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Mountains to Main Streets: Negotiating Authenticity in Appalachia's 21st Century Moonshine Distilleries

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Mountains to Main Streets:
Negotiating Authenticity in Appalachia's 21st Century Moonshine Distilleries

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

My first encounter with moonshine took place when I was fifteen or sixteen years old. I was visiting my father in upstate South Carolina from New Hampshire, where I attended high school. While the Appalachian Mountains run through both states, one cannot really call New Hampshire Appalachian. The two areas have distinctly different post-encounter histories and economies, with what is now known as New Hampshire having largely Puritan origins and upstate South Carolina being settled as frontier land by profit-seeking farmers. My father had lived upstate South Carolina for around three years at that point, and I was somewhat familiar with the area, having visited him three or four times a year since he moved. Sitting on the couch in his living room one day, I noticed two mason jars filled with a clear liquid resting on a shelf across the room. They had not been there before; and I was curious, so I asked him what they were. “Moonshine,” he told me, and I will admit that I was a bit shocked. *Where did he get moonshine?* I thought. He was working at a car dealership outside of a small city which, though less than an hour’s drive from the mountains, did not seem like the type of place where one would acquire moonshine. At the time, I had no idea how common it was for people to make moonshine as a hobby. Nor did I know about the number of “old-timers,” as many call them, who have been making moonshine for most of their lives.

In my younger mind, moonshine was still something taboo and dangerous. I, like many others, had heard the stories of people going blind from drinking a bad jar of it, and of course I had seen shocking programs such as Discovery Channel’s *Moonshiners*, which heavily dramatize the illegal distilling process and the moonshine industry. Still, I was intrigued. “Where did you get it?” I asked. While I do not remember where these specific jars came from, I can make an

educated guess. My father sells cars, and when you sell cars, people often give you little gifts after they make a purchase. These gifts are generally homemade, and vary by region: in New Hampshire it was almost exclusively maple syrup. Over the years, I watched this shelf accumulate more and more jars of different colored liquids, some clear and some amber, and some with entire apples and sticks of cinnamon suspended in the liquor. Those jars with apples and cinnamon always smelled and tasted sweet, like an alcoholic apple pie, but these first two jars most certainly did not. Opening that first jar was like sticking my nose into a bottle of acetone; it stung just to breathe in the vapors. Naturally, I had no inclination to put it in my mouth.

These two jars were gifted to my father from one of the “old-timers,” and while I do not know exactly what the proof was—the jars were lacking any sort of label—I am sure it was high. If I wanted to know, I could probably find out, as no one has touched those jars since. When making moonshine, the product is divided into three categories: the fronts, the hearts, and the ends. The fronts and ends are where the bad stuff, like methanol, is generally found while the hearts are the pure liquor. What was in those two bottles was probably a mix of fronts and ends: people often like to keep the hearts to themselves. In my adulthood I have tried many of the other moonshines that have ended up on that shelf, and most are not so repulsive. Trying the illegal moonshines was always exciting to me, as I saw it as a sort of behind-the-scenes, secretive product that anyone outside of the region would likely never get the opportunity to try. Some of those jars were not illegal at all, however, and the number of these legal moonshines on the shelf increased year after year. Coexisting with the ever-present production of illegal moonshine is the relatively new legal moonshine industry. This type of moonshine is not secretive at all. Rather, it

is blown up to enormous proportions on billboards that dot the sides of southern highways. It is advertised in newspapers, and sometimes you can even buy it at the airport.

Legal moonshine is a relatively new product, only appearing after a slow process of legalization in southern states in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Since then, however, many distilleries have cropped up both in the South and across the United States. Moonshine, originally an illegally produced corn whiskey whose name refers to its secretive production under the light of the moon, is no longer produced primarily on mountain creeks, far from the prying eyes of the revenueur. Today, one can find moonshine distilleries on Main Streets throughout Appalachia and beyond. This new moonshine poses a complicated question, however: what is moonshine if it is not illegal? Is it even moonshine? After all, its most widely recognized name suggests that an integral aspect of moonshine is in fact its illegality. Taking a closer look, one discovers that these liquors that are legally being sold under the name “moonshine” are fundamentally different drinks. Some are pure corn whiskey, others a neutral grain spirit; some are made from a mix of corn and sugar, and others have flavors like apple pie or peach cobbler. The alcohol by volume of these liquors vary widely as well, with some clocking in at around 15-20 percent and others upwards of 60. These questions about what legal moonshine is exactly point to a much larger question, and that is the question of authenticity. Why does anyone care if legal moonshine is *real* moonshine or not? Why does this question arise in newspaper articles and in conversations with distillers?

