. In all of them, either the hillbilly or the region, or both, are thrust into engagement with the larger post-industrial world. Indeed, the refutation of a

persistent and deeply erroneous model of isolated Appalachia and gormless mountaineers is perhaps the most edifying results of these texts. These works engage the larger culture of late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century America from an often unconsidered perspective—that of the angry hillbilly.

## Chapter 1—Jesco White and the Hillbilly Punk Grotesque

*“I just don’t understand it. They said they were friends of mine, and then they come up here and set fire to my place”* –Jesco White, after his home burned down, August 1997<sup>25</sup>

My introduction to the Jesco White phenomenon occurred sometime in 1996, while living in Roanoke, Virginia. My roommate at the time, Cheryl, was a born-and-raised West Virginian. Her friend, another Mountain State expatriate, loaned her a VHS videotape of the short documentary film *Dancing Outlaw* (1991). There was an air of subversion about this artifact, as if it held some secret that explained an inherent attribute of “West Virginian-ness.” In my mind’s no-doubt flawed recollections, I like to imagine that the tape was a bootleg copy, several generations removed from the original. Cheryl teased me with the prospect of viewing, warning me with a near-gleeful disposition that I would have difficulty countenancing what I was about to see, that in some way my perception of the world might shift irrevocably. She was right. As an ostensible “punk” (or some patchwork of antisocial subcultural signifiers that often occur in semi-isolated urban areas on the borders of American rural hinterlands), I was already familiar with the campy celebration of “white trash” subversion by cultural producers like filmmaker John Waters and any number of “alternative” musicians embracing over-stylized stereotypes of the Southern U.S. (Southern Culture on the Skids, The Reverend Horton Heat, Rednex, Antiseen). Roanoke’s surprisingly high-profile Queer community readily embraced such identifications: Patsy Cline portrayals as a staple of weekend drag shows, or the gay nightclub bouncer who earned a living as a Hank Williams, Jr., impersonator. But *Dancing Outlaw* and Jesco White was something else entirely—absorbing all these other cultural manifestations of “Appalachian-ness,” revising them, adding to them, dispensing with some, and

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<sup>25</sup> “Tragedy Strikes Jesco White.”

in the end forging an image that obscured them all with a sense (if not a “reality”) of unassailable documentary authenticity. In the discourse about Generation X punk subcultural identity and its refutation of much mainstream popular culture production, “documentary was still a genre that promised to represent something real; it was a genre that was still desirable” (Mills 236). Jesco and the other members of the White family appearing in *Dancing Outlaw* constitute a film franchise that serves as a foundational pillar of “Appalachia” as a punk subculture. Following the raw and compelling inaugural film, the painfully self-conscious *Dancing Outlaw II: Jesco Goes to Hollywood* (1999) (hereafter referred to as *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*) chronicles the titular character’s isolated and abortive initial attempt to break into mainstream media as a patronized sideshow abnormality. Abandoned by film for a decade, Jesco reappears heavily fictionalized in the 2009 British film *White Lightnin’*—a statement both articulated and absurdly incoherent, of his perception and signification by the punk subculture, in particularly antagonizing terms. Jesco’s final appearance in the time period under review occurs in the 2009 MTV documentary film *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, wherein his centrality drops into a background, narrative role while focus diffuses onto the family and community that produced him.<sup>26</sup> *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* provides a nuanced picture of the social complexities that inhere in an Appalachian identification—particulars sorely lacking in all previous Jesco-related images. The film also has moments of compelling metanarrative—assessing Jesco’s role, and by connection Appalachia’s role, in subcultural longing.

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<sup>26</sup> *White Lightnin’* was released on 25 September 2009, *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* was released on May 5, 2010. No definitive evidence has yet been uncovered, but despite being completed in 2009, the release was suspiciously delayed. As explained later in this section, my hypothesis is that the finished product completely failed to meet MTV’s expectations for reality-television sensationalism.

### **Anarchy in the Boone County: *Dancing Outlaw***

Had matters gone differently for Jesco White—had his “discoverers” been some earnest Anthropology or Musicology graduate students instead of burgeoning filmmakers Julien Nitzberg and Jacob Young—he could have become a new Folk Revival icon, studied and appreciated for his place in national folklore. In his early 30s at the time *Dancing Outlaw* was filmed, White was the legitimate cultural scion of the “mountain dancing” tap form. Indeed, White’s father Donald Ray (“D-Ray”) White was murdered during production of the Mike Seeger-produced Smithsonian Institution documentary film *Talking Feet* (1987). There was a precedent for the negative early reactions of Young’s colleagues and his television producers to a potential Jesco White documentary.<sup>27</sup> Folk Revivalists of the 1960s and 70s had difficulty accepting the more controversial/unsavory aspects of their subjects—for instance, exhibiting behaviors and worldviews that ran counter to both the documentarians’ academic-infused cosmopolitanism and their Left-oriented, non-violent politics. While in unquestionable opposition to white middle-class American society and desiring to challenge it through non-violent direct action, the seeming willingness of their Southern/Appalachian research subjects to legitimize violence against authority could on occasion cause concern. Folk Revivalists of the 1960s counterculture wanted to see their subjects as (unwitting and innocently ignorant) rural proletarian standard bearers, as kindly old anthropological informants, national grandparents on the “our contemporary ancestors” model.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most representative of such encounters is

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<sup>27</sup> “All the time I was making *Dancing Outlaw* anybody who saw any of it said ‘Man, you’re out of your mind. None of that stuff is going to amount to anything.’ The programming director saw a little and said that I’d better get rid of it. When I first showed it complete in the studio, people kept looking at the monitor. They were stunned.....The former general manager said ‘Jake, this not one of your better shows.’” (Douglass 310)

<sup>28</sup> The descriptive phrase “our contemporary ancestors” was coined by novelist John Fox, Jr. to describe early twentieth-century Appalachian residents—as a still extant remnant of the original U.S. settlers and frontiersmen. The phrase is ubiquitous in Appalachian Studies discourse, such that I had forgotten the original attribution (page 97 of Fox’s *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*).

Mike Seeger’s panic while trying to dissuade southwest Virginian Lee Moran “Dock” Boggs (a folk-gothic icon) from resorting to gun-violence over a minor property dispute and his auto-insurance, respectively: “if anybody fool with me, they encountering danger.... I may walk into that insurance office and clean it up, clean it out” (Marcus 15).<sup>29</sup> Jesco’s father was similarly an anthropological subject—and one wonders if the producers of *Talking Feet*, some undoubtedly veterans of early folk-form collection expeditions, were still incapable of apprehending the sociological contours of the communities they were documenting—where men (and women) lived and died marginal lives, characterized as often-as-not by illegality and its attendant violence.

In an inversion of this Folk Revivalist myopia to the perceived unsavory aspects of their subjects, Generation X punk subculturalists fixate on the lifestyle of the subjects to the (relative) exclusion of their subjects’ formal performative significance—in other words, it matters less to them that White is bearer of a folk-culture form with roots going back to Europe and more that he possesses an “outlaw” persona committed to a unique yet poorly articulated form of Appalachian anarchism and attendant acts. As Young himself admits of his subject, “While he has some dancing talent, I think his notoriety is largely derived from the power of [*Dancing Outlaw*]. The way I organized the material is what captured people’s imagination, not necessarily the talent of Jesco White” (“High” 22). Kate Doering, a producer of the later documentary *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* documentary was even more succinct on the subject

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<sup>29</sup> This particular snippet of a recorded interview is included among an extensive catalog of Boggs’s violent history, with Marcus imbuing the stories with a sense of romantic tragedy.

of White's dual fame: "Some people appeal [sic] to his wildness and others are appeal [sic] to him for his mountain culture" (Newman).<sup>30</sup>

The countercultural anthropologist of the 1960s was interested primarily in a subject's dancing, or singing, or cooking, or barn-building and would prefer to ignore their personal "negative" reactions to society at large (or perhaps how those reactions might manifest), whereas Generation X punk subculturalists fixate on the socio-cultural oppositional recalcitrance of their subjects. In watching the Jesco White films, his significance to the field of Cultural Anthropology as the "Last of the Mountain Dancers" is peripheral to his role as purveyor of Appalachian "anti-culture": consuming all-manner of illegal drugs, blathering violence-infused, borderline-unintelligible, absurdist philosophy, and generally serving (with his family) as a persistent threat and annoyance to regional societal elites ("Artist" 293).<sup>31</sup>

An iconic image that emerges early in the runtime of *Dancing Outlaw* is White's integration of traditional mountain dancing with contemporary Southern rock music—specifically the Ozark Mountain Daredevil's 1974 track "If You Wanna Get to Heaven." In contrast with his father and the established image of the soberly-attired mountaineer folkway informant (slacks, collared white button-up shirts to Sunday-best full suits), White is dressed in a manner which emulates, with arguable degrees of self-consciousness, early 90s grunge rock performers: well-worn jean pants, a stylized black-t-shirt with a fantasy screen-print image of a heavily bearded wizard figure, an unbuttoned flannel over-shirt, and a soft-billed leather cap usually associated with outlaw motorcycle culture. Thurston Moore of iconic alternative band

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<sup>30</sup> Although his film contains no more dancing content than Young's, perhaps Nitzberg's far more elaborate and sympathetic depiction of the Whites' social circumstances are rooted in his contention "I thought *Dancing Outlaw* could have been done, and shown the culture of the dance, better" (Newman).

<sup>31</sup> This term "anti-culture" was used to explain hillbilly pantomime rock band Night Train's reasoning behind seeking out Jesco White to perform with them.

Sonic Youth (and himself no stranger to a disheveled sartorial and personal grooming style) bemusedly referred to Nirvana's aesthetic presentation as "like the Children of the Corn. . . . They wore ripped flannel, had greasy long hair. Total *backwoods freaks*" (Lehman 117, emphasis mine). But White exceeds and transgresses the limits of acceptable representation for most Generation X alternative icons. The inclusion of leather attire and the association of the heavy metal music genre becomes the signifier of Appalachian-associated, economically-underprivileged rebellion—the more associations with outlaw motorcycle gang chic, the further from Grunge the image. Furthermore, White's copious tattooing is primarily amateur and haphazard, lacking in any unifying thematic or design considerations. Indeed, the simplistic swastika on his hand (allegedly a prison convention received, White claims in unconvincing ignorance) causes major consternation during his cameo on the *Roseanne* show. Such examples of body art, and the circumstances of their acquisition—jury-rigged cassette player prison tattoo guns, wrong-side-of-the-tracks outlaw biker tattoo parlors, a kitchen table in a mobile home—are referents to an authenticity that lay beyond emulation by most affluent suburban white youth, no matter their predilection for anti-authoritarianism. In other words, in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century America, anyone can acquire a number of well-executed tattoos in a sterile and safe environment governed by ethical protocols. But not everyone has access to the social circumstances that facilitate White's tattoos. They correspond to White's punk subcultural predecessors like GG Allin (who bore remarkably similar haphazard, amateur, and likely impulsive tattoo art) and are less aesthetic works of articulate self-expression and more symbols of extreme contempt for societal norms or the semi-acceptable forms of transgression offered by professionally executed and commodified tattooing. Ugly, amateur-produced, inchoate, and overtly offensive tattooing is, almost literally, the irrefutable stamp of subcultural antiauthority

authenticity. So too is the physical location of tattooing. Although far more mainstream acceptable at the present moment, body art that could not be easily hidden by clothing (thus hands, neck, face) signaled an element of low-class authenticity.<sup>32</sup> The power in this establishing scene of *Dancing Outlaw* is that the audience is presented with an image of a “new” or as yet undiscovered (or perhaps unacknowledged) version of Appalachia—one that is not frozen in frontier Early Republic persistent folkways amber but is instead the bricolage detritus of mainstream American culture erected unsteadily on the foundation of older cultural forms allegedly unique to a demographic long considered isolated from the mainstream currents of American life.

My argument is that one of the earliest demarcations of a punk subcultural Appalachian-ness—the claim to an anarchic hillbilly authenticity—appears in the 1990 production *The Dancing Outlaw*. This documentary film draws on a cinematic vocabulary drawn from earlier John Waters and David Lynch productions and repeatedly highlights a punk aesthetic of grime, decay, and social deviance that appeals to viewers with a punk subcultural ethos, particularly those with associations to a constructed Southern Appalachian geographic region. However, a barrage of scenes continue and further develop White’s punk iconography. Glimpses of this persona, limited depictions of this worldview, began appearing as far back as the 1970s in the “rednecksploitation” film genre in which working class rural Southern/Appalachian antiheroes defied, sometimes violently, law enforcement and polite society in general while pedaling illegal liquor, driving fast cars, and fornicating extensively.<sup>33</sup> The Southern noir fiction of Harry Crews,

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<sup>32</sup> The aforementioned Cheryl, who opens this chapter, was extremely proud of a blotchy cleavage tattoo (another, for the time, unsavory location) that she fiercely contended was given to her by an artist that also tattooed GG Allin.

<sup>33</sup> *The Dukes of Hazzard* did not emerge from a vacuum. It is the commodified, co-opted, and domesticated variant of a far more ribald and socially challenging film genre. See J. W. Williamson’s *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains & What the Mountains Did to the Movies*, especially Chapter Five “The Good Old Boys.”

and Crews' own writer-as-performer personality, explored in expansive detail the amoral (and immoral) aggressive depravity of working class Southern whites. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some punk-hardcore acts (the aforementioned Antiseen, GG Allin, Buzzoven) captured this image in an exceedingly transgressive and violence-infused sphere of underground music, but it still largely lacked overt, precise associations with the concept of Appalachia.

The opening shot of *The Dancing Outlaw* places the road sign marker for Boone County (and its "Please Don't Litter" subheader) central to the screen—from out of frame a beer bottle soars through the air then strikes squarely in the center, making a loud, dull thud before falling to the ground (see fig. 1). On the surface, this image could be read as merely an act of defiance against government authority represented by official demarcation and a scolding charge to not defile an environment that is already well-trashed. Or even more simplistically, that there is a ritualistic component to the action—that this is merely "what one does" in Boone County, hurling empty alcohol containers at available signage. Behind the large green boundary sign stands a historical marker, the white background and black text confirming the county's namesake and relating Boone's notable achievements. A prominent spray-painted anarchy symbol mars the sign, painted across it from top to bottom—again, possibly just a casual act of rebellion by bored local teens.<sup>34</sup> But there is a much deeper implication that points to a rebuttal of the old, quaint Appalachian symbolism. More than any other mytho-historical figure, Daniel Boone is identified with the heroic, frontier image of Appalachia.<sup>35</sup> Boone was the stalwart pathfinder, the Indian-killer, the type of noble individualist that fuels the larger American settler

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<sup>34</sup> The visual impact of these images is the same regardless of how they came to be. While there is no definitive proof, both the thrown bottle and the graffiti are possibly Young's contrivances.

<sup>35</sup> The connections between Boone and Appalachia are far too numerous to list. Even the writer Gurney Norman, in his counterculture work *Divine Right's Trip* depicts Boone as a positive figure in relation to regional identification. Perhaps the most recent and complete example is Appalachian literary personality Robert Morgan's *Boone: A Biography*.

colonial national narrative. In this context, the beer bottle striking the sign is an act of defiance, an act of desecration against the Boone identification and what he represents: a wholesome Appalachia, a region that commits its human energy and resources to national dictates of conquest and a nebulously defined “progress.” Boone is the “good Appalachian”—the coonskin cap and buckskin eighteenth and nineteenth-century avatar for the region, exerting dominion over a pristine wilderness. The hillbilly icon that follows Boone, and prefigures Jesco White, requires the industrial age and its trappings to debase and confound. The anarchy symbol refutes Boone’s symbolic significance as a patriotic national figure, integral in the expansion of the settlers’ new nation-state. The implication of such an establishing shot guarantees that what the viewer is about to witness will be as far from the Boone image as possible—the very people that inhabit a tangible reminder of his legacy reject the pathfinder’s lineage and his calling to respectable, expansionistic self-sufficiency. They are, in essence, Boone’s ungrateful children spurning his cultural patrimony.

[fig. 1 here]

Aside from the associations with Daniel Boone, the location of the signs has further bearing on the subcultural possibilities of the Whites and Boone County. This particular boundary marker and attendant historical sign stood along the West Virginia 94 roadway—one would see them if driving south from Kanawha County and the state capitol of Charleston. Although all of West Virginia is customarily delineated/coded as Appalachia, these signs and their defacement hint that one is leaving the protection of the sub/urban, the culturally general, and entering an area of lawlessness, contempt, and absurdity. But times do change, and as of November 2016, the Boone County boundary sign still stands, although the anti-littering addendum has been replaced by one declaring the area “A Certified Business Location”

(“Lens”). The historical marker is no longer present—according to the “West Virginia Highway Markers Database” it is “missing” (“WV Highway Markers”). Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, the four other Boone historical markers that stood at the roadway entrances to the county are also missing. The eleven other historical markers in Boone County, unrelated to Daniel Boone’s biography, are safely in place. Perhaps White fans, given the sign’s prominence in the documentary films have made off with them. Perhaps their absence is attributable to petty acts of rebellion against Boone (the governmental structure and the person). Perhaps both.

In his brief acknowledgement and praise for *The Dancing Outlaw*, established Appalachian-themed filmmaker Andrew Garrison notes that “There are a lot of people who, I think, ‘cruise’ the culture and ‘cruise’ what they think of as low-life” before stating his belief that Young essentially did right by White in his production (188). Young does not shy away from allowing White to display a range of seemingly uncontrived social and domestic commentary that would be untenable to a Leftist, equitable perspective: pride in Confederate paraphernalia, an inarticulate adherence to Christian Fundamentalism, and unapologetic threats (and alleged acts) of spousal abuse. Young encompasses this all with the profound understatement “Jesco White is not politically correct” (Garrison 188).

The visual rhetoric of *Dancing Outlaw* draws upon outsider/alternative filmmaking references that would be familiar to many, perhaps most, punk subcultural viewers. Director Young references iconic scenes from two filmmakers with deep subcultural associations: John Waters’s *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) and David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Wild at Heart* (1990). Young admits to a professional familiarity with the former’s approach to shock filmmaking: “I guess [*Dancing*] *Outlaw* does push the boundaries of documentary, but you’ve got to do that if you are working out of ‘Podunk, Nowhere.’ That’s the John Waters lesson”

(Young 311).<sup>36</sup> The White's mobile trailer home, perched between the edge of a deep woods and a busy county roadway appears full-frame in shots throughout *The Dancing Outlaw*, conveying a silent threat to financial prosperity, civic decency, and formal education that inheres to the structure's symbology (bar the curated vintage examples of silver Slipstreams for which retro aficionados pay a premium) (see fig. 2). Waters knew well the power of such imagery, with establishing shots of Babs Johnson's backwoods trailer, similarly situated and appointed, throughout *Pink Flamingos* (see fig. 3).<sup>37</sup>

[fig. 2 here]

[fig. 3 here]

In Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, brothel pimp Ben (Dean Stockwell) performs a hyper-stylized lip-synch of Roy Orbison's operatic "In Dreams," attired in a disconcerting pastiche of gaudy formal wear (a ruffled tuxedo shirt) and a velvet suit coat and feminized with pancake makeup foundation, eyeliner, and lipstick (see fig. 4). The tension of the scene depends on a sense of unpredictable violence roiling underneath the surface of what in other circumstances might be retro-popular culture camp entertainment. In *The Dancing Outlaw*, White performs similarly in his Elvis-persona. Before inviting the film crew into his "Elvis room," White explains its significance while dressed in a bedazzled formal white-collared shirt, his fingers sporting multiple gold rings while he maneuvers his hands in a graceful, feminine-coded arc. In his Elvis-persona, White seems to fully reference Presley's "essential androgyny" and "the ambiguous sexual nature of his stage performance" (Carlson 78). And while it is difficult to fully parse the

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<sup>36</sup> Waters, for his part, has expressed his appreciation for "hillbilly" culture and aesthetics on many occasions. See *Shock Value* for his association of hillbilly aesthetics and his early film productions.

<sup>37</sup> If Young was consciously framing *The Dancing Outlaw* along the lines of *Pink Flamingos*, the depiction of White bears more than a passing resemblance to the unsubtly-named character Crackers (Danny Mills)—the long-haired bearded degenerate Southern/Appalachian-coded "son" of Babs, prone to sexually deviant acts and unreasoning violence, who lives in the chicken coop behind the trailer.

implications, at points in *The Dancing Outlaw* (though not subsequent White documentary films) White is *possibly* wearing eye-liner makeup—perhaps it is the natural severe contrast between his skin-tone, piercing blue eyes, and very dark hair, but regardless the perception of such is hard to shake.<sup>38</sup> White does not so much lip synch along with “Put the Blame on Me” as softly sing misaligned swatches of the lyrics while being (willingly?) overwhelmed by Elvis’ vocals on the tape recording—like strict lip synching, it is his performative presence that matters most. In a direct visual correlation with Ben’s use of a mechanic’s light as a surrogate microphone and for facial lighting, a similarly provisional artificial light source beams onto White’s face and dubiously functional microphone as he performs (see fig. 5). White confirms that his Elvis fixation, unconvincingly to the audience, keeps him restrained: “I was actually an animal....I mean a beast, no-good animal that would feel like killing anybody just for a drink of water....I had those kinds of feelings. This Elvis collection took that away from me. I don’t have to feel that way no more”. Lynch would return to the motif of Elvis as a restraining, civilizing trope. *Wild at Heart*, a film concurrent with *The Dancing Outlaw*, features a hillbilly-coded protagonist, Sailor Ripley (Nicholas Cage), who alternates between a loving and protective Elvis-obsessed romantic and a graphically hyperviolent former organized crime enforcer equally fixated on the speed metal band Powermad.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps in concert with Young and the audience, White’s mother Bertie Mae remains skeptical and dismissive of her son’s Elvis fixation and suggests he focus exclusively on his mountain dancing. We will revisit the implications in the discussion below, but the connection between White and Presley, so prominent in Young’s

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<sup>38</sup> This would be in keeping with White’s dedication to the Elvis persona: “Elvis was repellant at first to his primarily country music audience because of his use of makeup” (Kelley 6).

<sup>39</sup> This is, of course, not to suggest that Jacob Young had any knowledge of *Wild at Heart* during the production of *The Dancing Outlaw*—only that subcultural media of the time did have a fixation on Elvis (and Elvis-like musical personalities such as Roy Orbison) as one aspect of period anti-heroes, especially as set against more extreme parts of their personalities. See also the films *True Romance* (1993) and *3000 Miles to Graceland* (2001).

documentaries is severely downplayed in the subsequent Jesco films, allowing/encouraging him to reference his other personal icon, Charles Manson.

[fig. 4 here]

[fig. 5 here]

Several scenes in *The Dancing Outlaw* allude to annihilation on both a societal macro and an individual micro level. Appalachian associations with a purported death drive (often described as an inherent hillbilly “fatalism”) have a lengthy and pervasive history.<sup>40</sup> From Dock Boggs performance of “Oh Death” at the Newport Folk Festival in the 1960s through to the centrality of Ralph Stanley’s “Oh Death” recording to the critical success of the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* film soundtrack continuing on to contemporary Appalachian-set fiction’s focus on the region as a proto-Apocalyptic landscape, the mountain South is synonymous with a morbid turn of mind. Given a similar fixation, scenes from Young’s documentary are another point of resonance with subcultural 1990s punk. In the film’s opening montage, White dances elaborately on a wavering suspension footbridge that passes over a strongly flowing stream. Young takes pains to shoot from a knee-height perspective, capturing White’s movements above the undulations (see fig. 6). On its surface, the scene is a heavy-handed allegory for the tenuousness of White’s life and the subsumption of his mortality in his art. However, streams have far more symbolic salience in the Appalachian region—particularly in its Allegheny subregions of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. Owing to the terrain necessity of planting housing within very narrow river valleys and exacerbated by the environmental degradations of strip mining, catastrophic flooding with significant costs in human life and property is an all-too frequent occurrence—given its close proximity to his mobile trailer home, the engorged stream passing under White could quite

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of fatalism in regards to community and religion, see John A. Williams pp. 322-23. For a deep, contextual reading of Appalachian fatalism, see Cunningham pp. 96-97.

literally spell his death someday. In the moments before the title fade-in, White continues dancing out into the seemingly busy asphalt road that passes the front of his home, waving a seeming farewell (despite this being the film's intro) before abruptly falling to his knees (the usual coda for most of his dance performances) on the pavement itself. As White will later detail in the film itself (and other Appalachian punk subculturalists like Pinckney Benedict and Raven Mack emphasize), dramatic and gory highway fatalities are another prominent fixture of Appalachian fatalism imaginary.<sup>41</sup> As the still frame of the title fills the screen, we hear the audio of a car passing (with the paused White still in the road), a confirmation of White's later contention in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* that he and his family are indeed "already dead."