I address these questions about the authenticity of legal moonshine in this project, while at the same time refraining from making any claims of my own about what types of moonshine are authentic and which are not. In this regard, I follow the lead of Kaitland Byrd, J. Slade Lellock, and Nathaniel Chapman who write: “authenticity itself is not an inherent attribute of any

object; rather, it is [the] result of ongoing negotiation between producers and consumers.”¹ Because authenticity is never an inherent attribute of any object, I am not concerned with the chemical authenticity of any given moonshine. Instead of making claims about contemporary moonshine’s authenticity, I examine the ways in which authenticity is a core, yet malleable concept for producing, marketing, and selling legal moonshine. In looking at moonshine with authenticity in mind, I am contributing to a larger body of research on authenticity as a construct (Zuckin 2009; Handler 1986) as well as foodways and food studies (Mintz 1996; Wilk 2012; Hamada 2015).

Within the framework of authenticity, an additional two theoretical approaches emerge: placemaking and terroir. Placemaking has been used widely as a theoretical framework in anthropology, and definitions therefore vary. While I believe it is important to define placemaking quite simply, as there are myriad forms that it can take, Helen Rosko offers a definition in her article on moonshine and placemaking in eastern Tennessee that most closely resembles the placemaking I discuss in this project. Rosko writes that “conceptions of place-making,” are “synonymously called place-promotion, place-branding, or place-marketing.”² Using Rosko’s approach, placemaking is not simply the process of making a location legible to groups of people as differentiated from other locations over time, but also the way in which locations are made desirable and sellable. This sort of placemaking and place-marketing is integral to contemporary moonshine’s claims to authenticity.

Terroir, on the other hand, I use as a framework for understanding contemporary moonshine’s connection to the physical landscape of Appalachia. The Oxford English dictionary

¹ Byrd, K. M., Lellock, J. S., & Chapman, N. G. “From the Appalachian Mountains to the Puget Sound and Beyond.” In *Modern Moonshine: The Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-first Century* edited by C. D. Lippard & B. E. Stewart. (Morgantown, West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 139.

² Rosko, Helen M. "Drinking and (Re)making Place: Commercial Moonshine as Place-making in East Tennessee." *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 4 (2017): 353.

defines terroir as “the growing conditions in a particular region, viewed as contributing distinctive flavours to the grapes, and hence the wines, produced there.”³ Unlike wine, contemporary moonshine distilleries do not emphasize the type of soil in which the corn used to make the liquor is grown. Rather, emphasis is placed on the use of spring water from the mountains in the distilling process, as well as on the type of corn used. Terroir also arises as a useful framework for understanding products such as “mountain gin,” a moonshine made solely from corn that is infused with regional botanicals. While placemaking offers insight into the cultural-historical landscape of contemporary moonshine, terroir offers insight into its physical-geological landscape.

Methodology

Research for this project was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, which has had a profound impact on the research methods and capabilities of anthropologists. The necessity of social distancing precluded a more traditional participant-observation approach for this project. The unfortunate circumstances of this research have allowed me, however, to engage in a multidisciplinary project which blends aspects of anthropology and history, using methods from both disciplines to explore the landscape of contemporary legal moonshine production. The cores of my arguments about the legal moonshine industry emerge from interviews I conducted with five distillers in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted from twenty minutes to an hour. I presented my interlocutors with around ten questions about their heritage regarding moonshine, how they got started, their recipes, and the distilleries?

³“terroir, n. and adj.”. OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press.
<https://www-oed-com.ezprox.bard.edu/view/Entry/199605?redirectedFrom=terroir>.

relationships to their surrounding communities. Though the number of my interlocutors is small, having five core interviews has allowed me to focus on a few particular distilleries and how they affect their communities and the greater region. This is, of course, supplemented by the relatively limited scholarly literature surrounding contemporary moonshine, as well as literature produced by food/wine writers, newspaper articles about moonshine's reemergence and the distilleries responsible, historical documents, and various other forms of media. What emerges is a project grounded primarily in the voices of distillers in the South while at the same time approaching the legal moonshine industry from various angles.