[fig. 6 here]

In *The Dancing Outlaw* there are three distinct Jescos, as delineated by his (or someone else's) choice in the attire that he wears and in his grooming.<sup>42</sup> The first Jesco to appear onscreen is dressed in the punk-grunge-outlaw biker ensemble mentioned above: short billed leather cap, jeans, and a cheap flannel button-up over a black t-shirt. The t-shirt itself is of some significance. Closely scrutinizing film stills reveals that the shirt features a Harley-Davidson logo, with the image of a heavily bearded and long-haired wizard figure overlooking a similarly hirsute man on a motorcycle. The text states "The Last Biker on EARTH" isolated and bold across the top, followed by "will be ridin' a...harley" underneath (see fig. 7). While superficially this pop culture item conforms to White's general outlaw biker attire, there is added meaning in the graphic and textual elements it contains. The mystical wizard figure easily conforms to

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<sup>41</sup> Benedict's short story "The Wrecking Yard" is possibly the densest example of this.

<sup>42</sup> My classifications bear no (obvious) relation to Norma Jean White's contention that Jesco White "can be three people: he is Jesse [unequivocally good], he is Jesco [unequivocally evil], and he is Elvis [channeling/consciously emulating Presley]".

stereotypical caricatures of aged but virile hillbilly men—indeed, White will come to resemble this image twenty years later in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. Along these lines, the young wild-haired young-man overseen by the elder figure roughly correlates to White in his present appearance—Jesco as the outlaw that is and the outlaw that will be. Finally, the amplified declaration of a “last biker on earth” connotes an impending apocalypse, with a last figure—biker, man, human—left to roam the wastes. By conflation and transference of symbols, the implication is that someone like White, perhaps White himself, the hillbilly-biker-punk-outlaw will be hardy enough to survive a cataclysm that would wipe away more structured, more conformist society. That White himself is not a biker (there are no depictions of him on a bike in any of the films, although outlaw bikers do appear in *White Lightning*) and that the shirt itself is possibly not an officially licensed product (likely not, as variants of it have been repurposed for other brands or no-brands) are irrelevant to its symbolic weight in this context.<sup>43</sup>

[fig. 7 here]

White then appears seated on the threshold of his mobile home, after producing a single-shot antiquated 12-gauge shotgun that he displays to the camera while detailing his proficiency in harvesting squirrels. While doing so, White now wears a furred vest, likely made from the pelt of some canine predator like a wolf or coyote. The visual impact of this scene lies in yet another Boone/Appalachian frontiersmen reference—that some essence of the backwoodsman archetype remains in contemporary Appalachians like White. This figure has been mutated, has absorbed (and repurposed) trappings of industrial society, but still retains a wilderness-oriented ability for

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<sup>43</sup> I would hope that someone has written on the phenomenon of Harley-Davidson branded gear in Southern/Appalachian white working class depictions. From anecdotal personal observation, it is highly popular amongst those with no motorcycling experience and/or for whom a Harley-Davidson motorcycle is financially out of reach. Furthermore, in researching this particular t-shirt, I discovered that versions of it are currently selling at the online retailer Etsy for between \$100 and \$200 as “rare vintage 90s” artifacts. Perhaps it truly is a rare example of the fashion genre, but given the missing Boone County historical markers mentioned above, it is possible this could be another (market-driven) consequence of the cult of Jesco.

survival. But even this symbol refuses to conform to the old frontiersman stereotype—instead of the expected buckskin of Boone, we get this furry somewhat transgressive ostentation, as if the provenance of said vest was: affluent dowager's estate to Pittsburgh thrift store to Boone County mobile home, with the intervention of a heavy set of scissors. It would not be lost on many punk subcultural viewers that similar cheap, ad-hoc furs appear frequently in the films of John Waters, particularly the aforementioned *Pink Flamingos* and *Desperate Living*.

The second Jesco wears a (mostly) black attire: a “western wear” button-up shirt adorned with roses embroidered at the shoulders and black dress slacks. His head is uncovered and his otherwise unruly long hair fixed in place (though in one performance he dons his leather hat). He also wears a belt with an oversized gilded buckle. In the context of *The Dancing Outlaw*, this seems to be Jesco's (or someone in the production crew's) preferred look for formal dancing segments, in which he is accompanied by the “traditional” guitar player (instead of the rock-blaring boombox of the intro). This choice of clothing presentation conforms to a “rockabilly” look prominent in that musical subculture and associated movements like Americana and Alt-Country. In both the black coloring, the cut, and the ostentatious belt buckle, these clothes reference earlier performers like Johnny Cash and the more raucous country acts of the Bakersfield sound—essentially a cowboy aesthetic mediated by cosmopolitan fashion that “broke from the restraints of southern rural culture” while simultaneously reinforcing them (Malone 135). For country and country-rock performers of the 1950s and 1960s, it signals both a fashion nous and a rural coding. Yet White manages to transgress this attire, in a viscerally stunning fashion. During an interview, White removes his dancing shoes to reveal white tube socks with colored banding at their tops, visually jarring in their incongruity with his staid black professional outfit. From a Generation X punk perspective, these socks represent juvenility and

thrift—unfashionable relics and, by subcultural punk standards, blessed for it.<sup>44</sup> But the socks do not shock in isolation. During the interview, White is seated on a folding PVC plastic beach lounger—an artifact also deeply associated with lower economic class. Other chairs of like make surround him, as he was performing by the stream/river near his house—in essence we are viewing the Whites’ personal “beach.” As the interview progresses, White moves his feet compulsively through the mud underneath, progressively befouling the whiteness of the socks. It is a scene of satisfying disgust, revealing White’s unawareness of/unconcern with fashion propriety and his equal disregard for filth—“Free of [middle class] squeamishness, the hillbilly thrives in squalor” (Williamson ix).

The third Jesco appears, in attire, grooming, and accessories, as some facsimile/interpretation of Elvis Presley. In *The Dancing Outlaw*, this presentation consists of a wide-collared button-up shirt, a silk or silk-substitute with glittering accents, khaki trousers, leather loafer shoes, and the thick gold-rimmed sunglasses commonly associated with 1970s “decadent” Elvis. White’s hair, unruly in his other appearances, is Elvis-appropriately tightly oiled back. His face, again at odds with much of his screen time, is strictly clean-shaven. Despite White’s profession of Elvis’ significance to his own life and his (temporary) redemption (as noted above), a viewer has the sense that this Elvis comportment is the least “authentic” of the Jesco personas depicted. As *The Wild Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* will emphasize, the symbolic figure of Elvis does seem to hold a deep meaning for White. However, the complete immersion of Jesco, bodily, into, essentially, a form of Elvis costume-play or drag-pantomime is fragile and it does fall away in future iterations of White depictions, with the exception of *Jesco*

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<sup>44</sup> Similar tube socks, paired with cutoff jean shorts, were/are a trademark of Lynyrd Skynyrd drummer Artemus Pyle, imbuing him with a sense of derangement and unpredictability. Given the appeal of Lynyrd Skynyrd in White’s socio-economic demographic, it is possible that his representation is influenced by Pyle’s socks.

*Goes to Hollywood*, where it reaches an apocalyptic defilement of sorts. At base, Elvis is a questionably worthy figure of emulation for a punk subculturalist fixating on Appalachia. While the more vulgar displays of Elvis kitsch display are appreciated as material aesthetic affronts, the figure of Elvis himself, both in “reality” and mediated, is problematic. Presley took a profoundly politically and ideologically conservative turn in his later years (if he had not been there all along), exemplified by his desire, gratified at least performatively by President Richard Nixon, to serve “as an undercover drug agent in order to spy on his fellow musicians” (Sweeney 258). Furthermore, Presley’s music, widely popular and exponentially successful commercially, lacks the imprint of socially downtrodden transgressiveness, both lyrically and aurally.

Perhaps the most highly problematic subcultural coding of *The Dancing Outlaw* and subsequent White-oriented films is the emphasis, sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, on perceived Appalachian sexual deviance (from some white middle-class standard of normativity). As eminent Appalachian representation scholar J.W. Williamson astutely notes in identifying the convention, there is an air of anti-authority subversiveness to it: “hillbillies as stars of their own foolshows have been thinly veiled assaults on sexual respectability, perhaps even more so than they are assaults on the assumptions of Pax Capitalismus. Some are attacks on both” (62).<sup>45</sup> In territory again pre-charted by John Waters, sexual transgression against middle-class American mores holds vast appeal to punk subculturalists, as a means to further challenge moral and political authority.<sup>46</sup> All the Jesco White-related films reference violations of contemporary

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<sup>45</sup> At the risk of some mild essentializing, *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt, dubbed “king of the hillbillies,” is a product of a hardscrabble upbringing in Appalachian eastern Kentucky (Millard). Paraphrasing Laura Kipnis’ in “(Male) Desire, (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*,” Constance Penley writes: “*Hustler*, she found, was militantly gross in its pictorials, its cartoons, its editorials and political humor, with bodies and body parts straight out of Rabelais, all put to service in stinging attacks on petit-bourgeoisiehood, every kind of social and intellectual pretension, the social power of the professional classes, the power of the government, and the hypocrisy of organized religion” (93).

<sup>46</sup> I am specifically thinking of the scene late in *Pink Flamingos* where Babs fellates her hillbilly-coded “son” Crackers in the Marbles’ respectable urban home, with the intent to irreparably contaminate it.

bourgeois sexual mores. The sexual transgressiveness of *The Dancing Outlaw* primarily concerns White's marriage. White's wife, Norma Jean White (born Marie Wilson), is visibly older than her husband—if a viewer does the math after she gives the chronological history of their marriage, the event occurred when Jesco was approximately 21 and she was approximately 38 (Jesco is 33/34 at the time of filming, Norma Jean 50/51). Added to this age-disparity, Norma Jean and Jesco are phenotypically incongruous by suburban bourgeois standards of physical attractiveness. In some ways, Norma Jean can be interpreted as just as much of an oddity as Jesco, if not more so: the observation that she could easily pass for his mother, her oversized hairstyle resembling a contrived mohawk, her child-like speaking voice (particularly in contrast to Jesco's volume and enthusiasm). Like Jesco, the code shifts of her clothing in the course of the film are especially noteworthy. In much of her on-camera appearance, she is dressed in exceedingly nondescript attire—a pastel collared polo shirt, white slacks, cotton canvas slip-on shoes. This presentation proves jarring when contrasted with Jesco, as if further emphasizing a potential mother-son dynamic. In short, such staid clothing further ages her and when set against grunge-punk Jesco juvenilizes the latter. Yet, at other points in the film, Norma Jean wears a black Guns n' Roses band t-shirt, with the collar cut out and a plunging neckline added and her hair seemingly pulled even higher into mohawk facsimile. For punk subculturalist viewers, such changes imply a welcome instability and by recontextualizing the iconography of a contemporary and popular heavy metal band further emphasize Appalachian bricolage.<sup>47</sup>

The musical numbers to which Jesco dances in the course of the White films are telling amalgamations of his identity, and of associations that might appeal to Appalachian punk subcultural viewers. *The Dancing Outlaw* opens with the punk-grunge White dancing, boombox

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<sup>47</sup> John Waters did similar symbolic work with one of his casting favorites, Edith Massey.

held near his head, to a recording of Ozark Mountain Daredevil’s 1973 hit “If You Want to Get to Heaven”—a Southern rock anthem. The significance of this track lies less in the lyrics or music itself, and more in the identifications of the band that performs it. The Ozark Mountains are coded either as a contiguous extension of the Southern Appalachians, in culture if not geology, or as a slight variant of Appalachia—another place where one would find hillbillies.<sup>48</sup> White’s clear song of choice for his formal dance performances is an instrumental version of the Appalachian-coded folksong “Wildwood Flower”—though electrified instead of a more “traditional” acoustic accompaniment. A later scene, meant to display the anarchic tendencies of the extended White family, uses the lengthy instrumental crescendo of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” as accompaniment to Jesco’s sister (and a focal point of *The Wild and Wonderful Whites*) Mamie tearing around a muddied mountain holler in a dilapidated 4x4 pickup truck. This snippet, a music track very commonly associated with a sense of (white) “Southern-ness” and Southern rebellion, still performs transgressive work in the film. Sociologist Jason Eastman would associate Southern rock bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd with “hegemonic masculine ideals” (192). Yet in this scene, Jesco’s thin and diminutive sister, smiling sweetly and with a disconcerting seductive charge, behind the steering wheel of a vehicle that with its size, power, and visible ad-hoc repairs would not look out of place in a post-apocalyptic road movie, declares that she is “the biggest one and the meanest one” before roaring off to cause more mayhem (including almost running over the film crew). “Free Bird” segues into Jesco’s brother Dorey discordantly playing an electric guitar in the corner of a poorly-lit trailer now packed with family members—an Appalachian variant of a punk rock house show. The impact of the scene and

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<sup>48</sup> See Woodard’s *American Nations*, which places the Ozark region in socio-cultural “Greater Appalachia”, and Anthony Harkins’ *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* for insight into the relationship between the Ozarks and Appalachia.

soundtrack choice implies further mutations and (de)evolution of popular culture perceptions of Appalachia—women become as powerful and frightening as men, stylized commercial rock music turned to guttural soundscapes for destructive potentiality.

### **Mainstream Grotesque: *Jesco Goes to Hollywood***

The sequel, *Dancing Outlaw II: Jesco Goes to Hollywood*, chronicles White's fleeting brush with a degree of mainstream exposure via a guest appearance on the popular 1990s situation comedy *Roseanne* (season six, episode twenty-two, "I Pray the Lord My Stove to Keep"). On a basic level, *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* is a painful depiction of White's anxious and confused interactions with an alien cosmopolitan culture. *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* details White's "discovery" by actor/producer Tom Arnold and his attempted (and ultimately failed) integration into an episode of the popular sitcom *Roseanne*. Indeed, the film can be read as an abortive attempt at proto-reality television, dependent on the trope of the rustic rube thrust into a good-faith encounter with, and eventually unwitting opposition to, popular culture.

Jesco White and other White family members make it clear that they primarily view his film appearances and the *Roseanne* opportunity as a money-making enterprise. From the present moment, knowing that White remains nowhere near wealthy, it is difficult to ascertain if some of the tension in *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* arises from White's naïveté in this regard—that in the isolation of the film's narrative White is far too unsophisticated and uncouth to be anything more than a temporary popular culture novelty. White's supposed fixation on the financial compensation for his performance—"earning money is a new-found power just as heady as huffing glue" and his unconcern if "people are making fun, as long as they laugh – and pay to get into my shows"—echoes an Appalachian stereotype of sorts. Mainstream heavily coded

Appalachian performer Dolly Parton, despite all her generosity in social uplift programs like Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, frequently alludes to a need to make money for her retirement ("High" 23). Indeed, White's catchphrase after *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* becomes "No money, no funny" ("High" 23).

In the pre-title footage to *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*, White recreates the opening "If You Want to Get to Heaven" promenade from *The Dancing Outlaw*, this time holding the boombox to his head as he taps his way down The Hollywood Walk of Fame. Whereas in the initial film, White is dressed in the grunge-punk ensemble discussed above, in this instance his attire references a subcultural icon with whom he is increasingly associated as the filmography progresses. Superficially, White, with his now-pronounced sideburns, seems to be continuing his Elvis homage (see fig. 8). However, the billowing wide-collared shirt, the vest, and the love-bead necklace places his appearance more in line with that of Charles Manson—particularly as in a series of photographs by Associated Press photographer Wally Fong during a February 10, 1970, court appearance (see fig. 9). The itinerary of White's travel mirrors that of rural-to-urban Appalachian outmigration during the Depression and World War II years—from the transportation hub of Charleston, West Virginia, to the urban Appalachia of Pittsburgh, to Detroit, along with several Ohio cities along the present Interstate 75 corridor and the final destination of many hillbilly families. Manson himself was born in Cincinnati of Appalachian migrant stock and in his youth depended on connections with his extended West Virginia family. In *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*, White seeks notoriety in the Los Angeles, California with which Manson is most intimately connected in popular culture—another charismatic hillbilly seeking converts on the west coast, as he says in the film: "everybody loved me, because they like the way I walked....and I give them some of that Boone County rhythm man, that shook them up."

[fig. 8 here]

[fig. 9 here]

After *The Dancing Outlaw*, film depictions of White involve an interlocutor—Hank Williams III in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, screenwriter Shane Smith for *White Lightnin'*. One of the more unsavory aspects of *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* is director Jacob Young's on-screen presence—no longer an anthropological observer, but now an active promotor of White as an entertainment professional. White also has a designated manager (Ann Woofter) who appears on screen, explaining her attempts to move Jesco away from working for “a six-pack of Coke and a pizza” to actual cash payments. While Young may be attempting a sly comment on the showmanship involved in novelty anthropology, it seems more likely the amplification of a media production/consumption exploitation that comes to a head with *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* and that will continue to dog White down to the present.<sup>49</sup>

Ostensibly a documentary film, *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* uses what appears to be scripted dialog in the opening and concluding West Virginia scenes. Delivered in a flat and amateurish manner, Jesco and Norma Jean's conversations evoke multiple subversive connections. On the one hand, this convention parallels the intentionally unsubtle scripting of John Waters's films—particularly his earlier work like *Pink Flamingos*. Secondly, Young's structure parodies the genre of True Crime television programs and their reliance on recreations of events in which the acting is notoriously poor. Jesco then walks out of his community on a

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<sup>49</sup> It is impossible to say at this moment, given the dearth of information, both primary and critical, about *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*, but I'm not prepared to dismiss the possibility that every aspect of the film aside from footage related to the studio taping of the *Roseanne* episode is scripted and contrived—from White's very formal/proper middle-class white woman “manager” to the white middle class North Carolina fan that supposedly went out of his way to encounter Jesco at a Pittsburgh airport layover.

muddy roadway, comically oversized suitcase in tow, with the implication that he may well journey to California on foot, or at least thinks that he can do so.

In his discussion of Max Cady, the degenerate and vengeful hillbilly caricature par excellence in the film *Cape Fear*, Douglas Reichert-Powell notes “the tattoos that turn his body itself into a text” (111). The hillbilly tattoo aesthetic, exemplified by Jesco and other individuals in this study, is scattered, piecemeal—disunified texts of circumstance, opportunity, the abdication of forethought, and the scorn of social consequences. There is no or little connection across individual pieces—cultural outsiders’ attempts to find a unifying complex narrative of the work would likely prove frustrating. Although White’s copious tattooing is obvious through much of *The Dancing Outlaw*, Young’s framing and the poor quality of the texts and images on Jesco’s body render them for the most part inscrutable. It is impossible not to register their presence, but they go without comment in the final cut of the film. The first direct reference to White’s tattoos has to wait until *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*. The makeup artist preparing White for his *Roseanne* appearance takes note of them. There is a dark humor in the dissonance of this woman, coded as a clean-cut and normative professional, as she tries to make perfunctory small talk about these cultural signifiers that to even the most casual viewer are evidence of trauma and statements of contempt for social decorum. After she singles out his “love/hate” knuckle tattoos, Jesco offers the mitigation—“they all weird looking because they’re jailhouse tattoos”—before detailing the graphic steps involved in producing sewing needle and India ink amateur work. As if he might be freshly escaped from the penitentiary, she whispers low in a concerned/conspiratorial voice, “now where are you from, exactly?” After White replies simply “Boone County,” Young cannot resist punctuating this segment with an intercut of the now iconic beer bottle striking the Boone County sign—an unvoiced visual echoing of a repeated

refrain throughout the *White* films and in other adversarial Appalachian-coded rhetoric: “this is how we do [it] in Boone County/West Virginia/the mountains/the South.”

Tattoos for the encoded Appalachian/hillbilly are just as likely signs of debasement and degradation as of pride and accomplishment—as often as not they are the product of penal incarceration, or produced at home under similar ad-hoc circumstances. The nihilistic texts of the tattoos paired with their aesthetic ugliness imply mortification of both the flesh and the spirit. Punk performer GG Allin, whom we return to several times in this study, displayed tattoos that in the totality of their visual impact are virtually indistinguishable from those of Jesco—prodigious, simplistic, ugly, inchoate and insomuch as they do articulate, convey a message of violence and contempt towards both bourgeois society and the self. Jesco’s prison-produced Nazi-rune hand tattoos, that justifiably incense the Jewish Roseanne Barr during Jesco’s appearance on her show, have little to do with Jesco’s explicit subscription to Fascist doctrine, and are better understood as a by-product of rural white incarceration and historical ignorance. Jesco’s declamation that he doesn’t know what the symbols mean, that they are just prison commonalities, is simultaneously disingenuous and accurate—likely he knew full well that they are unacceptable to bourgeois society and that they convey animus towards a non-white Other, yet his professed ignorance of the “really true” historical particulars of the Holocaust is perhaps even more disturbing for being believable. While Young may have included this sequence to offer *White* a sense of redemption in the eyes of the audience, the protracted length of it within the documentary hints at a more complicated subcultural purpose. On camera, Tom Arnold insists, delicately but firmly, that *White* have the Nazi-iconography covered by professional quality tattoos before leaving Los Angeles and that he himself will facilitate it financially and logistically. Earlier, in an audience warm-up session before taping the *Roseanne* episode, Arnold

jokes about the supposedly copious tattooing on both himself and Barr. While this may be true, the viewer sees no example of it, despite Arnold's rolled-up shirtsleeves and unbuttoned collar. The professional tattoo studio to which Arnold sends White has a framed, autographed portrait of Arnold and Barr on the wall, verifying his claim. Yet their tattoos are safely hidden, socially acceptable in their concealment and confined to the realm of rebellion-as-naughtiness. Furthermore, they are of professional quality—should they make a (partial) appearance, they would be aesthetically and (more) socially acceptable. This reinforces White's authenticity in contrast with Hollywood media and acceptable popular culture by virtue/vice of his tattooing, racist symbology included.<sup>50</sup>

The most compelling segments of *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* occur during the film's final four minutes of run time. Before departing Los Angeles, White appears on a Pacific Ocean beach, dressed in a high camp decadent era-Elvis jumpsuit, complete with gilded cape (see fig. 10). Much like an earlier segment of *The Dancing Outlaw*, White sings along in uncommitted fits and starts with Presley's version of "Let the World Call Me a Fool" blaring from his boom box.<sup>51</sup> On the most superficial level, Young alludes to White's unconcern with how Hollywood, and the American mass media culture it represents, might view him after his *Roseanne* appearance. Yet the most salient impact of this scene is to foreclose the potentiality of Jesco as a popular culture parody. White's working relationship with Young is ended. White's almost-exclusive fixation on Elvis Presley is concluding. The jumpsuit is remarkably cheap-looking and

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<sup>50</sup> I, and likely others that fixate on White, in no way absolve him of responsibility for the signification of Nazi-oriented tattoos. Jesco and other members of the White family never directly articulate opinions on racial matters, though the relentless ubiquity of the Confederate battle flag throughout the White films implies a staggering ignorance as the best case scenario. Although I cannot cite any sociological work on the subject, Mack attests (and I confirm through personal observation) that racist/fascist tattooing is overwhelmingly a matter-of-course for incarcerated underclass rural white men. These individuals likely hold a broad spectrum of beliefs on matters of race, but such tattooing is viewed as a necessary survival strategy in prison.

<sup>51</sup> One might also make something of White/Young's choice to include a very early-era Presley track in *The Dancing Outlaw* and a very late-era Presley track in *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*.

unimpressive for the genre, as if it might have been purchased from some Los Angeles novelty shop for the occasion (one of which White visits earlier in the film, to acquire Elvis-related kitsch). The whole scene is a plastic surface parody of what bourgeois retro-fetishists expect from a favorite “alternative” entertainer. The implication is that much of White’s Elvis obsession was a façade, a conforming to mass media expectations of white-trash. White poses and pantomimes Elvis’ mannerisms, with even Young seemingly non-committal in his camera work and/or editing. And yet, White still manages to subversively defile the scene. The jumpsuit is too small for White—perhaps the only size available for quick purchase, perhaps tailored poorly and for a younger, slimmer White. Obviously lacking underwear, White’s substantial penis lewdly bounces around the crotch of the outfit, adding a layer of sublime disgust to the scene, the libidinal image of the Appalachian grotesque overwhelming, in this instance at least, popular culture attempts at co-option. If Elvis is “a figure of terror and the grotesque” to bourgeois American society, White here manages to essentially defile the grotesque (Sweeney 251). Elvis as figure of socially safe camp and comic transgression is overwhelmed in the end by the hillbilly beast.

[fig. 10 here]

Both during his airport departure and his return, White is seen attended to closely by numerous women. In the return sequence, which looks contrived to parody the assault of groupies on a rock star, the women throw themselves physically at White, mobbing and hanging off of his person. In among them, predictably and somewhat appropriately, is his wife Norma Jean. But at least some members of this Jesco mob are White’s own female family members—his sisters Mamie and Sue Bob are easily identifiable. Two levels of transgressive meaning are at play here. First, White’s attendance by a coterie of women and girls is evocative of the Manson

Family—a charismatic psychologically unstable and violent hillbilly-coded man at the center, the psychic focal point, of multiple women. Secondly, the hillbilly-as-sexual deviant grotesque, the image of White as an erotic center for all female members of his family. Continuing in this vein, Jesco and Norma Jean return home as the film credits roll. The wide angle shot of the White home is overlaid with dialog between husband and wife, referencing for the viewer the “good night, John-boy” segment (in which the members of the Depression-era Virginia mountain family converse before bed against an establishing shot of their farmhouse) that concluded each episode of the wholesome Appalachia television series *The Waltons*. Only in Boone County, instead of innocent well wishes for a good night’s sleep, Norma Jean declares that “tonight should be the night” and White replies that “I want to take you down into the Heartbreak Hotel in the bedroom with me and show you the time of your life”—with each roleplaying as “Elvis” and “Priscilla” (Presley), a sexual trope repeated from *The Dancing Outlaw*. Thus the Appalachian sexual grotesque is able to encompass and defile not just in and of itself, but by absorbing exalted popular culture (the marriage of Elvis and Priscilla) and a paragon of popular culture morality (*The Waltons*). Though the Jacob Young period is completed, the image of White is far from finished with cultural transgressions. Indeed, the subcultural Jesco accelerates in other hands.

### **Perfecting the Punk Jesco in the Appalachian Art House: *White Lightning***

In the intervening years between *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* and before his cinematic re-emergence in the 2010s, White refused an opportunity to appear in a watershed production of Southern/Appalachian cultural fetishization—the 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* In preproduction, Joel and Ethan Coen “had written the part of a crazy hollerin’, dancin’, 1930s

fiddle player with Jesco in mind” yet White allegedly declared “‘I’m not leaving my trailer” (“Comin” 282).<sup>52</sup> Like White’s defiance of Daniel Boone iconography, he spurns the acclaimed filmmakers who would consign his image and significance out of time and into the Great Depression—thereby declaring the hillbilly as a past relic. Significantly, White’s succinct response is couched in terms of a regional iconography (the trailer) that emphasizes the present reality (and commitment) of his residence in an industrial society manufactured housing intimately associated with the present lived conditions of many Appalachian residents.

*White Lightnin’* is an ultimately offensive, rankly exploitative attempt by British and Canadian filmmakers and actors to produce an art house (heavily) fictionalization of White’s life. Screenwriter Shane Smith is co-founder of VICE Media, “the Hipster Bible....preaching a jaded worldview,” and a former punk rock musician (Moore 144). Yet their perspective is transparently one of anthropological and sociological desire for an idealized/stylized American South/Appalachia and, to their minds, the sincere and desirable absurdist savagery it represents. They want, to a degree, to emulate this identity through their mediation:

Shane [Smith] was excited about this guy [White], interested in his extreme personality and his whole culture. He reimagined Jesco’s story and came up with a more extreme version of what might have happened to him.... As a director, or creative person, writer, whatever, you’re kind of writing about yourself as much as anything else. (Murphy)

A review connects *White Lightnin’* to the Internet Age and increasing disparity between lived reality and biographical narrative, noting that the film “is obsessed with mood and the

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<sup>52</sup> In the early twenty-first century, Appalachian film projects attract filmmakers with strong independent cinema credentials—in addition to the Coens, Gus Van Sant allegedly considered an Appalachian-set project and post-punk icon Nick Cave wrote the screenplay for and appeared briefly in the 2013 Appalachian-Virginia film *Lawless*. See “Coax-a-Hoax.”

possibilities of character free from sterile factoids. It's a Wikipedia version of a life freely edited by mad men" ("White Noise" 156). The same reviewer favorably compared *White Lightnin'* with Todd Haynes' postmodern Bob Dylan biopic *I'm Not There*; primarily involved in commercial advertisement work, filmmaker Dominic Murphy previously directed a documentary about Alejandro Jodorowsky, once again connecting the visual rhetorics used in explicating Jesco White with subcultural art house films. To code the film as visually experimental, it is shot in a shimmering combination of black and white, with frequent overlays of severely desaturated color. Furthermore, both IFC (the Independent Film Channel) and Sundance were involved in the film's distribution. In confirming its subcultural punk credentials, Murphy's film is scored by Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs member Nick Zinner ("White Noise" 157).

Deep, oppositional readings of this film reveal just how firmly the idea of Appalachia as a site of highbrow subcultural longing has taken hold. The backdrop of the opening credits references the filmmakers themselves and others who would fetishize-by-depiction contemporary Appalachia—the aforementioned and anthropology-endorsed D. Ray White (Muse Watson) dances on a television screen, with the tape artifacts of lining and degraded pixilation in evidence from the tight and partial framing of the character. The film camera only catches over-zoomed and unlevel snippets of D. Ray's video performance, a common visual technique in subcultural punk art that emphasizes the nefariousness of broadcast/recorded media as a capital "M".<sup>53</sup> Intercut with these degraded broadcast images is Young's introductory footage, direct from the *Dancing Outlaw* film, of the Boone County community near White's mobile home. In both productions, the purpose of these shots is to establish the broken and degraded nature of the Appalachian landscape—aged mobile homes with doors thrown open to the air, consumer

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<sup>53</sup> The technique is a relentlessly common trope in the Industrial music genre, evident in any number of videos. See Autechre's "Second Bad Vilbel" (1995).

debris scattered around the dirt patch attempting to pass for a yard, parents and children staring at the camera with a mix of curiosity and wary distrust. Yet Murphy slows down this footage, emphasizing a longing and fetishization. The switch between D. Ray's (acted) performance and the ("real") community wasteland speaks to the dissonance between the pastoral "folk" Appalachian-anthropology site of desire, and appeal of the "real" Appalachia, with its dirt, decay, and threat. In the most simple terms, Murphy claims that what follows is a rendering of "real" ugly Appalachia in defiance of an over-mediated "nice" Appalachia.

A clear statement of Generation X subcultural punk longing in *White Lightning* involves the placement of Jesco White in time. The actual Jesco White was born in 1956, making him an (admittedly youthful-looking) 33/34 during the filming of *The Dancing Outlaw*. Thus his age places him *outside* the parameters of Generation X and, therefore, beyond immediate identification for punk viewers of the early 1990s. Murphy's Jesco, however, is temporally shifted into the Generation X cohort. An early adolescence Jesco is shuffled by police into a mid-1980s vintage cruiser, placing his birthdate at some point in the mid 1970s.

From the outset of *White Lightning*, the film fixates on the purported roiling, individualized violence of Appalachia. Within the first two minutes of run time, a young Jesco White (Owen Campbell) is high on inhalants and gouging a crucifix into his forearm with an absurdly oversized safety pin. In a staging repeated throughout the film, young Jesco lies on the floor, bloodied, smeared and encrusted with grime—as if that were his most natural, even exalted, state.

As noted above in the discussion of *Jesco Goes to Hollywood*, the racial politics of the White documentary films are problematic even if they are not foregrounded. However, *White Lightning* exceeds all of them in its disingenuous and offensive attempts to imbue Jesco, and

Appalachia more broadly, with a sense of racial solidarity and the imprimatur of violence against Appalachians as a raced minority—all attempts to make White and Appalachia fit more comfortably into a Left/liberal subcultural context. Claims to a persecuted ethnic identity on a level with racial minorities is nothing new to contemporary Appalachian representation—Kentucky writer Chris Offutt downplays his whiteness and posits connections of solidarity with other ethnic groups, claiming to “prefer the company of Indians and Chicanos....African-Americans and people from the Caribbean. We were all hillbillies of the soul” (Offutt, *No Heroes* 148).<sup>54</sup> The fictional Jesco learns how to defend himself in juvenile detention, with a toothbrush shiv, from a black fellow prisoner. Jesco describes the community-minded spirit of the fictional D. Ray, the camera pans across an interracial couple being served food by Jesco’s mother while Jesco narrates: “they used to all come out [to the White household] the cripples, the homeless, the colored folks....everyone was welcome at ours, that was the way D.R. liked it.” The most troubling moment of racial tone-deafness occurs later in the film, in the details of D. Ray’s murder. After a dance performance, D. Ray is walking home and is accosted by two inebriated white working class men in a pickup truck, one of whom prominently displays a Confederate flag on his shirt. The confrontation seems random, though perhaps the viewer is meant to connect D. Ray’s persecution with his openness to racial co-mingling. While verbally harassing him, a middle-aged white man, the two “rednecks,” both in their late 20s/early 30s, address him with the racially-fraught “boy”—a convention *extremely* unlikely in such an exchange. They then proceed to loop a metal cable around his neck and drag him to death behind

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<sup>54</sup> Such sentiments are not confined to fiction/memoir: scholar J. W. Williamson in *Hillbillyland* claims “Indians have been seen as hillbillies by many people” (20).

their pickup—all following an established sequence of racially-motivated lynching.<sup>55</sup> When Jesco later confronts the murderers, they other Jesco by spitting the label “hillbilly” at him as a slur—although they themselves seeming to conform to all the usual stereotypical visual markers of that appellation. At a dance performance, Jesco’s musical accompaniment, Bob, refuses to enter the establishment owing to the presence of blacks in the audience (“I don’t like playing for no niggers”). Jesco dismisses his concern, stating “they’s no problem” and that he “knows a whole load of them” from his incarceration and that he “had no problem with them blacks....I’ve been with them in Melwood [prison] and I had no quarrel....no quarrel at all.” Events then test Jesco’s anti-racist resolve, when during his dance performance he perceives his romantic partner Priscilla (Carrie Fisher) to be flirting with two black men at the bar. Jesco confronts one of the men, holding a pistol to his head. The audience expects, given the earlier exchange with Bob, that in such a moment of rage Jesco will vent his murderous anger in racist invective that will contradict his previous statement and thus further emphasize his instability. Instead, Jesco sticks to “you son-of-a-bitch motherfucker.” Thus the hillbilly is capable of extreme violence, but not racialized violence.

Much of the narrative in *White Lightnin’* does roughly follow the contours of Jesco White’s life as presented in *The Dancing Outlaw*, particularly his relationship with the fictional Priscilla (a representation of Norma Jean White). Yet this aspect of the film, this relationship, is perhaps the most oppositional and transgressive statement that *White Lightnin’* makes to bourgeois popular culture, both in the film narrative itself and in the extratextual weight of the casting. Priscilla is played by Carrie Fisher, an actor whose notoriety rests primarily on her

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<sup>55</sup> Specifically, this is the 1998 lynching of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas—a crime that received extensive media coverage for months. Particularly given screenwriter Smith’s association with VICE Media, the parallels are very unlikely to be by chance.

performances as Princess Leia Organa in the popular culture milestone *Star Wars* film franchise. The impact of these films on American (and global) mass media consciousness is difficult, particularly for the generation (X) that experienced their artistic and commercial onslaught as children and adolescents. For many in that demographic, Fisher IS Princess Leia—one of the earliest erotic loci and/or point of self-identification/emulation for popular culture consumers who came of age in the 1980s . Seeing such a libidinal icon “reduced” to a drawling naïve consort of degenerate hillbilly man-child Jesco is arguably the most impactful element of *White Lightnin’*.<sup>56</sup> It is an intentional trampling underfoot of popular culture nostalgia—filmmakers in essence obliterating the childhood idols/sexual icons of Generation X, to the potential acclaim of subcultural consumers that place themselves in opposition to the longings of their own socio-cultural psychic underpinnings.

Fisher’s *White Lightnin’* scenes are difficult to unpack. The specific contours of Jesco White’s marriage to Norma Jean White (in the Young documentaries) underscore his Appalachian deviance from social and sexual norms, with the age disparity between them and her relative awkwardness defining points. The respective ages of Fisher and Hogg at the time of filming roughly correlate with the ages of Jesco and Norma Jean in *Dancing Outlaw*. A dissonance occurs here because the physical appearance of Fisher in 2009 does not align with our erotic object of the early 1980s. But yet she is still Carrie Fisher/Princess Leia and she is now, as graphically filmed by Murphy, sexually involved with a boyish and degenerate hillbilly malcontent. *White Lightnin’* transgresses and antagonizes popular culture nostalgia by defiling

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<sup>56</sup> Fisher is by far the most professionally established and recognizable member of the film’s cast, and her presence seems a rank anomaly—as if it must surely be a different “Carrie Fisher.” I’ve yet to find any stated explanation of what compelled her to take this part. It’s subjective aesthetic judgment, but alone among the cast Fisher seems to be playing her role with a sense of parody. Given Fisher’s storied irreverence for both herself and the film industry, I suspect she may have been intentionally overacting in such a pretentious film and/or enjoyed defacing her own iconic image.

Fisher-as-erotic-ideal. Jesco and Priscilla engage in graphic sex, while White casually (and callously) assesses her erotic skills as excellent (despite her age). In perhaps the most graphically sexual scene, Princess Leia-as-Priscilla performs oral sex on Jesco (with hot chili peppers in her mouth). A large Confederate battle flag is draped across the wall behind the scene, upsetting further a sense of ideological propriety. Finding the peppers too hot, Jesco saturates Priscilla's head and torso with a glass of water in a simulacrum of ejaculation. Adding to the complexity of this scene, it begins with a conversation between Jesco and Priscilla over a potential egg-based breakfast. Their dialog directly references a scene in *The Dancing Outlaw*, wherein Jesco voices his intense disdain for "runny eggs." In the documentary, Jesco threatens Norma Jean with death if she does not prepare breakfast to his liking. Like so much of *The Dancing Outlaw*, the scene is both an uncomfortable glimpse of domestic violence and plays for laughs (essentially, "hillbillies are so funny—they'll kill each other over eggs"). Smith, the screenwriter, dodges this problematic (and introduces another) by having the same egg discourse result in fellatio instead of murder threats. Sex and homicide, all the same to the Appalachian.

Establishing Fisher/Princess Leia/Priscilla as a figure that dominates the psyche of the fictional Jesco and of the Generation X subcultural viewer is central to situating the latter as a culturally oppositional Appalachian figure. Priscilla seeks to reform Jesco, to steer him away from the rampant substance abuse and the violent outbursts that characterize his life—to, in essence, align with bourgeois cultural dictates. But Jesco, the degenerate oppositional hillbilly, bristles at these demands—torn, like the Generation X subcultural viewer, between desire and contempt for popular culture representative Princess Leia. After assaulting Priscilla while she showers (in a blatant reference to *Psycho*—Princess Janet Leigh-a), Jesco threatens her with a broken glass liquor bottle, before the turning the provisional weapon on himself and

stabbing/slicing his arm repeatedly in an inarticulate attempt at suicidal release. Jesco survives, barely, noting that Priscilla was so distraught as to be useless in efforts to save his life. Later, a severely agitated Jesco, desperate for the release of intoxication and the freedom of his old life, stalks around the confines of his and Priscilla's mobile home. Seemingly intended to keep him distracted from his customary debauchery, Jesco's hobby is creating images with woodburning—essentially creating woodcut illustrations but with a superheated wand. The works he has produced line the walls of the mobile home and Jesco sits at a small kitchen table in the corner, comported like a grade school child at homework. After succumbing to his frustration and binging on inhalants in Priscilla's temporary absence, an intoxicated Jesco encounters her returning. In a childlike tantrum, Jesco returns to his desk/table and takes up the woodburning stylus. Priscilla recognizes his state and flees, for good, with Jesco shooting at her. The implication in this scene is that the popular culture (Princess Leia) place for the hillbilly is calmly producing (neo) folk art that references his own novelty culture—the works Jesco produces superficially resemble any number of outsider artists and their like is available at sites of bourgeois consumption: urban farmers' markets, community art galleries, regional tourist gift shops. But Jesco White cannot be tamed by this—his oppositional hillbilly streak and his self-loathing, so central to his being, cannot/will not allow him to become a genteel regional spectacle. He may become an Appalachian spectacle, but of a more direct and adversarial kind.

For all of its surface excesses and exploitative tropes, the final scenes of *White Lightning* in which Hogg performs solo do produce some visually compelling compositions. Indeed, Murphy attributes receipt of UK Film Board funding for *White Lightning* (after initial hesitation) to a pilot reel of Hogg working through what would become the film's final images. Having graphically tortured and slain his father's murderers, Jesco flees deeper and deeper into the

Appalachian forest. In his rapidly deteriorating psychological state, Jesco is pursued by a narration of hackneyed and ad-libbed Christian Fundamentalist sermonizing—that the viewer eventually realizes are coming from the decomposed corpse of a hermitical family friend with whom Jesco seeks to hide.<sup>57</sup> Convinced that his blood and body are literally contaminated by evil as a biological pathogen, Jesco engages in extensive self-mutilation—cutting, burning, and amputating parts of his body. Much like the presence of Carrie Fisher/Princess Leia, these scenes engage in a visual rhetoric that challenges bourgeois popular culture. The final images of Jesco reference, simultaneously, the punk masochism of GG Allin, the cult-orientation of Charles Manson, and filmic representations of the Vietnam War.

Hardcore punk performer/performance artist GG Allin (1956-1993) constructed his persona around extreme acts of public masochism and graphic self-abnegation. Spouting hyper-nihilistic rhetoric and avowing disdain for humanity ( himself very much included), Allin serves as perhaps the most extreme example of punk rock societal contempt. Usually performing naked and shaven, a raging Allin would cut and beat himself while intermittently assaulting audience members whom he fully expected (and desired) to return physical violence on his body. He would also rain all available bodily excretions—blood, urine, feces—on both himself and his audience. Covered in piecemeal amateur tattoos indistinguishable from those of both the real and fictive Jesco White, offstage Allin indulged in low decadence of all sorts, from heroin to overeating. As mentioned in the Introduction, despite being born and raised in New England, Allin was often coded as an admixture of hillbilly/Appalachian/Southern. As the Jesco of *White Lightin'* mutilates himself in the film's final act, he increasingly comes to resemble the figure of

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<sup>57</sup> These “sermon interludes” that occur throughout the film are, in my opinion, the worst part of the production. They are mostly incoherent ramblings meant to *sound* disturbingly Appalachian and condemnatory, delivered in a revoltingly contrived dialect/inflection.

Allin. Deep bloody self-inflicted gashes in his arm collaborate with the aesthetically displeasing prison tattooing. Streaks of watery blood cover Jesco's body, along with a veneer of sweat and unspecific grime. While not nude like Allin, Jesco wears only loose-fitting pants that fall beneath his hips, threatening to reveal his genitalia in a manner similar to Allin's willing erotic disgrace. Allin displayed a Jean Genet-esque desire to break his body and his ego in tandem. Jesco articulates a similar desire to punish his contaminated body and efface his personality through introspective pain.

Although this study conflates an image of Jesco White with that of Charles Manson, it is important to note that in both *Dancing Outlaw* and *Jesco Goes to Hollywood* the titular character makes no mention of the cult-leader. White's willing connection of himself to Manson does not occur, on film at least, until *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. Yet *White Lightning* does make an overt White-Manson connection through one of Jesco's woodburning pieces, centered on the wall behind his work area. The piece is a caricatured depiction of Manson and White together. Unlike the real White, the actor Hogg more closely matches Manson's slim frame and height. With his unkempt beard and greasy long hair framing his face, the fictional Jesco resembles a pretrial Manson.

The punk subculture deploys the images and sounds of Manson and the Vietnam War as scarecrows against the Baby Boom/Countercultural/Hippie generation that preceded them. While punks and hippies may be in sympathy with regards to a base level of Leftist/Liberal political commitment, punk holds the hippie archetype in contempt for its seeming willingness to "sell out" and comport itself to bourgeois U.S. national values. In discussing his own filmography, and his fixation on the cult-leader, John Waters notes that "Manson was the ultimate hippie boogey man" and "The whole movement of scaring hippies was punk" (Waters "Manson

Family”). Despite the existence of groups like the Weather Underground, punk subculture takes hippies to task for non-violent peace and love ethos, and the esoteric contention that everything is all right, even when it is not all right.<sup>58</sup> Punk senses that for all the trauma of the Vietnam War, the hippie generation refuses to dwell on the horrors of that, or any, military conflict—that while they obviously believed the war was wrong and organized against it, they refused to let the minutia of exploded and burned bodies “harsh” their search for personal and communal contentment. Punk senses a delusion in the hippie belief that a U.S. society teetering on fascism could be redeemed through positive thoughts and pacifistic hope. Consequently, the iconography of the Vietnam War appeals to Generation X subcultural punks as a way to torment their now comfortable parents that lived through the historical period. Punk uses these images to remind, to torment, to condemn—saying in essence, “you want to forget this, locate it safely in the past, but it’s not over, you fixed nothing, this violence and the national forces that demand it are still in place, perhaps even accelerating.” In short, the punk subculture uses the imagery of Vietnam to break their now socially and economically secure parents with a reminder of their own failure in the moment and their own continuing complicity (and the more graphic that reminder, the better).

One of clearest integrations of mediated Vietnam War references in Generation X subculture occurs with audio samples in the Industrial, punk, and sludge metal music genres. These are performers and consumers raised on a host of Vietnam War-related films, across the spectrum from jingoistic Cold War lumpen propaganda, like the *Rambo* trilogy and a host of lesser B-grade emulations, to critically acclaimed Left critiques of the Vietnam conflict specifically and war overall. Numerous tracks of the period use clips from films like *Apocalypse*

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<sup>58</sup> The most concise statement of this attitude remains Skinny Puppy’s 1989 track “Tin Omen,” the lyrics and album art of which both contain Manson references.

*Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).<sup>59</sup> The final images of Jesco in *White Lightnin'* are virtually indistinguishable from depictions of the tired, jaded, and maimed American foot soldier of these films. Jesco's loose-fitting trousers closely resemble fatigue pants. His forehead is wrapped in an olive drab bandana, and around his neck hang objects that resemble military identification tags. His bloody cuts, his own smeared visceral fluids that cover him, and his bandaged amputations resemble combat wounds. And he enacts his final ordeal deep in a tightly wooded setting, easily coded as jungle. We will return to the Appalachia-as-Vietnam in the following chapter on West Virginia writer Pinckney Benedict and his novel *Dogs of God*, but in this moment, the Appalachian subcultural punk Jesco bodily displays the anxieties and shame of his generational predecessors, trying to purge them from his own body as graphically as possible.