In chapter one, I outline a brief history of moonshine in the United States, from its origins in the Monongahela River Valley to its spread further south and its recent legalization and regulation. I discuss this history using four core aspects of historical moonshining: rurality, provinciality, generational continuity, and its production by lower economic classes. Moonshine was produced largely due to the problems posed by farming in rural areas of the United States historically: it was simply cheaper and more profitable to sell and transport corn whiskey than it was to transport corn. The location of farmers in the mountains meant a lack of roads and difficulty transporting crops to larger coastal markets; distilling their corn into whiskey was one way to make ends meet. Provinciality is another lens which one can use to look at moonshine historically, particularly in regards to the anti-taxation and anti-government sentiments held by its producers. It also helps explain how the stereotypes about moonshine and Appalachia persist to this day, and how they were largely created by people living outside of the region. Another sentiment held by many outside of the region is that moonshining survived the centuries by being passed down through generations, generally from father to son. In exploring this idea, I assert that moonshining was not as consistent a practice as some believe it to be, but rather waxed and

waned in response to varying economic and political circumstances. Lastly I discuss the lower class production of moonshine, exploring its origins in economic desperation as well as the persistent stereotypes surrounding it due to the circumstances of its historical producers.

Chapter two relies primarily on the voices of my interlocutors, and is split into two interrelated sections. The first section explores the tenacity of moonshining as a practice and situates the recent rebirth of moonshine as a legal product within the historical waxing and waning of moonshine production. I argue that the contemporary desire for authentic regional products and authentic regional tourist experiences is largely responsible for moonshine's recent reemergence. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the ways in which distillers claim their products as authentic despite the lack of a regulated definition of what moonshine is. With distilleries creating liquors using vastly different ingredients and labeling the final products "moonshine," it is difficult to say what moonshine really is today. Thus, I focus on the negotiations that distillers make amongst themselves about what type of moonshine is authentic, arguing that a common strategy is to claim that other moonshines are not authentic. While still making various claims about what makes one's own product authentic, distillers often rely on ideas of which competing moonshines are not authentic to portray their own products as superior.

In the third chapter, I explore the negotiations between producers and consumers that create ideas of authenticity within the legal moonshine industry. I focus on the ways in which moonshine is marketed to consumers, particularly the packaging and labeling of products. The use of mason jars and jugs—containers associated with both rurality more generally as well as with illegal moonshining—plays a major role in these marketing strategies. The use of mountain and "mountain culture" imagery on labels contributes to this as well. In recalling the past through the use of these containers and this imagery, legal distillers use the history of moonshining in

Appalachia to portray their products as authentic to both regional customers and (perhaps more importantly) tourists. I argue that in using this imagery and packaging on high quality, regulated moonshine products, distillers are reconstructing what moonshine is in the minds of consumers. No longer is it a dangerous substance that could lead to blindness, but an exciting new ingredient that tastes great in a cocktail. In reconstructing moonshine using traditional Appalachian imagery, they are at the same time reconstructing Appalachia. This transformation of moonshine has played a part in transforming Appalachia from an internal frontier to a tourist destination, though part of its attractiveness lies in its (partial) retention of the image of the internal frontier. Circling back to distillers' claims about which moonshines are authentic and which are not, I argue that these claims are not simply marketing strategies, but show a deep investment in Appalachia as well as its culture and history. Distillers want tourists to drink an authentic and high quality moonshine because it will give them an authentic and positive image of the region, whereas a bad or inauthentic product might leave one with unpleasant associations. In this way, the legal moonshine industry is invested in changing the nation's (and the world's) often negative ideas about moonshine and Appalachia.

Chapter One

There's one book on the history of Travelers Rest that says, and I'm quoting the book, that during the thirties, forties and fifties, there was a still on every Creek and every stream up here in the dark corner, in the upstate of South Carolina. And in the winter time, when the snakes and the bugs are gone—I'm like Indiana Jones, I don't do snakes—I go hiking over to where our two main Saluda rivers come together as one. And there's nobody. There's no docks, no homes, no nothing on the river. It's all property that's able to be hiked on.