[fig. 11 here]

[fig. 12 here]

### **False Bill of Sale: *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia***

Like *White Lightnin'*, Julien Nitzberg's *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* attempts to perfect Jesco—and members of his family—as subcultural oppositional figures. Nitzberg earned his first production credit on *The Dancing Outlaw*, but both he and *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* producer Storm Taylor expressed dissatisfaction with the earlier film's depiction of White—pointedly declaring that their project “is not a *Dancing Outlaw Part 3*, but a reintroduction to Jesco and the entire family” and that “it be done correctly”

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<sup>59</sup> Despite commercial success, critical acclaim, and industry awards, *Full Metal Jacket* has arguably also become a cult film solely from the use of audio samples in subcultural alternative music genres.

(“New Steps” 16).<sup>60</sup> The final (as of this writing) long-form installment in the White filmography, *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, was blatantly conceived as essentially a film-length pilot for a Whites-based reality show on MTV. The commercial failure of this film marks the transition/cleavage of the Appalachian/hillbilly cultural figure. This figure goes from a deep connection with 1990s-2000s subcultural longing to a fully bourgeois co-opted image of popular culture-reinforcement and blatantly-reactionary politics—all expressed through the proliferating reality television genre. The network’s creative expectations were thwarted spectacularly. The original film trailer is a staccato assault on the senses in which choice acts of White family violence, narcotics-usage, and sex are interwoven to a pulsing hard rock and punk rock soundtrack. After county authorities recount the lengthy list of the Whites’ specific criminal charges, a title card “from the people that brought you *Jackass*” appears as an endorsement of what follows. Thus the trailer promises a film that continues the format of that commercially successful long-running MTV franchise, in which young men intentionally brutalize themselves in increasingly risky physical stunts. Yet instead of a shallow, popularly accessible piece of voyeurism, Nitzberg delivers a nuanced, sympathetic depiction of the Appalachian underclass, executed with depth and subtlety and refusing to conceal the mundane traumas of both family and community: the compulsory removal of a White newborn by social services, the hospitalization and death of the family matriarch, the pretrial maneuverings of a young White male facing decades of incarceration. This is partly achieved by backgrounding White and his established celebrity and instead focusing on the extended White family, particularly the women, and the fraught, economically-divided, extractive industry-based community in which they exist.

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<sup>60</sup> “Dancing for the Folks” (AJ 35.4, Summer 2008)

MTV began its reality television orientation with *The Real World*, yet still managed to produce *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. The Whites didn't behave in the manner desired/anticipated by MTV producers—the irony of which is that they sought misbehavior, just not of the variety that Nitzberg delivered. MTV wanted spontaneous misbehavior without explanation—the jerky isolated clips of stereotypically crazed hillbillies who tautologically snort meth because meth is snorted by crazed hillbillies. Nitzberg attempted to elide context and causation. The film performs powerful work in dismantling the notion of an economically homogenous Appalachia—there is a social elite, a middle-class, and a working/underclass, even in an area coded nationally as a twentieth- and twenty-first-century white peasant homeland. The Whites could not or would not transition, and proved resistant to overt co-option—at least to the degree and in the broadly consumable manner demanded by basic cable television. Instead, the project of commodifying Appalachian/hillbilly identity had to be produced whole-cloth. We have a battle between the Whites and the Robertsons of the *Duck Dynasty* reality television franchise that follows in the immediate wake of *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*—one family that could not be brought “up” to the level of socially-acceptable co-option were replaced by another family that could be brought “down” to a novel image-commodity. Jesco and the other Whites move deeper into an association with a subculture—more dangerous, more depraved, more threatening to social mores as their depictions accumulate. The Robertsons are the White image of wildness, of independence and rebellion, co-opted and domesticated, stripped of overt antisocial violence, sexuality, and criminality, and repurposed as national conservative values—a return to the image of Daniel Boone that the Whites and their mediators work so hard to undo.

The dialogue-debate between Young and Nitzberg begs the question: do we prefer the Jesco and the other Whites with no context—as figures thrust upon our screen to be interpreted by the viewer and perhaps only really understood by insiders—by consumers who may have distant connection to similar communities and the families that inhabit them? Or do we benefit more from Nitzberg’s guided vision, of how these people come to be, of the community and the circumstances in which they move?

## Chapter 2—Mountain Terror: Pinckney Benedict's *Dogs of God*

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, fiction set in the Appalachian region consisted largely of close knit family/community narratives, wherein the pastoral hardship of Appalachia provides an anvil for forging character. Williams described this fiction as a fusion of the “national trend” towards literary realism with “antiquarianism and increased emphasis on the folk quality of the Southern mountaineers” (335).<sup>61</sup> During the Depression, the mountaineer was briefly co-opted for the blatantly ideological proletarian novels of Olive Tilford Dargan and Grace Lumpkin, which focused on his degradation when funneled into the mills of the Piedmont (Williams 349-51). However, “mountain people themselves” begin to pen these works, such as James Still with *River of Earth* (1940) and Harriette Arnow with *Hunter's Horn* (1954) (Williams 354). Then, in Appalachian fiction's next chronological “phase,” the mountains transform into a sinister wasteland where the simple, yet stalwart mountaineer of an earlier century re-emerges as either an unreasoning, utterly regressed savage (James Dickey's *Deliverance*) or as a tragic, Quasimodo-like pariah (Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*). At this point, however, the Appalachian character's deficiencies and eccentricities and his disordered landscape stand in stark contrast to the broader expanse of American society: the attributes of “backwardness” and natural savagery are no longer dismissed with automatic prejudice.

As Williams notes in the conclusion of *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction*, post-World War II Appalachia “held a new fascination for writers who wished to emphasize ‘early American’ styles of living to their countrymen harassed with the demands of an industrial civilization and plagued with fears that civilization itself might collapse” (391). Thus, in at least one case, in the 1970s, the primitive lifestyle of the mountaineer is presented in an unqualified

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<sup>61</sup> Williams identifies the beginnings of these conventions in the (mostly) juvenile fiction of Mary and Stanley (Maristan) Chapman (336-42).

favorable way—Gurney Norman’s *Divine Right’s Trip*, in which Appalachia is reconceived as a damaged and exploited Eden, and her inhabitants are generous, loving people, living in communal relationship with their environment and each other, in dramatic contrast to the social fragmentation and confusion existing in characters from outside the region. The reverse side of the same coin occurs in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, in which representatives of a soft, suburban America must come to grips with the challenges offered by both the Appalachian wilderness and the mountaineer and in the process inherit or reclaim the skills of such a mythic character.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, Appalachian literature synthesizes (in true postmodern fashion) all these previous elements to one degree or another. Works of romantic pastoral environmentalism (Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*) exist alongside coal mining labor-related historical fiction (Denise Giardina’s *Storming Heaven*). But an important shift occurs in the number of contemporary published writers defining themselves as “Appalachian writers,” if not explicitly with that term, at least by accentuating a close, personal connection to the Appalachian region and its people to confirm the authenticity of their respective works. Essentially, 100-plus years of Appalachian fiction as an identifiable literary category testifies to the evolution of that fiction from the province of “outsider” writers to “insider” writers. But while much of the motivation underlying outsider depictions of the region receive scholarly attention, as in the work of Shapiro, Williamson, and Harkins, the purposes behind “insider” regional representation have received far less critical treatment.

Benedict’s writing *celebrates* (for lack of a better word) a vision of the region as a place that is untamed, violent, and “backwards” (in the sense of refusing the dictates of mainstream American society). This fictional vision has antecedents drawn from the several previous eras of Appalachian-themed fiction. Furthermore, Benedict reinterprets and re-contextualizes the very

traits that provide a negative stereotype of the Appalachian region and its people. That is, they take the attributes that consistently define the “other” of mainstream American values: violent inclinations, refusal to embrace mainstream ideological/moral imperatives, and resistance to progress—and turn them into a positive, “heroic” or, more correctly, “anti-heroic” vision of the region that proudly offers an almost militant counterpoint to their correspondingly negative vision of mainstream America.<sup>62</sup> Such realignment of symbols confirms Anthony Harkins’s point in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*: “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” (3).

Attempts at understanding the mountaineer’s place in the American consciousness are far from lacking. The “grandfather” of Appalachian Studies as an academic discipline, Cratis D. Williams, inaugurated such analysis with his exhaustive doctoral dissertation *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction* (1961). Prior to Williams’s overview of the mountaineer in both literature and reality, the subject had received a modest degree of scholarly attention: Ruth Fretwell Lewis’s circa 1929 Master’s thesis “The Southern Mountaineer in Fiction,” John Angus McLeod’s 1930 Master’s thesis “The Southern Highlands in Prose Fiction,” and Carvel Collins 1944 dissertation “The Literary Tradition of the Southern Mountaineer, 1824-1900.” While each of these works can be considered a valuable early contribution, none approaches the exhaustive scope achieved by Williams. In his comprehensive sweep (of 1600+ pages), Williams covers the cultural perception of the Southern mountaineer starting with his antebellum “literary ancestors” through the Civil War, after which “the mountaineer becomes separated in fiction from the

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<sup>62</sup> “The highlander was also frequently in conflict with the standards and ideals of what might be somewhat nebulously called a lower middle-class culture” (Williams 210).

pioneer, the hunter, and the backwoodsman” (Williams 101). Williams’s thorough overview continues through the travel writing and local color writing genres, up to roughly “the eve of the centennial of the Civil War” and the literary era of James Dickey and Cormac McCarthy and their depictions of the mountaineer as depraved backwoods savage (Williams 391). Although their work is beyond the time-frame of Williams’s study, he mentions a mountaineer precursor to characters found in Benedict’s writing:

The feuds of the mountaineer and his struggle to reject values forced upon him by the invasion of capital with its attendant influences if he stayed in the mountains, or by values surrounding him if he migrated, lent themselves easily to manipulation by formula into the blood-and-thunder plot of the popular thriller that proved most remunerative to the skilled artificer. (Williams 210)

In his 1995 study of hillbilly iconography in American cinema *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*, scholar J. W. Williamson “extend[s] *Appalachia On Our Mind* into and through the pop culture that followed the period examined by Shapiro” (Williamson, “Remembering” 137). *Hillbillyland* invaluable defines six archetypes of the mountaineer outsider: the Fool (the “no-account” lazy “natural man” who never quite seems to grasp the dictates of civilization), the Frontiersman (the wild-man hunter who clears a path through the wilderness for the benefit of the very civilization he holds in contempt), the Social Bandit (the outlaw who fights righteously against civilization’s oppressions, almost always to the death), the Good Old Boy (the contemporary popular culture merging of the Fool and the Social Bandit), and the Monster (the depraved enemy of society, who gives in to supposedly irresistible naturally inherent desires for sex and violence).

For the purposes of this study, Williamson's view of the hillbilly as social bandit is perhaps the most important. This is the archetypal construct chosen by Benedict, the foundation for his vision of the late twentieth-century Appalachian hero. Examples from Williamson's other character categories make appearances in the selected texts, but in subordinate roles to the primary social bandit hero. Furthermore, as detailed later, some of the more odious attributes formerly connected with the hillbilly stereotype are transferred onto the heroic mountaineer's numerous adversaries.

As many studies of the media representations of Appalachia attest, the archetypal hillbilly and his highland home have supposedly resisted mainstream American acculturation since both were left behind in the wake of America's Manifest Destiny western expansion. For over a hundred years, since the very inception of the distinct hillbilly image, Southern mountaineer obstinacy in the face of the supposedly bounteous rewards of American citizenship has been looked upon as a deficiency—intellectually, morally, and/or genetically. But as questions of American society's moral sanctity were thrust more and more into the social discourse (as a result of political flashpoints like Vietnam, Watergate, and the persisting trickle-down economics ideology of Reaganomics), a figure and region that had for so long resisted, rebelled against, or ignored the dictates of such a society is well-placed to serve as an appealing, subversive rallying point for political progressives.

### **Vietnam in the Alleghenies**

John Alexander Williams states that “in the new terrain of globalized market capitalism, the combination of exploitation and per/re-sistance, of crises and renewal, that Appalachian history manifests may turn out to be instructive to every dweller in the postmodern world”

(*History* 18). This statement applies in similar measure to Appalachian literature. Pinckney Benedict's *Dogs of God* in many ways depicts exactly this struggle. Furthermore, the natural environment of the region itself does combat with these very forces of economic exploitation. Indeed, the persistence and resistance that Williams mentions are the very hallmarks of Benedict's work.

As Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* reveals, protagonists strikingly similar to those presented by Benedict are not exceptionally Appalachian; in the post-Vietnam era which Slotkin labels as "Revisionist Western," cynical, stoic, non-ideological<sup>63</sup> heroes are appearing in numerous environmental and situational contexts: Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* and the subsequent film adaptation, the off-shore "Spaghetti Westerns" of the 1960s and '70s, the *Mad Max/Road Warrior* film series of the 1980s, and the musical phenomenon of urban gangster rap in the 1990s are only a few superficially disparate examples of this mythically idealized desire for resistance and rebellion (violent if necessary) evinced by fictional and quasi-fictional representatives of justifiably disgruntled populations in American society. And the mountaineer has become a prime character in this societal rebellion.

In Benedict's Appalachia, the tools of American military might are arrayed in the service of the region's enemies. DEA pilot Loomis flies his Vietnam-era helicopter with the same civilian-harassing impunity as he did during his actual Vietnam service:

They [Carmichael and Loomis] were maybe a dozen feet off the deck ... The boat lay directly in their path, oars loose in the rowlocks and trailing in the water. As they bore down on it, a man sat up in the stern. Carmichael, thinking that the copter would decapitate the boatman, squeezed his eyes shut. (37)

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<sup>63</sup> A better description of these characters might be "non-aligned," as they have no allegiance to anything besides themselves and/or their immediate community.

When telling the story of an ill-fated military training exercise that used Appalachia as a surrogate for Vietnam, Loomis explicitly states a parallel between the natural environments of the two regions: “Apparently the fog here [in the West Virginia mountains] has exactly the same consistency, same density, as what you encounter on the Mekong Delta” (207). At another point in the novel, Loomis also recommends a Vietnam-esque defoliation project as a cure for all forms of Appalachian malfeasance:

You know what you ought to do, you DEA guys ... if you really want to clear out the dope? ... Acquire a few squadrons of choppers, maybe a dozen heavy sections, and load us up with some kick-ass defoliant. Give us Agent Orange, or whatever new thing you might have, something even hotter. Let us loose to scald the hills with it. Just scald them and scrub them clean.... (42)

The ruined resort/prison-turned-marijuana-growing-operation El Dorado becomes under Tannhauser’s administration “Just like a firebase in Nam”—a central compound protected by a configuration of booby-traps and anti-personnel mines, and with its own improvised airstrip (175). El Dorado’s arsenal is rife with Vietnam-era associations: Claymore mines, M-16 assault rifles, and napalm (even if the latter is of a more improvised composition than the government-issued original). Furthermore, his Mingo Indian scouts wear “tiger-stripe fatigues,” a camouflage pattern born of the Vietnam conflict and still heavily associated with it (Benedict 64, 204).<sup>64</sup> Even Tannhauser’s weapons delivery service—the two pilots and their antiquated DC-3 aircraft—seem to have previous associations with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and clandestine struggles against Third World rural insurgencies, as their résumé includes “running

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<sup>64</sup> Tiger-stripe camouflage was associated, during the Vietnam conflict, with elite/covert units (many of which operated outside of traditional military parameters). In keeping with the Vietnam-as-Western theme, the John Wayne film *The Green Berets* (identified by Slotkin as a prime example of the allegory) features the heroes wearing just such a relatively uncommon camouflage pattern.

weapons and personnel down to Cuba, Central America, that sort of thing” (Benedict 30). Such activity, including the ethnically/nationally ambiguous financiers Bodo and Tomo who are also passengers on that plane, evokes the Vietnam War’s Air America project—popularly believed to be a guns-for-drugs operation, and therefore an historical analogue to Tannhauser’s operation.

### **Wild Boar Uprising and Deep Green Retribution**

By the extensive use of lengthy seductive descriptions of the landscape, the ultimate Enviro-Anarchy Deep Green Resistance, Benedict emphasizes the importance of the natural environment in the contemporary era of Appalachian fiction. Yet this is not a new characteristic of the regional literature. As Cratis Williams points out, early pastoral Appalachian fiction was often “padded with interminable descriptions of the landscape” that extol the beauty of mist-covered slopes and “perpetuates the exaggerated height of the Southern mountains as reported first by travelers” (147, 145). These contemporary novels emphasize all aspects of the mountain terrain, both the breathtaking and the terrible. Benedict’s West Virginia landscape often seems more like a threatening green morass—more akin to a Third World jungle rather than the temperate hardwood forests we would expect.

The Appalachian mountain ecosystem itself violently challenges the outside invaders—quite simply, the villains cannot survive, much less subdue, this natural world. Benedict embraces the trepidation that mountains elicit in the popular imagination and uses such apprehension as building blocks in their statements of opposition to outside encroachment. A depiction of overgrown mountains (in both physical size and vegetative cover) provides the perfect setting for stories that challenge mainstream America because, as Williamson states in *Hillbillyland*, since the earliest days of Western Civilization, “mountains...seemed beyond mere

logic and offered challenges to control” (18). Essentially, these authors re-visit a literary trope in which the mountaineers believe that trees are “sentient growths”—a convention that Cratis Williams identified in the early twentieth-century Appalachian fiction of John Fox, Jr., Neville Buck, and Jesse Stuart (339n).<sup>65</sup> In *Dogs of God* the natural environment undoes the villainous American hegemon at least as much as any other opposing element such as the hero and/or other competing villains.

The frequent appearances of canines within Benedict’s *Dogs of God* evince significant distinctions relating to an Appalachian/United States dichotomy. Goody’s elderly landlord Inchcape is a listless yet prickly character in the mold of the old rawboned, lazy hillbilly stereotype of local color writing. Inchcape’s somnambulistic yet imposing watchdog Tonto is an “immense Great Pyrenees”—a hardy breed associated with a mountainous region and a non-white, culturally defiant group of European mountaineers (the Basques of the Spanish/French borderland) (Benedict 16). Tannhauser’s adopted canine is “a handsome, savage-looking malamute”—a dog associated (like Tannhauser’s henchman Yukon) with the Alaskan (Western) gold rush.<sup>66</sup> Like the idea of the mountaineer as a hardened survivor toughened by the rugged dictates of his regional home, Tonto had to fight for survival in the difficult circumstances of his birth: “His mother ate every whelp in the litter but him. He was the only one of those pups that managed to stand her off” (Benedict 16). If Tonto represents both Goody and the Appalachian region overall, then the plight of his infancy is instructive in Benedict’s apocalyptic, Appalachia-will-survive paradigm—Tonto’s mother (the expansionistic attitude that epitomizes aspects of U.S. history) cannibalizes her brood (all regional and cultural expressions emerging from the

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<sup>65</sup> Williams did, however, contend that such a belief had no historical basis.

<sup>66</sup> The origin of the name “malamute” itself complicates this reading, as it derives from the name of an Eskimo tribe credited with their breeding, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

nation). Simply put, the mountaineer and mountains symbolized by Tonto will not assimilate into the larger nation.

In a more specialized sense, Tonto and the malamute (and the symbolism they carry—Tonto and the media-derived American Indian connotations, the malamute and his westward expansion associations) represent Goody and Tannhauser, respectively.<sup>67</sup> Like Goody, Tonto is friendly, if guarded: “Tonto raised his head and glared at Goody with deep cunning...Tonto’s short tail thumped noncommittally against the floor of the porch” (Benedict 15-16). The malamute, however, is as pathologically and unreasonably vicious as his master, as equally willing to turn on another dog for no apparent reason—when Tannhauser psychologically tortures the anchorite character by urging the malamute to attack and kill the latter’s companion dog: “It hit one of the hounds with its broad chest, knocked it sprawling. Then it clasped the hound’s throat in its wickedly strong jaws” (Benedict 252). The malamute’s behavior also mirrors its master’s lack of loyalty for those in his respective charge—the cannibalism of the former (“eating the hound that lay dead in the pipe”) reflects the latter’s attitude regarding the disposability of his own people (such as when the mortally wounded migrant labor boss Ernesto is ignored during a boar hunt) (Benedict 192, 220-221). Like Goody, Tonto is nonplussed unless directly provoked—at which point he displays violence both swift and profound. When the harassment of flying pests becomes too much to bear, “Tonto darted his head forward with startling speed, clapped his mouth shut on the insect and swallowed. He shuddered and subsided, falling swiftly into a deep sleep that was to all appearances undisturbed by dreams” (Benedict 19). And his appetite for these insects has no limits, as his owner Inchcape explains, “He’ll eat

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<sup>67</sup> This is not the first time conflict between mountaineers and outsiders has been allegorized using canines. See Jesse Stuart’s 1944 *Mongrel Mettle: The Autobiography of a Dog*.

his weight in insects if you don't stop him" (Benedict 146). Goody's appetite for prize fighting is also similarly limitless, as both Tannhauser and Inchcape recognize (Benedict 267, 294).

Initially, Goody possesses little understanding of the natural environment and he blunders around the landscape in much the same fashion as the villains. When he battles the cane in the field behind his house prior to his discovery of Billy Rugg's body, "Goody calculated to the best of his poor ability where the nearest edge of the canefield lay and headed in that direction, anxious to be out in the sunlight again" (Benedict 11). His relationship with the Appalachian earth is solidified only in the final pages of the novel, during his mystical sojourn in the bowels of the mountain—a passage that serves as a sort of postscript to *Dogs of God's* overarching message of regional persistence.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Goody spends countless (it would seem literally "timeless") days in some half-maddened state—encountering such Appalachian phenomena as the Mothmen<sup>69</sup> of West Virginia lore—while his "unearthly vision" leads him through his underground wanderings (Benedict 349). In conjunction with Goody, the novel's mysterious anchorite figure—a nameless hermit with a muddled past and psycho-religious issues who roams through the action of Benedict's novel—serves to establish a clear, intimate relationship between nature and mountaineers. While spying on Tannhauser's caravan as it passes through his domain,

The anchorite smiled to think that the interlopers had brought dogs along with them for protection and that the dogs had failed to note his presence at all. He wondered whether the dogs were poor ones or *whether he had lost entirely the scent of humanity* in his long isolation *and was thus beyond detection*. (Benedict 67, emphasis mine)

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<sup>68</sup> Goody's underground "vision quest" is remarkably similar to the one experienced by Gurney Norman's David Ray Davenport, although the former is far more brutal in both length of time and intensity.

<sup>69</sup> The peripheral character Peanut also dreams of these creatures (Benedict 163).

This self-mortifying ascetic has essentially severed all bonds with the outside, civilized world and reunited (for better or worse) with nature in a manner fully befitting his common noun name—an individual who has removed himself from the company of man and frequently seeks solitude in the wilderness. Goody’s mental and physical state at the novel’s conclusion combined with the possible demise of this anchorite implies that Goody may well take his symbolic place.

The role of nature—particularly animals—in resistance to outside, “unnatural” invasion is explicit in both the title of Benedict’s novel and in the implications of the opening epigram:

I will appoint over them four kinds,  
 says the Lord: the sword to slay, and  
 the dogs to tear, and fowls of the  
 heaven, and the beasts of the earth,  
 to devour and destroy. (Jeremiah 15:3)

As mentioned above, the totemic Great Pyrenees Tonto symbolizes the rugged character Goody. However, Tonto also represents Appalachia as whole, particularly in his affinity for and skill at devouring countless insects with an appetite that is seemingly never sated. With this in mind, Benedict foreshadows the novel’s conclusion when Goody notes the takeoff of the DEA helicopter: “The sun spilled over its various closely fitted parts: steel, plastic, glass. *It looked like an insect*” (Benedict 21, emphasis mine). Benedict further ascribes insect qualities to modern machinery encountered by Peanut (an itinerant hustler peripheral to the plot) in a local garbage dump: “the bulldozer looked like a yellow hard-shelled insect” (Benedict 159). With the same insect connotations, the helmets worn by the DEA aircrew are referred to as “carapaces” (Benedict 116). Like Tonto’s easy return to slumber, the pestilent interlopers are consumed, and the mountains return to their state of rest in which time is mostly irrelevant. Thus, through Tonto,

Benedict posits the Appalachian region's ability to rise up unexpectedly and consume any external provocation—then return peacefully to its previous state.<sup>70</sup>

Benedict also attempts to anthropomorphize the Appalachian Mountains. While touring the Lost World caverns “tourist trap,” the cave-obsessed character Dreama (a stereotypical hillbilly princess and the object of Goody's lust—if not love) comments to the tour guide that “It's like we're inside a giant body here, laid down in the earth and hidden from sight through the ages....and we're crawling through its body now like we were bugs” (Benedict 97, 51). When Goody and Peanut fall into the watery cavern: “with a noise like a human sigh the earth beneath him collapsed, pouring into the abyss” (Benedict 328).

In *Dogs of God*, the antagonist Tannhauser seems to offend the very earth itself in his attempts at realizing a profit-filled latter day El Dorado literally cut out of the West Virginia forest. He drives out the “luddite” hippies and their sustainable—and profitable—organic marijuana farming methods to replace them with his own high-tech, standardized system, which ultimately fails (Benedict 180-82). He shaves out massive swaths of trees to construct his landing space. And he hunts the formidable wild boars of the region with unsportsmanlike abandon, using fully automatic assault rifles (Benedict 216-21).<sup>71</sup> He further mars the landscape with the detritus of modern warfare—claymore mines, trip-flares, and barbed-wire—implements of twentieth Century imperialist attempts at subjugating both land and population. Tannhauser blasphemes by stating that “God doesn't want to see what goes on here. God has no interest”

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<sup>70</sup> As Benedict no doubt realizes (and Offutt confirms as well), dogs are a consistent presence in hillbilly iconography (particularly with violent connotations): “He [the hillbilly] nearly always possesses the wherewithal for physical violence—especially involving *dogs* and guns” (Williamson 2-3, emphasis mine).

<sup>71</sup> Despite being “outgunned,” the boars still manage to inflict a fatal human casualty. See also the pursuit of the character Peanut by a pack of these creatures: “The house shuddered with the blows of their bulky bodies against its walls. He thought they might tear the whole house apart board from board, joist from joist, and bring it crashing down around them” (Benedict 164-65).

(Benedict 251). But if we view God as manifest in the natural environment of the region, then Tannhauser has very much transgressed and will be punished accordingly. Significantly, all of his military technology fails, overcome by the environment:

...the flares had fired as a result of a change in temperature, in humidity....Sometimes wandering wild hogs set them off. And Peanut had described hitting a couple of trigger wires, maybe more, as he blundered into camp...the Claymores that should have cut him to ribbons, had not discharged. The multiple failures of their weaponry pained and humiliated Bodo. (Benedict 315)

Every vestige of modern society is treated with contempt by Benedict's mountains. Much as it does in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* some years earlier, the wholesale devastation wrought on the trespassers and their technological tools evinces a desire (on the part of the authors, the protagonists, and perhaps the reader) for "the dereliction of modernity" (Monk 92). Thus, not only human interlopers fall prey to the uplands, but the trappings of civilization and society are also equally at risk, as described in Goody's discovery of an impromptu garbage dump:

He turned back to the sinkhole before him. It was funnel shaped, a hundred and fifty feet across its top, narrowing at the bottom, where the earth had collapsed into the caves below. The cavity was filled with greenery, jumbled thornbushes and shrubs and vines covering in lurid trumpet-shaped flowers, with here and there a stunted tree pushing its way up from the incline. Garbage lay scattered around the rim of the sinkhole, and down its sides: bundles of old newspapers, oil cans, plastic buckets with split sides, power mowers, discarded washing

machines, refrigerators, a stove or two. At the very bottom of the pit, what looked like the bullet-holed trunk of an antique black Ford coupe poked out of the greenery. (Benedict 21-22)

The commonplace image of such a dump becomes a threat—the trappings of the Industrial Age like so many fossils slowly sinking into the earth.<sup>72</sup> Tannhauser’s enterprise is far from the first to suffer such a fate; only the intensity of the comeuppance differs, as the improvised shelter of the frozen timber train used by Tannhauser and his workers indicates:

The train sat rusting at the eastern terminus of a short spur of abandoned narrow-gauge siding, stranded there decades earlier by some timbering company’s bankruptcy. It was covered in swaths of creeper and flowering sumac and masked by rusting hedges of wild rhododendron. (Benedict 65)

Like the tombstones in the neglected Civil War-era cemetery explored by the anchorite, the tools of the outsider’s attempts at exploitation will stand only as “cenotaphs of a race that had...died out utterly” (Benedict 111).

In *Dogs of God*, El Dorado’s transitory history serves as the most significant representation of the ultimate failure plaguing most organized human endeavor in the region. The compound of once-opulent buildings has at various times served as the locale for an antebellum health spa, Civil War hospital, battle site and prison, resort hotel, World War II prison-of-war camp, Cold War government retreat, and (in the present) a multi-nationally financed narcotics enterprise. As Tannhauser notes when ushering his financiers Bodo and Tomo through a tour, “Its history goes back in layers through time” (Benedict 178). Even during Tannhauser’s tenure,

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<sup>72</sup> Although not strictly within the purview of this discussion, the amateur museum of antiquated toys and carnival automatons that Goody encounters in the local country store has similar implications of dereliction and abandonment (Benedict 60-61).

the place remains a “gigantic ruin” (180). Benedict implies, through the past and future dereliction of El Dorado, that all these “civilized” incursions will come to naught.

Even roads, perhaps the most prominent symbols of modern society, are ephemeral in the mountains, “rising oftentimes in lazy roaming switchbacks to the heights, where they lapsed and ended, *futile among the vegetation*” (Benedict 40, emphasis mine). Electricity, the lifeblood of modern civilization, is given similar disrespect, as when lightning decimates a power transformer and nature fully displays its dominance: “Thunder followed hard on the heels of the lightning. The darkened house shook with the force of it...It echoed up and down the narrow valley, bounding and rebounding from the hillsides all around without seeming to diminish” (Benedict 198). On the first page of chapter one, Benedict foreshadows the later human desperation as the natural world rises against them: “The tall plants clashed and undulated as though something trapped among them were battling to get out” (9). The intimidating personification of nature continues when Goody enters the cane in search of an offending odor’s source: “The fleshy leaves brushed the nape of his neck, and he gritted his teeth against the unpleasant sensation, *like humid overfriendly hands on him* (Benedict 10, emphasis mine). Later, the anchorite similarly suffers in his passage through the underbrush: “the hooks and needles of barbed shrubs grabbing at his clothes, tearing the skin of his face, his hands,” a sharp contrast with the eventual ineffectiveness of Tannhauser’s man-made barbed wired fortifications (Benedict 120). Thus, the defensive characteristics of nature are decidedly superior to those concocted by men.

Extensions of nature even take on the characteristics of man-made weaponry, thus emphasizing the militant terms of the conflict between man and nature: “A big flying insect droned like a bullet past his [Goody’s] ear”; Benedict refers to the “neatly articulated armor” of a wasp’s “exoskeleton” (11). Later references to “a high breastwork of hills” and “the rampart of

the forest” further the allusion to a military struggle (Benedict 21, 323). Perhaps most significant to the military allegory, literal representatives of military power face potential destruction, as when the DEA helicopter patrols the hills, “The topmost branches of the trees below whipped past with disorienting speed, the tallest threatening to slap against the hull of the little Defender airship, pull it from the sky, dash it to pieces on the hard-packed earth below” (Benedict 33). At another point, the forest’s smallest residents evince a militant resistance to this unwelcome “stinking machine” of man as they again assault the helicopter:

Even here, forty feet off the forest canopy, insects dashed themselves against the lens that covered the lamp’s blazing element. They swam up the swath of light, throwing vast dancing shadows across the expanse of greenery below. Carmichael found it astonishing that they could climb so high against the dense wash of the copter’s rotor. (Benedict 120, 115)

At the climax of the novel, when an absurd mid-air collision claims both the DEA helicopter and the cargo plane that supplies El Dorado, the forest eats the wreckage much like the timber train of an earlier era: “The venerable Douglas DC-3...descended swiftly and uncontrollably...into the dark canopy of the trees, shedding parts as it went” (Benedict 326). Considering that the helicopter pilot Loomis had earlier recommended a military-sponsored mass defoliation of the region, Benedict posits that nature will always emerge triumphant from any such conflict.

In a rare moment of natural awe on the part of an antagonist, the nameless drug-running pilot of *Dogs of God* declares during a boar hunt of his quarry, “If those things got organized in any kind of significant numbers, they could rule the world” (Benedict 219). Thus, there is a recognition of nature’s power, coupled with a conceit that nature is somehow “unorganized” (at least by civilization’s standards) and therefore incapable of ultimately triumphing—a mistake

that leads to Tannhauser's downfall. This dogged, yet futile, persistence in which man vainly assumes he can somehow overcome nature continues in Loomis's revelatory tale of the government's attempt at "fighting the fog"—using the West Virginia environs as a testing ground for besting nature through "cloud-seeding experiments" and other attempts at improving aerial navigation during heavy fog (Benedict 207). And even though these experiments "poisoned the livestock and ruined the crops," nature still prevails as "no matter what they did, those guys were still flying around blind. They had a few midair collisions" (Benedict 207). Such thinking paints Tannhauser's setbacks in an entirely new light, such as the discovery that El Dorado's "cistern...had been *inexplicably* fouled" (Benedict 175). As his entire operation crumbles, Tannhauser blames his crop failure on "Something in the soil we didn't count on....something up there, something in the land that killed it" (270). Thus nature turns against the invaders at multiple points, even if the invaders themselves never fully recognize or understand how nature is destroying them.

Benedict also vividly depicts instances in which the natural world, the earth itself, literally devours humanity. When Goody discovers the deceased Billy Rugg, "Other wasps ascended from the body and proceeded off in the same direction. A mob of flies hung over the cadaver as well. The air was filled with their intense murmur" (11). Later, one of the anchorite's near-feral hounds nonchalantly gnaws on an exhumed human bone, further evincing nature's contempt for humanity (113). Even the trees partake, as the overgrown and forgotten cemetery (the final resting place of some of El Dorado's earlier residents) illustrates: "A willow flourished on the broken roof of a low stone vault, its roots thrust insistently into the dank interior" (Benedict 111). Thus, not only does nature destroy the disrespectful invaders and their equipment, but it also literally consumes them. Such instances are not coincidental, as recognized

by the mountain natives: “‘The giant drew it down for nourishment,’ she [Dreama] said. ‘Or did you think it just got lost?’” (Benedict 55). As Sheriff Faktor himself later predicts “Tannhauser will be gone from the face of the earth. Expunged. His person, personnel, operation, equipment, and every living memory thereof eliminated. Tabula rasa” (Benedict 239). Tannhauser’s remains and those of his enterprise will be reclaimed by the earth.

Even little vignettes outside the main narrative of the novel allude to the ultimate reclamation of man by nature and the lack of proprietary sentimentality the mountain inhabitants display towards death, as when Inchcape describes the fate of two past prize fighters: “They put the one dead brother in a pit in a woods and covered him with lime. When the other brother finally died, they put him in it too. The lime melted them away to nothing” (265). Tannhauser’s henchman Yukon, beaten into a vegetative state by Goody and then abandoned by his compatriots, is “eyed suspiciously and hungrily by the great horned owl” that resides in El Dorado’s dilapidated ballroom (Benedict 334).<sup>73</sup> Earlier in the text, the same owl engages in a defiant altercation with the minor character Peanut in which “Perhaps...[the owl] thought that it had caught him [Peanut], and had visions of killing him and dining off his body for weeks and months to come” (Benedict 232).

The timelessness of the region breaks down both human endeavor and human thought.<sup>74</sup> The final thoughts of the aforementioned Peanut, before succumbing to subterranean hypothermia at the novel’s conclusion, allude to just such a state, “The cold water would preserve him. As long as it flowed, he would remain. For a hundred, a thousand years.

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<sup>73</sup> In keeping with the theme of a natural world bent on destroying Tannhauser and company, writers reference Appalachian folklore about owl’s sinister import. See Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* which refers to the owl as the “Death bird” (146) and Ron Rash’s short story “Corpse Bird”.

<sup>74</sup> In describing the work of Thomas Wolfe, Banner refers to “the idea of the mysterious connectedness of the mountain people with their *timeless* and powerful world” (85, emphasis mine).

Refrigerated. Perfectly preserved beneath the sheet of ice, waiting” (Benedict 341). During his underground sojourn, Goody glimpses a geologic perspective on earth’s antiquity (and places his own age in its properly diminished place):

He entered a room where the walls were lined with the impressions of petrified bones, layer upon layer of them like lines of indecipherable typescript rising to the stone ceiling above. The fossil remains at the bottom were small, nearly microscopic, clustered in colonies like air bubbles, the rock as porous as sponge. (Benedict 348)

Such temporally defiant experiences are not limited to Goody and Peanut. Further emphasizing the subjugation of human conventions to time and nature, the anchorite says of the painful personal memories burned away by his self-imposed mountain exile, “Time was the only thing required to disperse it all...” (Benedict 78).

In a theme already common in rural exploitation/horror flicks, the terrifying plight and/or eventual demise of the interlopers is always their own damn fault for even daring to penetrate the upland canopy. “Death by misadventure”—the corrupt Sheriff Faktor’s pronouncement on the violent death of the body found in Goody’s backyard—comes to apply to Tannhauser and his entire operation (Benedict 14). And the natural environment has played a pervasively central role in the Appalachian novel—from the earliest work of the local color writers, through the post-World War II realism of Arnow’s *Hunter’s Horn*, to more contemporary novels that fall outside the parameters of this thesis (like Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*). The attitude of Benedict towards the natural environment and the humanity inhabiting it is perhaps best captured in a passage from *Dogs of God*: when the cavern tour guide Dwight informs fellow guide Janina of his theory of the mountain and the caverns underneath as a living entity, she responds, “It’s

got a face, and the outside is what?' Janina said, her brow furrowed, her mouth pursed in disgust. 'Its ass? A giant's ass? My God. We walk around out there. We *live* out there. What does that make us?'" (102). And while a mountain may be just such a living entity, it most certainly cannot be anthropomorphized into an easy, understandable familiarity—as an old coal miner in one of Dwight's tour groups delights in refuting the guide's attempts at just that: "I seen the shadows. And I seen the rocks. But you got no face in there. Maybe you think you do, but you don't" (Benedict 55). Thus, mankind is reduced in his importance to either a symbiotic ally of the ancient mountains, or an unwelcome parasite that demands purging. In Appalachia, the mountains are a place of intimate understanding and comprehension that present problems only to the outsider unprepared to accept their unswerving dictates.

The fact that Benedict refuses to expend much text in describing the physical appearance of Goody, other than that he is slightly built for one in his exceedingly physical profession as an underground prizefighter, makes Goody seem like a mutt when compared to the lavish descriptions of his antagonists. In emphasizing his whiteness, Benedict describes Yukon as "light-skinned...pallid as soap...milky pale, veined with blue" so much so that it seems "blades of grass reflected on [his] flesh" and "He wore his blond hair long" (68, 266). As if to further emphasize the Teutonic origins of his very name and to provide a military allusion, Tannhauser has "close-cropped blond hair" (Benedict 70). He would not seem out of place at Hitler's Nuremberg Rally, as he possesses "features...pleasant enough but unremarkable in their regularity" and "a strong, good-looking face, square and well proportioned" (70, 173). Furthermore, Benedict's decision to name this primary antagonist after an opera composed by notorious proto-Nazi Richard Wagner also conjures up negative connotations of white supremacy. Tannhauser's appearance epitomizes King's description of the 1980s-1990s popular

culture über-villain, the “whiter-than-white appearance of the most threatening criminals, who may seem to come from a race all their own. The genre [action films] reserves the clean-cut, blond and blue-eyed look almost wholly for the wildest bad guys. The *vicious, looney killers* are not so much ‘Anglo,’ or ‘Caucasian,’ as WHITE. They embody every log-up-the-ass/Germanic Nazi/Aryan upper-class/gentleman-sadist, racist characteristic imaginable” (King 68-69). In keeping with this theme of a Naziesque “superman,” Tannhauser’s unnamed father refused to have his son’s extra fingers removed and instead refers to him as “*Homo novus*,” viewing him as a Darwinian leap (Benedict 289, italics original). Tannhauser, in his primal ruthlessness and his paranoia regarding who is and isn’t a real human being, seems to have fully accepted these beliefs about himself. Yet the implication is that with all his associated cowboy accoutrements, Tannhauser is most certainly an American. Jane Tompkins, in her cultural study of the Western film genre, notes that the archetypal cowboy is in essence an “Anglo-Saxon knight-at-arms” and therefore carries marks of his “racial superiority” (146-47).

Tannhauser’s use of almost exclusively Latinx labor, controlled through violent coercion, also clearly implies a belief in his own racial superiority. These migrant workers are treated as and behave like a slave population: “dark-eyed and dark-complexioned” (in stark contrast to the already established extreme whiteness of Tannhauser and Yukon), they “moved quickly to get out of the way [of Tannhauser and his colleagues], eyes fixed on the ground...underfed, poorly shod and dressed” (Benedict 176).<sup>75</sup> Tannhauser even describes Ernesto, the Latino manager of his countrymen, as a “kapo”—the same term used for Nazi concentration camp guards chosen from among the prisoners. Despite the anchorite’s seemingly advanced age, Tannhauser

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<sup>75</sup> Continuing the symbolic animal connections, the malamute (Tannhauser’s totemic counterpart) is a blue-eyed dog that uses extreme violence to dominate the wild pack that it leads.

repeatedly refers to the anchorite as “boy”—a pejorative term for an African-American—while torturing him.<sup>76</sup>

Benedict’s Goody is already a walking mass of scar tissue and healed broken bones, the byproduct of his prize-fighting career; he has a “scarred cheek” and a “welt on his nose” as reminders of his chosen profession (267). After taking a savage gang-beating at the opening of *Dogs of God*, he remains keenly aware of his surroundings and dispassionately assesses his own physical condition. But neither seems to be cause for undue concern, as he calmly notes: “*I try to rise, but there’s not much on me that’s in working order anymore*” (Benedict 4). He expresses more consternation that his boxing shorts are partially removed, shamefully exposing his backside. He triumphs in his fight over Yukon, despite two broken hands and a general pummeling; after his victory, his “manager” Inchcape marvels at Goody’s fortitude and seeming insensibility to pain: “Broke both hands and still won the fight” (Benedict 292). Even after further beatings at the hands of an enraged Tannhauser and an unsuccessful strangulation, Goody still manages to pursue his would-be assassin Peanut, and survive an unspecified amount of time wandering partially blinded through an underground labyrinth. Such feats of endurance parallel the perseverance of Appalachia and the mountaineers that fight against the relentless hegemonic belief that the region and its people could be, must be, absorbed into the national culture. As a bemused spectator of the climactic prizefight states, “we heard [Yukon] was really something, superstrong, but he’s not showing us much. We thought he’d take you apart first thing” (Benedict 280). Similarly, the nation at large has always dismissed Appalachia and the

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<sup>76</sup> As one undergraduate student pointed out during a classroom discussion of the novel, the race of certain characters in *Dogs of God* is open to interpretation. Benedict could well be implying that the anchorite is an African-American.

Appalachian as the underdog. Yet the cachet of the region remains defiance and durability, in spite of all the exploitative economic suffering visited on it.

Benedict emphasizes the incompetence of Tannhauser and his crew, an incompetence born of physical awkwardness and sheer laziness—characteristics that are deadly in the unforgiving mountains. During Tannhauser’s boar-hunting “safari,” one “old boar” manages to upend Yukon, mortally wound the work gang boss Ernesto, and kill one of the pursuing hounds (185, 216-17). Only Toma manages a non-lethal hit in return. To emphasize simultaneously their sloth and panicked reactions, the party can only produce a loud yet impotent response: the “fusillade...issuing from the automatic weapons” of the hunting party “knocked limbs from trees, stripped the foliage from the limbs, shredded the stripped foliage” and yet “The hog pounded onward” (Benedict 217).<sup>77</sup> Tannhauser is, at best, nothing more than, as Peanut describes him, a “twelve-fingered minor league potentate with angry eyes” (Benedict 248). While the marijuana crop languishes, or is perhaps never planted in the first place, the only activities that Tannhauser’s administrative staff seem either capable of or interested in are “hunting the boars, or watching porn flicks, or screwing the screeching brown girls” (Benedict 249).

Goody has a dim view of the human experience. In one scene he expects a gardener to throw a tomato at him while he jogs past her farm, when in reality, she only intended to offer it to him. He similarly evinces no surprise that there will be no referee for his climactic fight with Yukon; he is “used to that” and therefore willing to accept all the pitfalls an un-officiated match entails (Benedict 277). Only his own moral code and physical prowess will see him through—

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<sup>77</sup> We could, consequently, see a symbolic connection between Goody and the Boar—despite apparently overwhelming odds Goody survives a supposedly unfair fight and leaves Tannhauser and company in a similar state of befuddled excess.

and by and large, the former is characterized by a sense of non-interventionism. For instance, Goody in *Dogs of God* considers intruding on a predator/prey drama between a feral cat and a chipmunk, but “In the end he decided to allow the two of them to decide their own outcome” (59).

Yet there is an active, almost intellectualized sadism evident in enemies of the region. After describing the horrific scenes of Civil War carnage that occurred at El Dorado, Tannhauser “seemed pleased” by the images (Benedict 178). The villains are believers in the zero-sum solution, as Yukon explains of the solution to their pot-growing hippie predecessors at El Dorado: “We tried for a while at first to get them to do things our way. Modernize,” and failing that, Tannhauser literally immolated this recalcitrant population with homemade napalm—to further the aforementioned Vietnam connections (Benedict 181-82). Tannhauser’s hubris is an integral cause of his destruction, particularly his attitude towards the natural world he moves in. He erroneously declares his hegemony to his forced labor upon their arrival on Little Hogback: ““You are on the mountain now. And there is no law on the mountain. None,” he said, ‘but me and Yukon here...’” (74). In so doing, Tannhauser neglects the cause of his undoing. There *is* a law on the mountain. Natural Law, not man’s law. Significantly, if Yukon is representative of the Western American, then his defeat by Goody symbolizes the overall triumph of Appalachia-as-resistance over the expansive Western ideal. And the population clearly mourns that passing, as the crowd at the prizefight forces its way into the ring “to get to the fallen Yukon, to touch him, to get a look at him, perhaps to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood” (Benedict 284). If the ideal of the ever expansive, exploitative American West is to be defeated, the hillbilly will have a hand—or fist, in Goody’s case—in its expiration. Tannhauser represents the worst aspects, the hypocrisy of the American capitalist system. Tannhauser controls a minority workforce with

threats of violence and death that he sees as a natural component of capital enterprise. When dismissing the possibility of violent coercion applied to an actress in the aforementioned cowboy porno film, he declares, “This is America.... Everybody has a choice. It’s a free country” (Benedict 245). Even Bodo, the apparently amoral financier of Tannhauser’s operation, who seems to regret his involvement almost immediately after his arrival, describes Tannhauser’s enterprise as “quite a nasty piece of work” (Benedict 167).

The violence in *Dogs of God* differs contains a point wherein, like another contemporary novel—*American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis—“excessive naturalistic documentation of violence inevitably takes on surrealistic overtones” (Giles 160). Benedict’s novel achieves this feat by the end of the prologue. And future scenes of extended, hyper-detailed violence, each discrete within the text of the novel, reach and surpass this point repeatedly: the summary execution of Wallace Claymaker by Sheriff Faktor and his deputies, Goody’s vicious triumph over Yukon in the illegal prize fight, and the culminating paramilitary assault by the corrupt local law enforcement on Tannhauser’s compound that results in a spectacular air crash and the Sheriff’s demise from an anti-tank rocket. In this way, the violence that the natural region sustains, it absorbs and then metes out towards its oppressors. The mountain forest endures the clear-cutting for Tannhauser’s runway; wild hogs are hunted for sport. Yet that same forest environment ruins Tannhauser’s technology, and a boar kills a member of his staff. After weathering a graphic pummeling, Goody defeats Yukon with one powerful, well-placed blow with his “big right hand”—and like Tannhauser and his attempt at Appalachian marijuana farming, Yukon invites defeat because he is not “screening himself as he ought to have been doing” and instead rushes forward full of misplaced self-confidence (Benedict 278).