I've got a retired judge in the family who says, if it's not marked "no trespassing" it's fair game to hike on. So I don't take anything off of these properties, but I like to follow little creeks and little streams up from those two major rivers. And every time I go hiking, I find another busted still site. Sometimes there's one, sometimes there's a dozen, sometimes there's two dozen. But they are truly out there. Not only in the upstate of South Carolina, but throughout all of Appalachia.

An interlocutor of mine, Joe, who owns a distillery in upstate South Carolina, told this story to me in an interview over the phone. While listening, I remember thinking about how incredible it is that one could just go out into the mountains, follow a creek, and stumble upon possibly dozens of old, weathered stills among the stones and weeds. Moonshining as a historical practice and heritage of southern Appalachia is literally woven into the landscape. These stills emerge from the seams of the mountains as thread emerges from cloth. The location of these old stills says much about the importance of geography and place in moonshining, that they are to be found on the little creeks that bubble around the hills. If one were to go out looking today, however, they would likely find it difficult to find an operational still out in the depths of the woods. That is not to say that there are no more bootleggers out in the mountains, but that the

majority of moonshiners are to be found elsewhere in the twenty-first century. So before you go hunting for stills in the hills, take a quick stroll down Main Street.

The legalized moonshine industry that has emerged in southern Appalachia over the last fifteen years poses particular questions about the transformation and economic development of the region. Once viewed as the uncivilized, nearly poisonous vice of ignorant hillbillies, moonshine has acquired a middle class, educated clientele. Formerly derided as an illicit business of tax evaders, moonshining has evolved into a respected craft. In this project I ask: How has the changing landscape of southern Appalachia affected moonshining? How has the changing landscape of moonshining affected southern Appalachia? Along with ethnographic analysis of the current landscape of moonshine in the region, one must first tackle the cultural, social, and economic contexts of traditional, illicit moonshining, as well as the literal topography in which moonshining emerged as a practice. To quickly analyze the history of moonshining in southern Appalachia and the United States, I have split this history into four sections on characteristics of traditional illicit moonshining, as well as characteristics that have been imposed upon moonshine from those outside of its reality: rurality, provinciality, generational, and lower class production. While these are all interrelated concepts, it is worthwhile to consider each individually in order to differentiate what is novel from what is continuous in the contemporary revival of moonshine as a legal, tax-paying industry.

Rurality: Over Yonder in the Depths of the Hills

Distilling moonshine has always been a distinctly rural practice, and there are myriad reasons as to why this is the case. The profusion of whiskey making in the mountains was fueled by economic necessity. In this sense, distilling whiskey was a creative solution to the problems

posed by both the rurality of the region and the rugged terrain. It was one of the only ways that made farming financially viable in newly colonized territory.

The Trans-Appalachian region of late eighteenth century Virginia where moonshining had its inception was an early frontier region of the new American republic (see Map 1). Because of their distance from eastern markets, farmers who settled in the Monongahela River Valley experienced a distinct financial advantage that came from turning one's grain into whiskey. The location of settlers within the mountains of Appalachia meant a lack of roads and a long way to transport produce to a market, especially the large markets on the coast. One way to cheapen the cost of transporting one's corn was to distill it into whiskey. In liquid form, much more corn could be delivered to markets for a much cheaper price, as H. F. Wilkie describes in *Beverage Spirits in America*:

There were no roads in the new territory, and most of the trade was by pack-horse.

It cost more to transport a barrel of flour made from the grain which was the principal product of that region than the flour would have sold for on the eastern markets. If the farmer converted the grain into whiskey, a horse, which would carry only four bushels in solid form, could carry twenty-four bushels in liquid form. Practically every farmer, therefore, made whiskey.⁴

Economic pressures were exacerbated not only by transportation issues, but by debt and taxes. Around 70,000 people were living along the Monongahela River in 1790, which was then considered to be part of Virginia, when the American government ruled that the area belonged to Pennsylvania. These settlers were suddenly struck by massive Pennsylvania mortgage loan debt

⁴ Wilkie, H.F., *Beverage Spirits in America*, New York: Newcomen Society, 1947.

owed to the land speculators from which they had acquired their holdings; these mortgage payments were particularly exorbitant given the farmers' meager incomes.⁵ Soon thereafter it



Figure 1. The Monongahela River Basin

⁵ Dabney, Joseph Earl. *Mountain Spirits: a Chronicle of Corn Whiskey from King James' Ulster Plantation to America's Appalachians and the Moonshine Life*. (Asheville, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1985) 61.