Benedict asserts that in the bleak future on the horizon, the “proles,” the downtrodden, the “dogs of God” are natural man’s final hope, and in conjunction with the living, breathing wilderness, they will devour their oppressors. Apparently, Appalachian-themed fiction experienced a similar period of unmitigated negativity in the 1890s, what Carvel Collins refers to as a literary period of “gloom” characterized by “sordid pieces” of fiction (70). But Collins refuses to posit a definitive explanation for this literary turn (71). Collins’s dissertation reveals that Appalachian fiction had previously experienced a rather wrenching shift from the merely benighted and bucolic to the depraved and the depressed, much as Lee Smith’s and Sharyn McCrumb’s work of the 1980s preceded the work of Benedict and other Appalachian Grit Lit writers. In the 1970s, James Dickey and Cormac McCarthy detailed the early skirmishes of an upcoming conflict, making no immediately discernable judgments on which side was in the right. The invaders will pass from (and into) the earth—to use Faktor’s words from *Dogs of God* in reference to Tannhauser’s fate, is the wholesale “tabula rasa” destruction of modern society (Benedict 239).

There is nothing culturally “pure” nor “isolated” about the Appalachia of Benedict. Industrialization is present. Other populations are present. The schemes of economic globalization are present. It is how the mountains and the mountaineer confront these factors that forms the conflict, the action of these stories. We could argue that Benedict is in essence an heir to Charles Neville Buck, “whose recipe for a mountain thriller always included a generous pinch of aged mountain culture grated finely with a bit of outside sophistication and stirred vigorously into feuding and moonshining before they came to a boil” (Cratis Williams 241).

In the case of the cowboy Tannhauser, the West is played out, “lost in the Pacific Ocean,” leaving Appalachia as a recursive frontier territory, one of the last wild places left on

the North American continent (Frost, quoted in Cunningham 103). Thus, the lucre-hungry Western man is drawn to it: “The western frontier having closed, the dynamic of the ‘American’ character demanded that another frontier be found, another pioneering wave be launched, another ‘nature’ be subdued” (Cunningham 103). According to Shapiro, the earliest eras of Appalachian fiction sought to identify the mountaineer as an American outsider, then work diligently to integrate him into a standardized American culture. The contemporary era of Appalachian fiction seeks to draw as many distinctions as possible between the mountaineer and standardized American culture. The earliest era of Appalachian fiction sought to draw the mountaineer into America; the latest era seeks to extract him.

### ***Dogs of God as Transethnic Solidarity Literature***

Magical realist literature is posited as a postcolonial form of ethnic resistance against mainstream Western hegemony (Erickson 447-48; Zamora and Faris 3, 6). However, the magical real exists in other works of ethnic American letters. Appalachian regionalist literature, particularly of the subcultural variety, possesses a strong inclination towards the magical real. Although not naming it as such, reviewer Chris Holbrook described Pinckney Benedict’s 1994 *Dogs of God* as “more toward the allegorical than the realistic, so there’s no need to belabor the question of plausibility” and his West Virginia setting as “an unfathomable back country”—assessments that critically situate the novel within the sphere of magical realism (96). *Dogs of God* is, I believe, fairly unique in that it attempts to address—in both direct ways and through allegory—a vast array of Late Capitalism issues inherent in U.S. governmental economic and social policy that beset a contemporary, post-colonial Appalachia.

A significant factor in the magical realist genre is the role of ethnicity—works in the magical realist canon (if such a thing exists yet) are by, and about, individuals claiming (and/or perhaps labeled with) a distinct ethnic identity. For instance, Maria Amparo Escandon’s *Esperanza’s Box of Saints* (Mexican American), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (Chinese American), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (American Indian), and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (African American) all concern, in a variety of ways, their respective ethnic group’s encounter a white normative bourgeois socio-culture and feature issues—past and/or present, directly and/or allegorically—salient to those ethnic groups.

Appalachia, however difficult the region is to define geographically, is recognized in historical, sociological, anthropological, and literary discourse as a discernible ethnic region, producing a demographic group that remains, arguably but nebulously, culturally distinct even when its members are transplanted outside the region. Appalachia has, not without considerable disagreement, achieved ethnic status, both de facto and formalized. For instance, the city of Cincinnati officially recognizes Appalachians as a distinct census group.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, a posited Appalachian ethnic literature also exists—as Ann Lenning claims in an interview with Leonard Deutsch “Is Appalachian Literature an Ethnic Literature?” Additionally, several universities include courses exclusively concerning Appalachian literature, in which a given writer is not stripped of their Appalachian-status when they choose to relocate from the region—Dorothy Allison, Charles Frazier, and the focus of this section, Pickney Benedict all choose to reside permanently outside the variously defined geographic borders of the region. As interviews

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<sup>78</sup> “. . . Cincinnati is the only metropolis in the country with a human rights ordinance explicitly protecting the civil rights of Appalachian people . . . Moreover, the city also has adopted explicit regulations prohibiting discrimination against Appalachians in the hiring and employment practices of the city and of agencies using city funds.” (Obermiller 256)

and publicity attest, Pinckney Benedict also self-identifies as an Appalachian writer (and even more specifically, a West Virginia writer).<sup>79</sup>

Concerning the matter of ethnicity, geography, exploitation and acculturation, Appalachia and Latin America are connected in the popular imagination as similar entities. The regions are comparable in numerous political, sociological, and ecological ways. Referring to colonial period Appalachia, sociologist/historian Wilma Dunaway states

On a world scale, Southern Appalachia's role was not that different from many other such *peripheral fringes* at the time, including inland mountain sections of several Caribbean islands, Brazil, the West Indies, and central Europe" (196, emphasis mine).

Like Latin Americans, Asian-Americans, and American Indians, Appalachians have experienced an "othering" by mainstream, cosmopolitan core Anglo-American society. Like these aforementioned groups, time past saw Appalachians attempting to assimilate into that mainstream society with varying degrees of success. As Chris Offutt points out in his ethnic Appalachian novel *The Good Brother*, regional inhabitants leaving their home environs "tried to conceal their hill-bred traits, a doomed enterprise since everyone recognized not only the habits but the attempts to hide them" (28). In recent years, the advent of the Appalachian Studies movement has led to more acceptance and even celebration of an Appalachian ethnic identity. Appalachia is an interesting ethnic *mélange* that falls outside White Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms,

a group that is distinct from, that has not quite become a bland extension of the America represented by MacDonald (sic) arches and Holiday Inns, the America

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<sup>79</sup> See Angela B. Freeman's "The Origins and Fortunes of Negativity" for an extensive discussion of Benedict's chosen self-portrayals.

captured in the image of the so-called WASP compulsively and wastefully consuming the monotonous products of a mass culture. (Deutsch 23)

Benedict himself alludes to the outsider, heterogeneity of the region when he explains that “Writing the novel [*Dogs of God*] was great. It was wonderful to try and keep track of these tribes of people in my head and on paper” (“Best-Laid” 135).

Indeed, some scholars (with varying degrees of academic integrity and racist-essentialist problematics) claim that the “white” population of the region is ethnically (and genetically) distinct from “Anglo-Saxon” America by virtue of its Celtic “ancestry.” Leonard Deutsch’s “Is Appalachian Literature an Ethnic Literature?”, one of the earliest treatises to posit Appalachian letters as an ethnically distinct genre, constructs its argument around this point. Numerous works, from the dubious *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* to the more respected *The Thistle and the Brier: Historical Links and Cultural Parallels between Scotland and Appalachia* celebrate this thesis. But complicating, if not exactly refuting these historical/anthropological tracts, Appalachian fiction often imagines for itself a mestizo pedigree: “I never worked with a man yet who didn’t claim to be part Indian” (Offutt 32). Add numerous American Indian connections, both “pure” and mestizo, to the anthropologically mysterious Melungeon population unique to the region and you have an ethnic transition zone similar to Allende and Marquez’s South America. Benedict includes a pair of twin homicidal Mingo Indians, and two sexually and ethnically ambiguous global venture capitalists to emphasize the Appalachia of *Dogs of God* as not a ground of exclusively white conflict.

Benedict’s *Dogs of God* sits at a transitional juncture between a form of Magical Realism and the what we might call the Dirty Real—or alternately and popularly, Rough South, Dirty South, Grit Lit, or Surreal South genres. Stark, minimalist, banally violent qualities exist

alongside moments of the fantastic, in their own ways contributing to the subcultural resistance stance of these works. Arguably, much mainstream fiction would choose to forgo the descriptive minutiae of regionally and economically underclass human existence. Or it would most assuredly decline to ascribe any significance to these actions. In Benedict's oeuvre, no detail (regardless of explicitness) is spared in descriptions of sex and death. Benedict goes into grisly detail with regards to violence, mortality, and sex (and the intersections of all three) in particular. Goody's discovery of the unfortunate Billy Rugg contains an unflinching description of the corpse:

Its lips were drawn back in a grimace and he could see the blackened gums and uneven yellow teeth . . . . A wasp ambled into the open mouth and out again . . . . Other wasps ascended from the body and proceeded off . . . . A mob of flies hung over the cadaver as well. (11)

Benedict even lavishes attention on the auditory manifestations of acts of the most straightforward violence, "The ax handles of the Shifletts rise and fall. The sound of them is like the sound of fists in eight-ounce gloves working the heavy bag" (5). Such extensive descriptions are not limited to death, but also concern other activities both taboo and mundane (or taboo acts thus rendered mundane). Benedict uses portions of three paragraphs to describe a villain's woodland defecation.

Graphic as it may be, sexuality that contravenes hegemonic norms is treated with a similar nonchalance. In *Dogs of God* the main female character Dreama is remarkably free and open with her sexuality—she thinks nothing of sunbathing naked in the woods and as she becomes physically intimate with the central character Goody, she humorously asks him to "Remember, won't you . . . . that I'm a happily married woman" (229). Only when sex is melded with violence or gender power imbalances does it receive approbation: Tannhauser takes out his

sexually violent proclivities on his slave-laborer Paloma, unhinged government agent Loomis reminisces about the erotic sadism of harassing Vietnamese girls during the war, and Tannhauser's gang of goons entertain themselves with violently exploitative pornographic films that pointedly feature a Wild West trope.<sup>80</sup> As Theo L. D'haen explains in "Magical Realism and Postmodernism," the plight of women is inextricably linked with other groups oppressed by the ideals of Western hegemony (199-200).

Pinckney Benedict, while obviously quite forward about his West Virginia origins, bears little in common with his fictional characters.<sup>81</sup> Benedict is the Ivy League-educated scion of both a prominent political family and an heir to a portion of the Proctor and Gamble fortune (Freeman 1998). Thus, Benedict and his literary compatriots confirm Michael Valdez Moses' notion that "The magical realist novel is not written by or for those who believe in the marvelous, but rather for those who *would like to believe* in the marvelous" (115).<sup>82</sup> Like Latinx magical realist writers, Benedict places himself "on the side of the savage, of the believer" (Echevarria qtd. in Simpkins 147).

Even the most seemingly mundane of actions in *Dogs of God* warrant vivid descriptions. In the opening fight sequence, "somebody's nose smash[es] like a ripe tomato;" a prostrate Goody narrows his vision to the chicken droppings ("white worms of chicken shit . . . with wispy pinfeathers stuck in them") on the floor from the warm-up entertainment, and Goody's vanquished opponent lies with

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<sup>80</sup> In keeping with some variant on the American cowboy as a profoundly negative character.

<sup>81</sup> For a scathing appraisal of Benedict and his socio-economic background, see Bob Henry Baber's "My Exhilarating, Self-Destructive, and Near-Criminal Candidacy for the Governorship of West Virginia."

<sup>82</sup> My own attitudes are proof of this. I concede that a novel like *Dogs of God* does not have a wide readership in the Appalachian region. As a regional academic, I know good and well that the upland South is not the mythical, mysterious place regional authors like Benedict make it out to be. Yet I am deeply fascinated by the events depicted in his novel and wish that the region was somehow that unforgiving to ill-intentioned interlopers.

his left eye . . . . closed. The pupil covers most of the hazel iris of the open eye, and I am near enough to see that it is ragged at its edge, not smooth like you would expect. It is the dilated pupil that gives him his startled look. He has a slight smile on his lips. Blue shadow fills a deep rectangular dent in the exact middle of his forehead. (4)

Both the preponderance of bizarre events (such as a prolonged gun battle on a par with the Waco Branch Davidian shoot-out), behaviors, and situations—and the details used in explaining them—conforms to one of Zamora’s and Faris’ contention that “excess is a hallmark” of magical realist writing (1). The chief villain, Tannhauser, has six fingers and was born with a tail. Packs of wild dogs and bloodthirsty boars roam the woods. An exceedingly baroque Civil War-era cemetery exists abandoned deep in the woods. So do a network of Cold War weapons bunkers and an underground complex.

The magical real text is always open to the charge of hallucination, or allegory, or dream by readers. But, despite the distinctly un-proletarian origins of some Appalachian writers, their work fiercely defends a unique reality and mysteriousness inherent to the region. There is a place where the tendrils of modern, consumerist society either do not come at all, are absorbed and morphed to the purposes of the people and the area, or are neutralized and destroyed. Instead of portraits in which “smaller regions [are] engulfed by an encompassing global order,” the work of Benedict offers examples of successful resistance—either by the region as a whole and/or in individuals (Moses 132).

In Benedict’s Appalachia, cars and other elements of modernity rot back into the landscape unless they are claimed and offhandedly cared for by local residents. The descriptions lavished on the natural environment by Benedict almost serve to make that landscape a character

in its own right. Strangely, there is comfort in the blighted landscape. Its utter valuelessness to the broader society, for the time being, at least, protects it and the people there. Benedict's Little Hogback Mountain is similarly isolated and protected. A popular motif in magical real fiction, perhaps as a statement of postcolonial resistance and ethnic perseverance, is the frequent appearance of modern detritus. In *Dogs of God*, Tannhauser's marijuana plantation inhabits the ruins of El Dorado—a tourist retreat that has at various points in its existence served as a Civil War hospital, women's prison, and World War II prisoner-of-war camp. As events of the novel bear out, Tannhauser's enterprise will join them in futility.

The detritus of higher society is put to use in these liminal wonderlands. The outsider groups inhabit places abandoned by the hegemonic society. Benedict's anchorite occupies an abandoned Cold War bunker complex. If they are willing to somehow make peace with the parameters nature enforces on the environment, individuals can carve out an existence in these hybrid areas between modernity and the natural world.

*Dogs of God*, as evinced by the novel's very title, utilizes an animal trope common to magic realism. Indeed, a component of magical realist text is the characterization of animals as much more than mere narrative detail. They often become portentous characters in their own right—they take on much more meaning than the Western hegemonic view of the companionable “man's best friend.” In the genre, dogs are frequently associated with otherworldly passage. In Benedict's work, the ominously supernatural and tellingly out-of-place malamute (a dog more associated with western expansion, the Alaska gold-rush) accompanies Tannhauser—who alludes to the animal's strangeness ““as my rifle sights settled on him [the malamute], they just seemed to pass him over. And he came to me. . . . He does whatever I tell him to”” (251). Earlier, the same dog had menaced the novel's protagonist Goody by

contributing to a car crash and then trapping the latter within the wreck. Even after Goody's rescue, "he thought he saw the malamute keeping stride with them in the brush that grew along the side of the road . . . they had to be making thirty or forty miles an hour, faster than any dog could go" (194). But Goody also has a canine protector, one more symbolically appropriate to the region—Inchcape's "immense Great Pyrenees" (a mountain dog that protects sheep) (15). Late in the novel, Tonto gives his life in a vain attempt to protect Goody from Tannhauser's men (15, 298-99). Finally, in connecting the Biblical and the anti-hegemonic, Benedict chose *Jeremiah* 15:3 for his novel's epigraph, an allusion that dogs (as a part of natural world) are a tool for cleansing the earth.<sup>83</sup>

In the worlds of magical real novels, *Dogs of God* included, ghosts persist because of the wrongs they were done in their lives. Their presence affects the plot. An anonymous woman who was brutally murdered by her husband haunts Goody's rented house. For Goody, this repeated apparition serves as a reminder to keep his own violent impulses in check (as he later has a distemporal moment in which his playful aggressiveness with Dreama flashes shades of the earlier homicide). Finally, Goody's landlord Inchcape blames this ghost for Goody's fate and consequently incinerates the house (immolating himself in the process).

But there are living ghosts in these works as well. A Lazarus-figure appears in *Dogs of God*—the anchorite, traumatized by the deaths of the ones he loves—the graphically disturbing deaths of his parents. Yet he is accompanied by protective dogs in the same manner that the previously mentioned Tonto tried to aid Goody.

Benedict utilizes a sense of distemporality where "Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality" (Flores 115). As mentioned previously, there is

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<sup>83</sup> "I will appoint over them four kinds, says the Lord: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy" (*Jeremiah* 15:3).

no sense of when in historical time the fight that opens the novel occurs. Goody's exile deep inside the earth lacks any chronological basis except the unreliable growth of his beard. Even Peanut's protracted death sequence flips between the "present" and a near-fatal drowning incident in his youth. *Dogs of God* opens with a kind of prefatory interlude—one of Goody's prize fights. It has no relation to the other events in the novel. Is it a concussive injury that leads Goody into his conversation with his unconscious (and possibly dead) opponent, or leads to his ongoing "dreaming or daydreaming" in which this fight takes on a timeless quality? (5) At first, the reader might believe such, but as the plot progresses, and any number of strange occurrences proceed, one is left with the possibility that such an outcome is completely plausible. Rolly Benoit (the defeated fighter) exists as Goody's own internal ghost, his other half with more violent proclivities—whose "*story is much like yours [Goody's]. Circumstances and accident. Except I'm only too happy to have hurt you, you know*" (5). Similarly, Goody has no way of knowing that Dreama or Inchcape is dead when he encounters them in the underworld room of the dead.

Benedict's novel exhibits the "clash of true reality and apparent reality (of the actual room with the visionary realm of the painting)" (Roh 20). Benedict's Appalachia-as-Vietnam apocalyptic narrative was born of a self-professed knowledge of "local people," but the activities he details are products of his own imagination, with no obvious connection to real events. But Benedict's plot *could* happen. Many plot elements in *Dogs of God*, Benedict contends, have strong parallels in Appalachian reality ("Best-Laid 134-35).<sup>84</sup> It is the preponderance of such events that are highly unlikely in "reality." While the novel's cast of characters do contain psychological depth (or exhibit behavior that leads to curiosity and conjecture on the part of the

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<sup>84</sup> This is merely one instance where Benedict claims authenticity for his characters. I cannot, at the moment, recall the others.

readers towards their psychological composition), the dense symbolism behind both plot and characters confirms the “shift in emphasis in magical realism from psychological to social and political concerns” (Zamora and Faris 1-2). Just as Marquez attempts to allegorize the reality of 100 odd years of Latin American history into the narrative of one representational no-place and every-place, so too is Benedict’s Appalachia overflowing with almost every issue salient to contemporary Appalachia. Appalachia has a burgeoning drug trade, backed by the firepower and paranoia equal to Benedict’s fictional Tannhauser—accused domestic terrorist Eric Rudolph once produced large quantities of high grade marijuana on his western North Carolina homestead. Shady “multinational” investors like Bodo and Toma threaten the region with their own brand of amoral capitalism, über-cowboys like the evil Tannhauser are bent on subjugating the region and redesigning it to meet their own needs, utilizing the slave labor of so many migrant workers (many of Latinx origin). Violence against women, as Benedict hammers home, relentlessly afflicts the region.

Some protective entity (or perhaps a protective unity) operates in Benedict’s Appalachia. Dreama (and later Dwight) experience it in *The Hidden World*, Benedict’s rendering of a cavern tourist attraction common throughout Appalachia. For them, the cavern complex is the insides of some “giant” to which Dwight (in his capacity as “head guide”) has created a face using lighting. Inchcape genders this entity/unity, and blames her for Goody’s kidnapping, in his final fiery denouement:

*And was something—someone—following? Oh yes, it—she—was . . . hovering just at the edge of his perception, like a reflection far back in a dirty mirror. He tossed gas, fountains of gas, but at what? Could he really see anything? No. But like the*

*constant buzzing of hunger in his head, it—she—was there.* (Benedict, *Dogs* 299, italics in original)

Tannhauser's marijuana operation is irretrievably crippled by it, "something in the soil we didn't count on" (270).<sup>85</sup>

Like Faris's description of Scheherazade's children, Benedict's Goody is "born of the often death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction, but somehow able to pass beyond it" (163). A seeming requirement of the postmodern, magical real hero is that he or she be blasted by circumstances towards a position where even physical death becomes irrelevant.

*Dogs of God* is constructed around a regional/ethnic myth—the "mythic or folkloric type" of magical realism that Faris, contends is "mainly found in Latin America" (165). Elements in the novel—strange telephone rings, the odd sounds when those calls are answered, and the very un-human inhabitants Goody meets during his underworld experience—relate to the West Virginia mythic phenomenon known as the Mothman (responsible for several books and the 2002 film *The Mothman Prophecies*):

One of the creatures stood before him. It was an impressive example of its weird kind: many legged; as tall as a man and as broad. It regarded him out of expressionless faceted eyes that glittered like jewels. It moved its wings, so like a moth's, great curved sails covered in silver scales.... (Benedict, *Dogs* 350).

Essentially, the Mothman serves as an Appalachian variant of the Pacific Northwest's bigfoot myth, with weight in both the popular culture kitsch world and in the subcultural world—

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<sup>85</sup> Tannhauser later concludes that a crashed spaceship is responsible for the reason "nothing that grows up there now is normal" (271).

regional writer and poet Raven Mack, of the subsequent chapter, claims his parents witnessed the mothman shortly before his birth.<sup>86</sup>

Just as the novels combine the magical and the real in a hybridity indigestible to many mainstream readers, so too do they highlight the postmodern juncture of traditional and modern societies. The Appalachian reconciles his past with the present to defeat those who would take away both. Benedict's hero Goody clearly has a foot in both worlds; he knows how the outside works just as well as he understands the unstated rules of bare-knuckle, highland prizefighting. Benedict comprehends that "there is such a thing as a coherent, interdependent, and recognizable modern world that is inescapable" but chafes at the idea "that such a world is the only one with a historical future" (Moses 106). The modernity that intrudes upon Benedict's Appalachia is smote uncompromisingly by the very landscape itself. The timeless persistence of the region will outstrip any human efforts, any human concept of temporality. Counter to Moses' claim that the goal of a magical realist text allows "their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past or passing away," *Dogs of God* challenges readers with the notion that these worlds refuse to pass away. The textures of these worlds may superficially change—Appalachia will be mined for coal, invaded by interlopers seeking profit, but the underlying spirit of resistance that these regions of geography and humanity possess persist unconquered. Indeed, the authors posit that the absorption of such invasive outside plans only makes them stronger, more resilient. Again countering Moses's argument, the magical real future does not "only offer a version of or amendment to modernity" and "local variants and

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<sup>86</sup> The same roommate Cheryl responsible for both my introduction to Pinckney Benedict and Jesco White also provided an (at the time) esoteric book on the Mothman, of which I had no previous knowledge.

modifications of what we call modern (or more recently postmodern) existence” (107, 118). Quite the contrary, modernity is only an amendment to any number of magical realities.<sup>87</sup>

If one accepts the thesis of Appalachians as predominately a people marginalized since time immemorial—from Celts, to Scots and Irish, to exiles and indentured servants mixed with Africans, American Indians, and the enigmatic Melungeon, then Appalachia resembles Alejo Carpentier’s description of Latinx literary identity:

Latin Americans drag a legacy of thirty centuries behind them” and “in spite of a record of absurd deeds and many sins, we must recognize that *our style* is reaffirmed throughout *our history*, even though at times this style can beget veritable monsters (83).

Benedict tacitly acknowledges such a connection when he chooses to name the locus of his novels action El Dorado—the fabled city of gold linked more with Spanish explorers of Latin America and the Southwest (although Benedict is not the only author to posit an Appalachian El Dorado—Cherokee writer Robert Conley places a Spanish run gold mine in Appalachia in his historically conjectural novel *War Woman*).

When Carpentier speaks of the baroque born of “being symbiotic” which “intersect[s] with . . . ‘the marvelous real’”, he refers to the kinds of almost surreal cultural hybridity that occurs in magical real fiction. In *Dogs of God*, the gathering for an extra-legal prize fight merges vestiges of a stereotypical Appalachian past with modernity and other more recent cultural groups and manifestations in a somnambulistic blend:

In another part of the room, an old man sat atop a tall stool, plucking at a Dobro that he held cradled in this lap while several couples square-danced

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<sup>87</sup> Moses halfway contradicts himself, as in his essay he later states: “global modernization. . . is everywhere the same and in each locale subtly different and unique” (112).

diffidently around him. . . . The women wore checked skirts held out stiffly by crinoline petticoats, and the men wore tall wide-brimmed hats. . . . Some rough looking men in leather jackets leaned against a wall of the place, smoking and watching the dancers, their expressions serious. . . . A great fat man hauled himself off a folding chair. . . . He wore a Hawaiian shirt covered with pictures of orchids done in wild, unnatural colors, and a pair of pants that closed with a drawstring. (259)

Such cultural cross-hatching refutes notions of isolation and the supposed insular backwardness of “folk” groups. Instead, the hybridity of postmodernism becomes an aspect of strength and perseverance for these groups and a point in which they might refute modernism’s denigrating expectations for both the “quaintness” and/or dissoluteness of these groups.

*Dogs of God*, alongside other works of Appalachian fiction that could easily fit the bill for magical realist fiction: Fred Chappell’s *Dagone*, Gurney Norman’s *Divine Right’s Trip*, and Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* (although that final author likely in no way considers himself ethnically Appalachian) contains magical realist elements just as prominently as much more scholastically recognized magical realist works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Love Medicine*. Beyond the significance of these textual aspects, the *goals* of the Benedict’s Appalachian magical realism are similar to those of its literary cousins—literary resistance against mainstream, hegemonic discourse. Appalachia, like Latin America and many other marginal “nations,” seeks to assert its identity with its own unique discourse that may borrow and transform elements of Mae G. Henderson’s “master(‘s) narrative” but never acquiesce to its cultural hegemony (79).

### Chapter 3 – *The Confederate Mack and Raven Mack’s Greater Appalachia*

*Appalachia is a perpetual invention, a sneaky dancer that finds a way to dance somewhere out at the edge of what we think it was, what it is, and what we expect it to be*—Charles Dodd White, *Appalachia Now*

Raven Mack [Charles Raven McMillian] is a multi-genre and multi-media poet and prose writer whose 1997-2001 zine *Confederate Mack* figured prominently in the Richmond, Virginia, and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) punk community. As noted previously, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a romanticizing and reclamation of a “white trash,” Southern working-class cultural aesthetic among Generation X subculturalists seeking a oppositional identity.<sup>88</sup> “Tattooed White Trash” bumper stickers appeared in college towns, such consumers appropriately adorned with extensive (and expensive) skin art formerly reserved for hardened social malcontents. Both popular and underground/alternative musical acts displayed the Confederate flag and other material markers of a constructed Southern identity, as Southern-oriented alterations of existing musical genres proliferated—“Dirty South” hip-hop (Outkast, Goodie Mob); punk iterations variously styled “Cowpunk,” “Rockabilly,” or “Psychobilly” (Car Bomb, Inc., The Reverend Horton Heat), Southern heavy metal (Alabama Thunder Pussy, Nashville Pussy, Sourvein, Buzz\*oven), and folk/Bluegrass music (Gillian Welch, Old Crow Medicine Show, Bad Livers). As a city with an indelible and highly problematic connection to Southern U.S. history (via its role as the capital of the Confederacy) VCU’s acclaimed Fine Arts program, and a decades-long history of countercultural influence, Richmond emerged as a significant locale for this type of cultural appropriation and performance. Northern Virginian

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<sup>88</sup> See the collection of essays *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (Eds. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz), 1996 and Aaron A. Fox’s brilliant “‘Alternative’ to What?: *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” 2005.

students looking to self-consciously slum merged with students from Virginia's rural Southside and southwest counties, and from neglected rural-coded urban hinterlands like Danville and Roanoke. Students from these rural areas discovered that it was now acceptable, even "hip," to embrace cultural markers that they had previously shunned as reminders of a perceived stifling cultural backwards-ness that initially drove them to a cosmopolitan center like Richmond. Pockets of working-class white culture, like the Oregon Hill neighborhood and south Richmond corridors along Midlothian Turnpike and Hull Street, combining with an established urban African-American presence made for a heady brew of all things coded "Southern" in the popular imagination.

Yet Mack frequently expresses his social discomfort when engaging with a subcultural scene consisting of so many products of northern Virginia/Washington D.C. suburban affluence, often feeling persecuted for his own underprivileged rural background. He takes to task the "bunch of fuckin' nerds involved in the so-called punk rock scene in Richmond," by this statement implying that it no longer represents a true punk ethos and echoing media scholar Catherine Creswell's arguments that "by the early 1990s, punk itself had grown familiar, and the disjunctions the style presented seemed to express merely irony rather than rage" and that the subculture "had devolved into an appropriable oppositional stance, a suburban style" that was "'decently' degenerate" (Mack 1.7, Creswell 83; 85; 94).<sup>89</sup> Mack also references punk's socially degenerate, nomadic-fetishizing origins, while simultaneously denigrating the college education which he himself had just completed:

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<sup>89</sup> For all *The Confederate Mack* reference citations, the issue number is followed by the page number. The original zines had neither issue dates nor page numbers. Consequently, dates are speculative within a range, and pages must be counted to get to the correct number.

What I'm trying to say is anyone can go into debt for thousands of American dollars for a receipt called a degree, but it takes a special breed of man to get high behind dumpsters with folks he can't even remember the name of. And it's that breed of man that will stir-fry the heart of his enemy come the year 2000. (1.7)

Mack's work is easily classified under multiple media areas: verbal textuality, visual text, and performative text. His origins are obviously primarily textual—the *Confederate Mack* zine, lauded as “one of the best locally-produced written artifacts of that [1990s] era” (Necci). Relying on found-image collage, drawing, and typewriters/1980s-era word-processors, for much of its run *Confederate Mack* was self-published without the benefit of more contemporary software-facilitated publishing resources. Mack creates a stream of multiple character identities for himself to buttress his written textual output—“Raven Mack,” “The Confederate Mack,” “The Rambler,” “Chillington Loungeworth,” “One Thousand Feathers,” “Shakespeare Greenheart,” are just some of the handles to which he attributes his material. Much of his material, and his live spoken-word performances are conducted under the auspices of “Rojonekku”—the one instance where Mack imputes a shadowy-mystic-mythical collective organization to his work, equal parts the product of exposure to global conspiracy rhetoric and Wu-Tang mythology hip-hop. Furthermore, his later work (*Rojonekku* and *One Thousand Feathers*) frequently consists of intimate narratives about his routine daily struggles and his family. Mack has produced several series of visual art every bit as significant as his textual work: beer box haiku, *Spyku* railroad spikes, a “music video,” and numerous tongue-in-cheek “instructional videos.” Collectively these elements produce a sense of life lived performatively. In the area of communication studies, currently, Mack maintains an extensive social media presence that at times has included multiple accounts across Blogger, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter. He has at varying points

promoted himself through both Amazon.com, Kickstarter, and Patreon—though he seems, to varying degrees, philosophically conflicted with all of these.

Mack is an early twenty-first-century example of an underappreciated but vastly talented “starving artist” along the lines of Jean Genet or Basquiat. His textual work draws on a staggeringly complex array of media, both popular culture and underground. His ability to prolifically create intelligent social commentary from the raw material of such diverse cultural phenomenon as 1970s-1990s professional wrestling, hip-hop, motorcycle gang culture, 1970s exploitation films, and the lived experience of growing up in the subaltern milieu of rural Southside Virginia, with converging familial lineages from Polish-immigrant Chicago and Appalachian Virginia, represents the finest example of multimedia deconstructionism-as-art that one could encounter. A draw of Mack’s work is the (always difficult to define or articulate) “authenticity” inherent to it, or at least a *perceived* authenticity. Mack, through his life and work (and the constant liminal blurring that occurs between the two) models the way one individual can essentially turn into a cultural production factory—almost simultaneously synthesizing and producing written textuality, visual performance, and visual culture. Although very much a unique individual, Mack exemplifies the ability to get one’s ideas out into the world using a variety of media (even if one is, like Mack, not always comfortable doing so).

### ***The Confederate Mack Zine and Predecessors, 1995-2001***

Mack’s earliest publication is *Masochistic Forum*, produced with his peers while still a high school student in rural Meherrin, Virginia. Only three of the four Xeroxed issues are extant and it contains writing consistent with teenage frustration and anti-authoritarianism. After enrolling at VCU and moving to Richmond, Mack began publishing the zine *Warship Say 10*, of

which he produced five issues. Similarly limited series were also written and printed, like *The Gringo Manifesto* and *The Method Manson Skynyrd*—the titles alone offering the earliest examples of Mack’s ongoing fixation with, alternately and in conjunction, Latin American culture, radical political ideology, hip-hop, Charles Manson, and Lynyrd Skynyrd).<sup>90</sup> The latter two works are marked by extreme, self-conscious misogyny.<sup>91</sup> In personal conversation, as a father of three girls, Mack has expressed trepidation in re-encountering this material while considering the possibility of re-formatting this material for electronic publication and at publishing house offers to produce an edited *Confederate Mack* volume —as will be discussed in closer readings of his material, a temptation towards heavy sexism and difficult-to-parse racially-fixated rhetoric remains a problematic in Mack’s pre-2010 writing. *Confederate Mack*, first published in 1996, overflows with social commentary couched in the previously noted hybrid language of hip-hop, professional wrestling, Southern Rock, governmental conspiracy theories, and some dozen or more other esoteric referents.

Mack acknowledges the influence of popular media and often resorts to what Douglas Coupland calls “teleparabalizing”: the use of specific television program/episode referents to explicate lived experiences and allegedly a discursive innovation of Generation X (Mills 227). An example of this occurs when he dedicates Issue 19 to the actor Esther Rolle of the 1970s sitcom *Good Times*, “a cool old black lady I grew up watching, she gave me as many moral lectures as my grandma, so this issue’s dedicated to her” (Mack 19.24). Integrating popular “trash” culture references with geo-political observations, comments such as Bill Clinton’s Secretary of Defense William Perry “(not the Fridge)” [William “The Fridge” Perry, the

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<sup>90</sup> Extant copies of these zine titles are included with *The Confederate Mack* zine collection in the VCU Libraries Zine Collection, in Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library.

<sup>91</sup> The subtitle of *The Method Manson Skynyrd* bills the zine as “A manifesto of Southern chauvinism...Your bitch is massaging me while I’m committing misogyny.”

physically imposing defensive end of the 1980s Chicago Bears football team] and Clinton advisor George Stephanopolous “(not Webster’s dad)” [the character “George Papadopolis”—adoptive father of 1980s sitcom character Webster] (Mack 1.8). The implication that the rural working class Southern community in which Mack situates himself could understandably conflate these respective figures in the barrage of media to which they are subjected—and that furthermore, the boundary between national governance and televised entertainment (professional football, evening sitcoms) has become meaningless.

Mack frequently used the writing prompt of “top ten lists” for *Confederate Mack* content. These would result in rambling yet coherent discourses with occasionally discomfiting titles, like “Top 10 Reasons for Shitty Homemade Tattoos” (Issue 11); “Top 10 Events in the Decathlon at the Confederate Mack Olympics” (Issue 19); and “Top 10 All-Time Pairs of MCs” (Issue 33). Some of Mack’s most complex social commentary resulted from the feature “The Confederate Mack Title Match” series, an example of how the Generation X subculture “find[s]...genius in previous generations’ exploitative dross” (Cohen 50). Issue one pitted Jimmy Valiant versus Richard Petty, wherein the aforementioned social diversity-oriented Valiant is defeated in a racially coded manner. That Valiant, Mack’s personal icon, is defeated early in this series connotes a declaration, on the part of Mack, that this project will have no happy endings—that a regional, commercially-mediated demagogue like Richard Petty, a figure that Mack pointedly notes has crossed over into Republican Party politics—“The King of Nascar, the future Secretary of State of North Carolina” will defeat a marginal, co-option resistant figure like Valiant (1.9). Issue two has Richard Petty fighting the screen character Orville Beddoe (Geoffrey Lewis) from the Clint Eastwood films *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978) and *Any Which Way You Can* (1980). Using underhanded tactics and once again aided unsportingly by his son Kyle, Richard

defeats Orville. Like Valiant, the Beddoe brothers of these films are Bakersfield, California, ethnic Okies—second generation migrants with Ozark-regional connotations. The Beddoes are, essentially, urbanized hillbilly migrants, underclass outsiders twice over. Mack continues to emphasize his pessimistic worldview by once again having the co-opted, heavily-mediated, politically-oriented Southern icon defeat a representative of an intersectional hillbilly subaltern.

An elaborately imagined brawl between Lynyrd Skynyrd drummer Artemus Pyle and hardcore hip-hop performer Too Short manages to be both satirically amusing and a profound statement on Southern intersectional identities, racism, and police brutality. When drummer Artemus Pyle is asked to back Too Short in an Atlanta studio session, Mack deconstructs the issue of white rock music's theft of African American music traditions. The drummer backs the Hip Hop track by "just imitating rhythms from early '60s soul records" and when asked to improvise further "meandered into one of those ten-minute long drum solos every self-respecting classic rock record had on it somewhere or another" (Mack 7.11). Yet this performance, a staple of white-oriented stadium rock, is rooted in "the jungle rhythm of the negro" (Mack 7.11). When misunderstanding leads to racialized violence between the Pyle and Too Short factions, the police arrive and, being racist in general and fans of Lynyrd Skynyrd in particular, assault the latter for the former to win the Confederate Mack title:

the cops showed up, and upon seeing a black man on top of a white man, they beat the shit out of Short, cuffing him up and cracking him with billy clubs....

[Artemus] gave them some autographs in return for them pulling Too Short out, knocking him cold with a stun gun, and counting the one-two-three for Artimus [sic] to retain his.... title." (Mack 7.11)

The implication is that a supposedly anti-authoritarian rock band as Lynyrd Skynyrd (in its original incarnation) still appealed to and depended on a white racist Southern power structure, despite being dependent on the African American musical traditions at the heart of rock music itself.<sup>92</sup>

The significance of the title “*Confederate Mack*” lies in a Southern white rural-working class and underclass affinity for the iconographic trappings of the Confederate States of America, combined with the African-American dialect term for “a man who can sweet-talk women” and/or the ability “to hustle or exploit someone” (Smitherman 157). Furthermore, “Mack” as a shortening of Mack’s Scottish/Irish-origin surname also connects and generalizes his identity to the large population of the Southern working class that could claim (or posits a claim) to a historical Celtic ancestral lineage (much the same way that “Mick” is used a catchall descriptor for Irish Catholics in northern metropolitan areas of the U.S.) (Fisher, McWhiney). Jim Goad, whose *Redneck Manifesto* was a significant influence on Mack’s thinking, notes that in large urban areas the label “Irish” tends to be the default identity other non-white ethnic groups apply to working-class whites. Thus, Mack is either referring to himself as a representative of Southern culture, with both the African and Euro-American markers that define that culture, who seeks to “sweet-talk” his readers. Or perhaps, with the same bi-racial connections, Mack implies that the working-class South as a whole is being “hustled and exploited” by a homogenized middle-class U.S. commercial culture. Likely as not, Mack intends both.

Mack begins with the presumption that “Confederate” marks whiteness as a Southern exclusivity—yet he appends the African-American vernacular Mack, and freely, and frequently,

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<sup>92</sup> Mack is also likely referencing the progressively more conservative orientation of post-Ronnie Van Zant Lynyrd Skynyrd, which post-9/11 became a blatantly hard-Right posture. In other writing over the years, Mack ruminates on the band’s betrayal of Ronnie Van Zant’s values.

discusses Latinx migrant culture in the U.S. South. By associating his person with the title of his zine, Mack acknowledges the “Confederate”—the low, the white, the parochial, the reactionarily rebellious and the “Mack”—a severe truncation of his own surname (Mack) subsumed in the African-American notion of a man of importance, a man secure in his being. The name triangulates: lower/working class rural white Southerner (for better or worse), an African American culture born from the South and recursively influencing the a poor rural white kid from that region, and the Self—Raven Mc[Mack]Millian, the individual. For Mack, the name symbolizes the complex social milieu of rural and rural-coded urban Virginia in which he moves, evidence of Appalachian literary scholar Douglas Reichert-Powell’s conviction that “communities are, whatever presumptions are made, more diverse and vital than they are generally presumed to be” (182).

Early in the first issue of *Confederate Mack*, Mack details how two people he has known have joined law enforcement and he specifically criticizes how they now “talk funny” without the accent or regional inflections that they had formerly (1.2). Mack specifically condemns these individuals for “exchanging their God-given dialect and lifestyle for a badge and a gun and the right to oppress their Confederate brethren for imperialist industrialists” (1.2). In this statement, Mack reveals his extremely complicated yet specific definition of “Confederate”—for him, it means the working-class/lower-class/economically underprivileged South. When paired with his charge of inherent law enforcement racism, the implication is that Mack may *include* Blacks in his definition of Confederate<sup>93</sup>. Obviously, this is a contentious nomenclature, but it speaks to the de-stabilized meanings behind demographic labels that supposedly have firm definitions within

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<sup>93</sup> Despite his adversarial stance towards law enforcement (an attitude at the foundation of the Confederate Mack identity) Mack does acknowledge that by virtue of his race and his personal connections to some officers that he and others in his family have escaped or received lighter criminal charges.

mainstream culture, but are unilaterally repurposed by the punk subculture. Thus “Confederate” (for Mack in ca. 1997), “hillbilly,” and “Appalachian” are all substitutes for “poor Southern whites” (Griffin & Thompson).

In *Confederate Mack*, Mack speaks approvingly of “inter-racial mixing” so despised by older whites in his community and acknowledges the significant Latin American demographic of the area—describing a drinking game designed around observing school children and “guessing whether the mixed kids are more black, white, or just Mexican confusing us” (1.3). Furthermore, Mack uses music references to display his eclectic tastes and his attitudes toward race—beginning with his “Government Seized Your Property & You Can Only Carry 10 Records Into Your Underground Cellar Back in the Woods List”, which contains a mix of 1960s counterculture, hip-hop, Country, Southern Rock, heavy metal, and Soul/Rhythm and Blues. (1.4). Such lists, and their context, are meant to be confounding—the image of a working-class white vehemently anti-government survivalist, fleeing to a rural redoubt with both the expected David Allan Coe and Lynyrd Skynyrd albums, and the seemingly absurd in this context Al Green, Kool G Rap, and Eric B & Rakim recordings. Such vignettes are the most delightful artifacts in the *Confederate Mack* run—intended to challenge assumptions of affluent white progressives, a demographic that Mack lists as his adversary alongside the much more predictable law enforcement, aged white-supremacists, and governmental authority.

The cover layout for the inaugural issue of *Confederate Mack* prominently featured a clipped image, likely taken from a fan magazine, of professional wrestler Jimmy “The Boogie-Woogie Man” Valiant (born James Fanning) subduing an opponent. Countless times, across multiple publications, Mack references Valiant as a personal icon whose performance style, physical features, and character philosophy Mack consciously seeks to emulate. Valiant’s

biography and wrestling persona represent an intersectional vision of Appalachian resistance to middle-class white propriety and authority. Born in southeast Tennessee, a geographic area included in an overwhelming number of Appalachian boundary definitions, Valiant's peak wrestling years saw him cultivate "hillbilly" markers—namely a wild, flowing beard and the retention of his speaking accent. But Valiant went further, constructing a hybridized hillbilly-urban-countercultural champion of the subaltern. His wrestling attire often consisted of garish colors and bold patterns; his ringside and promotional outfits conspicuously referenced urban African-American fashion of the 1970s. Despite his actual origins and his prominent accent, Valiant billed himself as from New York City and often declared that he fought for the honor and dignity of "my Street People." While competing/performing, Valiant would make common cause with minority wrestlers and enthusiastically celebrate with Black audience members. In the ring, Valiant cut a figure of absurdist jubilation—stomp dancing, clapping his hands, and vigorously nodding his head. Although presenting as virulently heterosexual, with his hypersexualized valet-wife Big Mama (Felicia Fanning) in tow, Valiant willingly played with performative homoerotics—hugging his allies, deeply kissing a male announcer, and drawling his suggestive catchphrase "mercy Daddy!" In the narrative of his bouts, Valiant was often (but not exclusively) placed in opposition to clean-cut, regimented white authority figures. After a decades-spanning career, Valiant went into semi-retirement in rural Appalachian-Virginia and founded a wrestling school that, owing to a combination of the continuing Boogie-Woogie Man persona and dilapidated compound-like setting, quickly developed its own subcultural status.

Jimmy Valiant's cultural weight as a intersectional anti-authority figure, renowned for his enthusiastically absurdist and poetic promotional performances explains his presence as the figurehead for *The Confederate Mack* project. But the particular Valiant image that Mack chose

for this cover, like the zine name itself, hints at the cultural problematics that will follow in the text. Despite his countercultural appearance—the long beard, the long hair, the bandana, the flamboyant pants—Valiant is violently choking The Great Kabuki (Akihisa Mera), a pan-east-Asian character who performed an offensive array of villainous Oriental stereotypes. Like Valiant, Mack’s critiques and narrative violence sometimes fell short of ideal equitability (see fig. 13).

[fig. 13 here]

In addition to Valiant’s image, Mack includes a subtitle beneath *The Confederate Mack* masthead—“Watching Babylon through Plywood Windows” typed in all-capital letters. The choice of “Babylon” again references multiple themes that will appear throughout the zine run. Like the zine title, the reference combines cosmological meanings from two seemingly disparate traditions. Firstly, the usage depends on Mack’s comprehensive knowledge of 1990s eschatological speculation that had reached a fever pitch in the right-leaning to hard-right conspiracy discourse between George Bush Sr.’s declaration of a “New World Order” and the approach of the year 2000, with all its attendant religious and secular anxieties. The back cover contains photo clippings of heavily armed riot police, superimposed over an image of a barrio alleyway. A quote from Hunter S. Thompson, alongside Manson emblematic of Appalachian anarchy, derides the authoritarianism of the 1990s decade and declares that “there will be no year 2000” (1.16).