was announced that Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, planned to tax whiskey production in order to pay off the country's Revolutionary War debt.⁶ These combined events were integral to the formation of the famous Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. In the span of two years, whiskey makers in and over the mountains found themselves saddled with massive financial obstacles stemming from the Pennsylvania and Federal governments. Considering the already indignant attitudes of many settlers toward the Federal government, along with antipathies toward the East in general due to being cast as a sort of bulwark against native peoples to the West, circumstances sparked the embers of rebellion that burst into flame in 1794 when the farmer whiskey-makers refused to pay the tax, attacked the homes of tax collectors, and marched as a militia through Pittsburgh.

The Whiskey Rebellion is one part of the answer as to why whiskey making and moonshining have remained predominantly rural practices. The strained relationship between these frontier regions and Federal and State governments dominated by the population centers on the seaboard led to the Rebellion, which, after it was crushed by federal troops, led to increased migration to the Southwest (now the Southeast). Joseph Earl Dabney writes that "the rebellion helped set the stage for the beginning of America's widespread distilling activity, for it pushed whiskey-making deeper into the West and South... Many a Monongahelan lashed his still onto a pack horse and headed for the promised land, where a man could carry out 'stillin' to his heart's content, away from the prying eyes of the excise man."⁷ Thus, the taxation of whiskey by the federal government pushed people into the regions of the United States that are associated with moonshining today, namely Southern Appalachia. Taxation of whiskey and the ever-present

⁶ Dabney 62.

⁷ Ibid., 67.

threat of the excise man meant that the more distant one was from the government, the easier it would be to make a living in these frontier regions.

Furthermore, the expansion of whiskey making into the South led to the widespread use of corn in whiskey-making as opposed to other grains. Corn became a staple in the Southeast, as it had a wide variety of uses. While it was difficult to mill, people in the mountains soon began to build grist mills using water power.⁸ Thus, corn became the base for distilling spirits in the region. Two years after Thomas Jefferson was elected president in 1800, he repealed Hamilton's excise tax on whiskey. This led to an immense increase in whiskey production in the mountains. By 1819, Tennessee was producing 800,000 gallons of whiskey a year, and New Orleans received more than two million gallons a year from upriver.⁹ The mountains had solidified as a center of whiskey production in the United States.

Provinciality: On the Margins of a New Society

The history of moonshine is in many ways a history of provinciality in the United States, or a history of the frontier. As referenced earlier in the chapter, part of the cause of the Whiskey Rebellion was the federal ruling that part of the Monongahela River Valley, a mountainous region largely populated by farmers for whom whiskey making was an essential source of income, belonged to Pennsylvania rather than Virginia.¹⁰ This sudden shift left these farmers owing larger mortgages to Pennsylvania land speculators. Rather than living in the frontier region of Virginia, they found themselves now part of a northern state with higher land prices. After the Whiskey Rebellion ended in defeat for the farmers, many of them migrated further into

⁸ Dabney, 70.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

the South, where whiskey excise taxes could easily be avoided.¹¹ The Mountain South became a center for whiskey making soon after. In this sense, whiskey making followed the frontier, or, at the very least, seeped further into those provincial areas outside the strict jurisdiction of the law.

Jumping forward a couple hundred years into the twenty-first century, Emelie K. Peine and Kai A. Schafft explore present-day continuities of this historical provinciality in an article that uses Cocke County, Tennessee as a case study.¹² This article centers moonshining as the central reason why Cocke County is a particularly othered area in the already provincial geopolitical region of Appalachia. What separates Cocke County from surrounding counties, according to Peine and Schafft, is its reputation for and history of moonshining.¹³ Within Appalachia, a region already viewed as backwards and antimodern, regions like Cocke County stand out as even more backwards, even more antimodern, despite the fact that they appear to be quite similar to other rural areas of the United States:

Even within a region recognized nationally as somehow antithetical to modernity proper, Cocke County stands out as a remote backwater on the geographic and social margins. And that's just it. It is an imagined place. The Cocke County that one sees on driving through town is one of K-marts, fast food chains, and all the trappings of modern U.S.A. Still, even to this day everyone knows that's where the moonshiners are, and the associative subculture still leaves its mark on the county.¹⁴

Despite the abundant signals of modernity in Cocke County Tennessee, the county retains this image of being on the margins of society. The provinciality or frontier aspect of moonshining regions is often perpetuated beyond those regions' actual history of being on the frontier. Eastern Tennessee has not been frontier territory for over a century, and yet areas within it are still *imagined* by many people outside of Appalachia to retain some aspect of that era, a sort of

¹¹ Dabney, 67.