Throughout the *Confederate Mack* run, Mack uses the (at the time) plebian entertainment of professional wrestling and globalist conspiracy to explain, in one go, contemporary geopolitics, media monopolies, and the intersection of the two that would become an increasingly dangerous combination in twenty-first-century American life. Mack’s chief bogeyman, Vince

McMahon, Jr., uses “creative Yankee lawyering” to destroy regionally-oriented independent wrestling federations that offered broad-based and local talent that allowed them to earn a living-wage in their full-time entertainment profession. In Mack’s telling, McMahon turns wrestling entertainment into a nation-wide concern, saturating local markets with high-paid talent gleaned from the former local federations. Mack’s allegory is that “This is much like 3<sup>rd</sup> World countries, who can’t survive without aid from the big 2, or now with the fall of the USSR, with aid from the United Nations with its tip maker America. And the smartest scientists, teachers, baseball players, whatever, sell out their home region for the big paychecks of the New World” (1.5). Significantly, and obviously beyond the scope of Mack’s divination, McMahon and his wrestling-media empire would prove significant as the terrain for Donald Trump to perfect his public façade. Mack continues, writing a fairly standard synopsis of the New World Order conspiracy that percolated throughout the early 1990s. Yet he connects it with the emergence of the New World Order professional wrestling tag-team, which included former “ultimate good guy, the eat-your-vitamins-and-say-your-prayers man himself, Hulk Hogan” (1.6). Mack describes the conspiracy rhetoric New World Order as “appearing to be a utopian delight where wrong has been conquered, but on the inside, for the conquerors, an order of vast riches and rewards” – in essence, a highly propagandistic façade concerned with enriching a few by manipulating the fear, biases, and ignorance of masses invested in the project by virtue of race and/or nationalism. Mack completes the connection, describing

as I stood drunkenly in line to see one of those dinky regional [wrestling] promotions at the state fair, inbred rednecks were chanting New World Order....It may seem like simple entertainment, but it is significant of something much deeper. They have gone public with the Master Plan, or at least with the catchy

slogan they hope to bait the masses with, and pull us all into their microchip hell (1.6).

After an uncomfortable and not particularly clear imputation that the Oklahoma City Bombing was a media manipulation, Mack despairs that working-class white support for the New World Order “trickled down to us, corrupting many of us, through a long-standing tradition within our culture, professional wrestling” (1.6) Reading this from a contemporary position, it’s impossible not to see Mack identifying a proto-“Make American Great Again” project, an edifice of xenophobia and exploitation transmitted through the co-opted and weaponized folkways of the Southern white working class. It is admittedly very uncomfortable to see Mack make explicit reference to conspiracy constructs, like a programmatically nefarious (instead of just ineffective and incompetent) United Nations or a New World Order cabal of elites planning global takeover, that in the popular consciousness are frequently and with much justification associated with the extreme fringes of right-wing rhetoric in America. However, similar constructs appear in Black Nationalist rhetoric and the extreme Left—the Horseshoe Theory in effect. Furthermore, these applications are the moments in Mack’s writing when he most seems to indulge a satiric character construct—in essence saying “my people” (working class white Southerners prone to believing such grand paranoid narratives) are wrong/foolish in the particulars (especially when they involved racism and xenophobia) but they are correct in the rough parameters. In essence, the rough outlines of these beliefs are contemporary hillbilly parables.

*The Confederate Mack* is first and foremost concerned with the people of a place, not the place itself. Indeed, there is no room for the pastoral in any of the texts so explored. They are, in their very essences, *anti-pastoral*. The place is not beautiful by conventional standards, and neither are the people with links to it. But the people always come first. The people construct the

place. For Raven, Southside/Southwest Virginia is nothing without the people that inhabit it: poor white trash, Blacks, Latinxs, Queers, etc.

### ***The Confederate Mack Website, 2001-2003***

Near the time Mack ceased publication of the print-medium *The Confederate Mack* zine, he created *The Confederate Mack* Website. The format consisted of simple html and looked decidedly, and probably intentionally, aesthetically discordant (see Fig. 14). Mack consistently expresses an affinity for retro aesthetics with vivid color schemes that to his mind are adversarial in their garishness and antiquated for 2001. The template for all pages used the neon green and black palette Mack refers to as his “battle colors” and which are a constant in his later social media-era web presence—over the course of his productions, he also demonstrates a fondness for both orange and purple, with his own philosophical justifications for both. Mack used for the site logo a neon, graffiti adorned variant of the “New South” flag<sup>94</sup>—the graphic elements of the ubiquitous Confederate battle flag rendered in the black, green and red of African Nationalism (see Fig. 15). Use of this logo continues Mack’s trend of intertwining Southern white working-class culture with African-American culture.

[fig. 14 here]

[fig. 15 here]

The website published material from several contributors—some consistently and in amounts that rivaled Mack’s own content, others sporadically or even only once. The subject matter continued Mack’s focus on cultural issues and perpetuated his *The Confederate Mack* zine established fascination with professional wrestling, 1970s Blaxploitation and Rednecksploration

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<sup>94</sup> For a brief note on this flag which came to prominence as the logo for a commercial fashion company, see Coski *The Confederate Battle Flag*, pages 305-06 and “A New Brand.”

films (and B movies of that era more generally), conspiracy theories, the social lives and broader social ramifications of immigrant and minority groups, and personal events in his own life.

Aside from straightforward essays like “14 Things that Killed the Good Ole Boy” (discussed below) and a rumination on the 9-11 attacks, Mack also includes serial features like “Ask Dr. Scientific” in which Mack would present questions e-mailed by readers to a local middle-aged economically-marginalized mechanic.<sup>95</sup> Other features included “23 Questions with the Semi-Famous” in which Mack e-mails or phone interviews other underground artists, performers, and writers a standardized list of questions. The website also included the weekly (or near weekly) “Friday Love/Hate” in which Mack ruminates on a specific phenomenon that makes him happy, and on one that earns his ire. *The Confederate Mack* message board appended to the Website provided an area for lively debate on both the content of the site and on larger cultural, social, and historical issues. A community of perhaps 20 consistent posters emerged, from various backgrounds and from Canada, the United Kingdom, and multiple regions of the U.S. Discussions veered from the absurd (role-playing Professional wrestling matches) to heatedly serious (conflict in the Middle East, issues of race and sexuality).

The prohibitive cost of Web hosting at the time, and possibly Mack’s burgeoning disillusionment with digital media, led to the demise of *The Confederate Mack* Website in 2003. Yet as media critic Katie Mills notes, “jacking into technology is the transformative path for Generation X, no matter how old fashioned their yearnings may be” (225-26). This is applicable to Mack, as despite his protestations to the contrary, and however he might bemoan his exposure, the Internet (and his savvy use of it) is largely responsible for the profile that he has. Raven’s

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<sup>95</sup> Like so much of Mack’s work, the actual existence of “Dr. Scientific” is unknown—particularly given Mack’s penchant for creating multiple alter-egos. Mack does contend that he is an actual person, but if he truly did answer these questions, Mack’s role in writing and/or editing the responses is unknown.

fans, the readers of his work, are an internationally disparate group that would be difficult to reach, difficult to communicate with, in the absence of social media. Even disregarding the recent use of Facebook and Twitter, the “old” *The Confederate Mack* website and the accompanying message board were one of Raven’s longest-running and most intellectually dense projects. Arguably, more debate and more thought went into postings on that medium than would occur in any later proprietary social media venue.

The essay “14 Things that Killed the Good Ole Boy” is representative of the material published by Mack on *The Confederate Mack* site. He presents 14 cultural, sociological, and historical phenomena that, in his view, contribute to the destruction of Southern white working-class males as a self-confident, self-defined demographic. Like much of his material, particularly from this and his earlier zine era, the text of “14 Things” overflows with misogyny, uncomfortable references to race, and a degree of homophobia. However, I contend that (again like much of his earlier work) the majority of these references are devices for getting at larger social circumstances, for getting at that “truth” using a voice of authenticity that utilizes terms that are purposefully frank and disconcerting to middle-class white readers of multiple political and ideological bents. Though it is now a terribly hackneyed cliché, pieces like “14 Things” truly are “politically incorrect.” Like a significant portion of his *Confederate Mack* material, Mack expresses his discomfort with “14 Things” despite (or perhaps because of) its popularity: “I’ve come to hate this fuckin’ thing, but it was the first piece of shit I put up on the internet like 19 years ago, and I still get comments from people about it. Figured I’d put it up so those folks could see how dated and stupid it is” (Mack, “14 Things”).

**Return to Roots: *One Thousand Feathers*, 2012-**

For Mack, the authenticity and durability of the material object spurs the return to a zine-esque format:

the power will go out, eventually, both in a smaller sense of a storm knocking trees across the power line, but also in the larger sense that the way we are living can not be maintained. An actual piece of paper can sit on the floorboard of your car or on the peach crate in the bathroom or in a drawer. And the batteries never run out on it, no matter how long the power is out. (Necci)

Once again, there is an apocalyptic longing, a willed prophecy, in Mack's increasing dogged insistence on the material, the analog, over the digital. If he scribbles on notecards enough, carves words into metal enough, speaks to enough gathered people the Industrial-Information-Digital Age will end. But it also involves a level of personalization. In both his Web-based promotion of the project and in personal conversation Mack explains that he intends *One Thousand Feathers* to be a message from one living, breathing human to another. Hence the handwritten red ink number penned on the back of each "authorized" issue. And while following the standard zine format of Xeroxed photo collage and cut out portions of word-processor type, instead of the expected 8.5 by 11 inch pages folded and stapled to form a booklet, Mack opts for one double-sided 11 x 17 inch leaf, printed on both sides, folded once vertically and then tri-folded twice horizontally to (in his words) intentionally represent a "letter" that he is sending to a subscriber.

Mack renders all references to this new project as *One Thousand Feathers* instead of *1000 Feathers*, thereby emphasizing the primacy of the *word* over the *numbers* that he feels so oppressively control our contemporary civilization. Page numbers are a consistent absence in

almost his entire body of paper-based work (none appear in issues of *The Confederate Mack*). In one of his earliest zines, the common Richmond ZIP code is rendered: “deuce-trey-deuce-deuce-zero” (“Warship” 1, [13]). Mack renders his contact information e-mail as “ravenmack at gmail dot com” as a way, I believe, to register his contempt for the near constant digital read-scans of the world.

Mack’s style of self-reference is in keeping with the wrestling entertainment genre convention of performers shifting their identities. A favorite subject of Mack, Jimmy “Boogie-Woogie Man” Valiant is a prime example. Born James Harold Fanning in Appalachian east Tennessee, he performed under various names/personalities: Jimmy Valentine, Jimmy McDonald, Big John Vallen, Jimmy Valiant, and finally (in the incarnation lauded by Mack) Jimmy “Boogie-Woogie Man” Valiant, “a modified hippie who reveled in hugging and kissing even his most hated opponents” (Johnson). In his explanatory note to *One Thousand Feathers*, *The Two*, Mack explains that “I am the human manifestation of the Heart of Virginia. I am one thousand feathers,” thereby connecting Mack to both his physical art (the *One Thousand Feathers* publication) and to the geographic area that he represents. As noted above, Mack likely had similar intentions with *The Confederate Mack* title/persona. The idea of multiple names for one entity. Multiple titles for his newest project. The first issue of *One Thousand Feathers* is also titled “AKA Primordial Traditionalist I.” Issues are referred to not as “number one/two/three” but “*the* one/two/three.” *One Thousand Feathers*, *The Two* is also titled “Recession Proof” (essentially a short story comprising the issue, but therefore also the issue itself). By doing this, Mack is altering the structure, the expected format of publication. Indeed, the whole concept of bibliographic citation is anathema to his sensibilities. His idea is that his material is alive, and

living things shift and move, decay and die, can become treasured curiosities, or a pile of ash in field burn pile.

### **“Raven Mack”: An Explication and an Assessment**

The *RVA Magazine* interview cited in this section is one of the few moments in which Mack offers (qualified) praise of electronic media. Most previous mentions treat it as a necessary evil to which he refuses to enslave himself. In his limited Blogger profile, he refers to himself as “Some dude who wastes time with different types of interactive mechanisms. That's my thing, ya know. I also do things that nobody but me cares about, and then share them, because we live in an age of self-important faggotry.”<sup>96</sup> But through this medium, Mack consistently encourages social interaction and creativity: reader input on *The Confederate Mack* message board and attempts to organize readings, and writing collectives. He is not the loner, nor the hermitical eccentric some might expect of his constructed persona. Much of his day-to-day routine concerns living what Appalachian cultural scholar Cratis Williams refers to as the “divided life”—a college educated individual, familiar with how twenty-first-century American society works, who is able to navigate it, but who yet rejects/condemns much of it outright and vehemently. He does, on occasion, express ambivalence about his own cultural background and is resistant to glorifying it, though he does compare it favorably with mainstream American society. In other words, we might call Mack a tech-savvy Luddite (one among many, I believe). In its own way, Mack’s project is the deconstruction—in the sense of a physical wrecking and in the critical sense of explication—of mathematics and science as understood and utilized by middle- and

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<sup>96</sup> Mack seems to have self-consciously, in his most recent work, eliminated the various epithets that characterized his earlier material. As mentioned in the main body of text, he expresses discomfort about such insensitive aspects of his earlier writing material, but still seems to embrace occasional lapses.

upper- class American society.  $2 + 2 =$  a variety of answers besides four, because those two “2”s are not necessarily the same “2”s.

Meeting with the present-day Mack gives one the sense that he has somehow “come out the other side” and returns to his roots older and wiser and ready to share what he has learned, though that lesson was prolifically documented along the way (one thinks of Dante and *The Divine Comedy*). Mack’s personality, particularly in matters of synthesizing and finding meaning in disparate media images, represents a hillbilly subculturalist perspective. He is underappreciated as an example of the cultural output possible by one individual. Raven’s body of work is truly massive and increasing exponentially on a daily schedule. “Prolific” is an insufficient term to describe it. Like so many talented writers, he frequently refers to his “need” to produce. Even he would readily admit that he has lost a grasp on the volume of his output. A comprehensive review of his work would take months, perhaps years, of dedicated study. Mack himself stays in a busy and psychologically stressed state for most of his day-to-day life, his resources—both emotional and economic—are, as he regularly notes, consistently at the point of breaking.

In the connection between region and Raven, there is little in the way of questioning. Raven is all about statements of being—of conditional fact perhaps. Sometimes, oftentimes, of prophecy. Consider how often in *The Confederate Mack* there is some seemingly tongue-in-cheek description of a future, invariably dystopian, society—either national or global. Raven is certain of the future as only a prophet can be—but he also remains self-effacing, recognizing that he could be full of shit. He essentially adheres to the conspiracy theorist William Cooper’s contention in the dedication of *Behold a Pale Horse* (a text referenced often in *The Confederate Mack*)—that something amiss is coming to pass, and that the prophet may be off in his

particulars but correct in his overall reading of a bleak future.<sup>97</sup> As Reichert-Powell astutely notes in *Critical Regionalism*, there is “seeming incommensurability between dealing with questions of cultural politics on broad geographical scales and representing local sites in careful and attentive detail” (148). This speaks to the global reach of Mack’s project, which began firmly rooted in the microcosm of rural Southside Virginia and the city of Richmond. There is, in the writing, an often jarring toggle between the two—ripping the reader from matters of global significance to their thinly veiled impacts on local-level life. For Mack, his perception is born of the butterfly flapping its wings.

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<sup>97</sup> Milton William Cooper is one of the more problematic figures in 1990s subcultural discourse. Undeniably associated with the right-wing militia movement, Cooper also garnered much attention in punk/New Age/radical African American circles—see the comprehensive and recent *Pale Horse Rider* by Mark Jacobson. Despite more of an association with the mountain/desert West, Cooper noted his family origins in the western North Carolina (Appalachian) mountains. There are blatant strains of both anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism in Cooper’s work, despite his attempted disavowal of the latter.

### Conclusion

James Still's 1940 novel *River of Earth* contains one of the most beloved passages in the study of literary Appalachia. The most oratorically powerful hardshell minister in the community, Sim Mobberly, delivers a sermon on the mutability of life

I used to think a mountain was the standingest object in the sight o' God. Hit says here they go skipping and hopping like sheep, a-rising and a-falling. These hills are just dirt waves, washing through eternity. My bretheren, they hain't a valley so low but what hit'll rise agin. They hain't a hill standing so proud but hit'll sink to the low ground o' sorrow. (76)

So too with the concept of "Appalachia" or "Appalachian". The meaning is always shifting, always ephemeral. The need to "thwart the nostalgia and sentimentality that is attached to the concept of place" can be a hallmark of contemporary texts that engage me—there is longing for the Whites' Boone County, but on the grounds of dissipation and disruption, that these places are/can be interzones that refute the rationalized cosmopolitan core and its suburban calving. These subcultural longings, in the immediate contemporary sense, are not constructed on a lost past of organic order instinctual structure, but on the perceived liberating freedoms of a future dys-utopia (Reichert-Powell 171). By this point in the ever-evolving field of Appalachian Studies, a battalion of scholars have dug away at the implications those meanings have for the "insider" and for the larger U.S. nation. But those studies themselves enter the body of regional representation, as documents full of the biases and desires of their writers. I readily confess that my work here is of that nature.

In discussing Still, Reichert Powell attributes to the writer the innovation of "appropriating literature to the region rather than vice versa [thereby refuting the local color

movement]” and “present the possibility of appropriation to alternative political uses, and in which place, rather than being conceded a priori to conservative interests and cultural forms, is a vital site of conflict and change” (172). I use *Dogs of God* as a pedagogical tool in which multiple elements of the text serve as allegories for myriad threats to the Appalachian bio-region and its inhabitants. But the great irony here is that *Dogs of God* posits a (to borrow a significant phrase from the text) “tabula rasa” solution to the region’s ills—that no (or at least most) humans be suffered to live through the metaphysical vengeance of the mountains. And most definitely not allowed to live unless they subjugate themselves to the mountains’ dictates—madness and/or indifference are the only survival stances possible. If Benedict has a political stance revealed through *Dogs of God*, it is of the Deep Green Ecology variety. Such a point-of-view is also central to *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, witnessed through the behavior of the family and articulated by Jesco himself in his late film soliloquy in the cemetery. Raven exhibits this same affinity in his appreciation, repeated often, of Chinese hermit poets from antiquity—reductively described as indifferent madmen wandering the mountains. Raven, uncountable times, refers to himself as a “crazy-man” or a “fool.” If Benedict has two protagonists, they are the Anchorite and Goody (the latter the implied successor of the former). And Dwight, the docent who is charged with keeping up the façade of the mountains as an intriguing tourist destination, yet eventually abdicates his job and emphasizing the ephemerality of the creations he maintained. This all leads to a sort of (as espoused by Raven) “mountain Taoism” (or, in his later work, “mountain Sufism”) that has its parallels in romanticized notions of the esoteric fringes of “traditional” Appalachian Christianity—particularly Pentecostalism, with its emotive worship services and snake-handling cachet that purports to emphasize the deletion of the self.

These literary and media images I have attempted to deconstruct have all, at one time or another, held a personal appeal to me. The Whites confused and enthralled me, particularly in how much I *identified* them in my own southwest Virginia community and family. Instead of uncritically dismissing people like the Whites who wove in and out of life, Jesco taught me to appreciate the inarticulate (but no less profound) impact the existence of such people have on the dictates of socio-economic system that is *not working*—not for the Whites and not for many, many other people. It is difficult to overstate the impact the mere existence of *Dogs of God* had on me, apart from the particulars of the text itself. I still remember my first encounter with it—an illicit galley proof lent by mail from a friend-of-a-friend publishing house employee. The name fascinated me, with its reference to the apocalyptic religious rhetoric so prevalent in my community—an embedded lexicon that fills me with both juvenile anxiety and adult longing. The cover art of the novel has shifted dramatically through various printings, but the proof cover depicted, like the Whites, people that I recognized; an anthropologically voyeuristic image of dirty redneck men on a front porch, pensive while fondling firearms and cans of beer. And finally, Benedict's book jacket portrait (a variant I have not re-encountered in my years of Benedict research), the author looking wan and shaven-headed and quietly angry—possibly the most self-consciously punk hillbilly image I have yet seen. *The Confederate Mack* came into my hands the way Mack would probably have wanted, if he could have been bothered to care about such things at the time. A new university student in the big city, I found myself caught between representations, believing that I needed to dispense with the tastes and trappings of my rural mountain background to conscionably succeed in a cosmopolitan-progressive world. But also deeply and intuitively feeling a falseness in that project. Like my impression of Jesco White, I *knew* *The Confederate Mack*, both without and within myself, and he attracted and disgusted me

in equal parts. But I intimately understood the rhetoric, and Mack helped me to understand myself and to at least attempt the social and identity navigation of a hillbilly thrust out into the larger world.

I have integrated and emulated (and sometimes rejected) the ideologies and aesthetics they depict. Though the term is often overused, subcultural exchanges with an Appalachian imagery are a FRAUGHT proposition. What starts as a validation of regional identity and an impulse to correct the socio-economic exploitation visited on the region and its people by a larger exploitative national political and cultural economy can so quickly descend into an essentializing right-wing racialized impulse. Raven Mack, throughout *The Confederate Mack* flirts uncomfortably with this potentiality; Jim Goad, author of *The Redneck Manifesto* produces one Appalachian-affiliated book full of valid left-oriented social and economic critique, and then within a decade descends into full-throated misogynistic ethno-fascism. Myself and many others dedicated to an Appalachian identity-construct that serves anti-colonialist, anti-fascist rhetoric have to contend with the social media age reality that many, perhaps even most, media voices claiming an Appalachian identity are committed to hard right ideological projects. The punk subcultural Appalachian moment is, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, spent as an oppositional construct.

After *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, Jesco and family maintain their underground cult status. Subcultural Appalachians are, as often as not, basing their presentation, their image, their creative output on depictions of the region filtered through mass media.

*Dancing Outlaw* is an outlier of sorts—an ostensibly unfiltered depiction of an characteristically eccentric individual, family, and community in Appalachia, that is in turn consumed by mass media and then cycled back into the discourse of the subcultural Appalachian imaginary. White

has remarried after the passing of Norma Jean. Occasional regional news articles document the continued petty criminality of his family, his sisters in particular. Amid the Jesco t-shirts, and limited edition Jesco-autographed skateboards, White continues to engage with media, appearing in the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series and cameoing in the major Hollywood neo-rednecksploitation production *Logan Lucky* (2017). His most sustained project, the animated cartoon network show *Squidbillies* (2009-present) is perhaps the only extant example of complex punk-Appalachia critique buried in vulgar and absurdist entertainment.<sup>98</sup> Despite being in his mid-60s, in public images White seems to have dispensed completely with his Elvis presentation and instead favors full-on punk-coded presentation of cargo shorts and black band t-shirts.

As of this writing, *Dogs of God* remains Pinckney Benedict's only novel. While he continues to publish, his focus seems to be on his academic duties in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Southern Illinois and editorial work with the small publisher Press 53. After the barrage of negative reactions *Dogs of God* and his earlier short story collections produced in the Appalachian academic community, critical attitudes towards Benedict have become commendatory, rating a special 2010 issue of the journal *Appalachian Heritage*.<sup>99</sup> Yet *Dogs of God* remains, in my firm opinion, the most complete post-Cold War macro-depiction of the economic and political factors afflicting the Appalachian, and evidence of a longing for the region to rise up and destroy them.

Raven Mack's creative output continues to be prodigious, perhaps even more so than in the period of this study. While still philosophically-oriented towards a southwest/Southside Virginia "Greater Appalachian" imagery, Mack has become increasingly drawn to political and

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<sup>98</sup> See David Pratt's "Squidbillies and White Trash Stereotypes in the Corporate Postmodern South" *Appalachian Journal* 40.1-2 (Fall 2012/Winter 2013), pp. 94-110.

<sup>99</sup> 38.1 (Winter 2010).

social activism in multiple contexts: anti-fascist organizing, prison education, and community-minded poetry and spoken word performances in the Charlottesville of his residence and in other locales across the U.S. His attitude towards *The Confederate Mack* remains a mixture of pride and disavowal. He remains one of the most articulate and compelling voices for connecting the Southern white rural-coded underclass to critiques of U.S. Information Age social and political imperatives. Mack embodies Reichert Powell's contention that Appalachia as a concept, can and may be person-based and not geographically based: "Where is Appalachia in this picture? Indeed, what are we talking about when we talk about Appalachia? Is it on the map? Or is it in me?" (39-40).

Much of Appalachian popular culture iconography and cultural currency, even that of the supposedly highly literate and/or anthropologically voyeuristic variety, relies on an image of a region and a people frozen in amber. Many of those cleaving to a subcultural Appalachian identity representation intend to depict, to model, contemporary Appalachia as it supposedly is, an evolving entity, expanding and contracting, undulating like Still's sermon —post-Industrial warts, detritus of consumerism, and all.

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