¹² Peine, Emelie K., and Kai A. Schafft. "Moonshine, Mountaineers, and Modernity: Distilling Cultural History in the Southern Appalachian Mountains." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 18, no. 1/2 (2012): 93-112.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

rugged individualism and anti-government mentality, and these imagined understandings maintain the marginalization of these areas.

The understanding of Appalachia as an antimodern, isolated, provincial region has been cemented in literature as well. In *Writing That Old Moonshine Lit*, Elizabeth Engelhardt explores gender, power, and nation in Appalachian moonshine literature. To Engelhardt, Appalachia has been constructed this way, at least in literature, in order to provide a sort of risk-free literary ground for radical social experimentation. In this sense, the antimodern Appalachia is integral to modernity in the United States: “because moonshining Appalachia was perceived to be lawless and isolated, radical political thought experiments set there seemed less threatening; contained geographically (by isolation) and metaphorically (by being kept outside of legal society) in the mountains, social changes could be wrestled with, tried out, and either accepted or dismissed.”¹⁵ But it is not simply Appalachia that serves as this testing ground, it is “moonshining Appalachia.” What Engelhardt is pointing to here is that within Appalachia, there are specific areas with different social and political structures. These social experiments are not taking place in Appalachian cities like Asheville or Knoxville, but rather in places like Cocke County, Tennessee.

Emelie Peine and Kai Schafft point us in the same direction as Elizabeth Engelhardt: both of these texts lead to an understanding of Appalachia as a region marginalized and othered, but quite unevenly. There are layers to this provinciality and distance from the modern project of the United States; some areas are even more distant, even more othered. Peine, Schafft, and Engelhardt all claim moonshining as the practice that defines these places. Moonshining is the practice that makes a place most deeply Appalachian, it is the practice that makes a place

¹⁵ Engelhardt, Elizabeth. "Writing That Old Moonshine Lit: Gender, Power, and Nation In Unexpected Places." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 13, no. 1/2 (2007): 50-51.

secretive, antimodern, mysterious, and stigmatized. Peine and Schafft, writing of Cocke County, claim that “the way that this place is apprehended by locals and perceived by outsiders has been heavily influenced by the prevalence of moonshining, especially as compared to the surrounding area. Moonshining, therefore, can be seen as a link between the economic marginalization of Cocke County and its present social status within Appalachia.”¹⁶ Here, moonshining is the critical feature of Cocke County when considering its economic marginalization.

This economic marginalization, however, is what draws so many tourists to Cocke County. This economic marginalization and notoriety is what makes Cocke County appear “authentic” enough for tourists to flock there to get “real” Tennessee moonshine.

One practicing bootlegger insisted that were it not for the tourists, his business would not survive. For this businessman, selling to tourists is both safer and preferable because tourists are less likely to use the information as leverage with police, which in and of itself is an indication of the tenuous double role that anyone involved in the moonshine trade occupies: valuable font of cultural authenticity and /or criminal. He said, "The tourists they think it's fantastic. 'We got a quart of moonshine from Tennessee!' I'm sure there's lots of other counties that make moonshine around here, but Cocke County got their name a long time ago. We're the moonshine capital of the world."¹⁷

The provinciality of Cocke County, then, serves in some ways to make the county less provincial, or at least less isolated. The image of the county as isolated, anti-modern, and lawless become positive features for tourists, who want to experience authentic moonshine and moonshine country. The mythos of moonshine and the places in which it is made has created a tourist economy that contradicts itself, bringing more and more people into areas that have been deemed (and often deem themselves) to be isolated and anti-modern.

¹⁶ Peine and Schafft, 109.

¹⁷ Ibid., 105.

Generational Continuity

While traditional moonshining was rural, provincial, and is often assumed to be generational, the practice was not as continuous as is often supposed. Rather than displaying a linear, unbroken history from the late eighteenth century through the early twenty-first century, moonshining waxed and waned in response to a mixture of local and national political and economic factors even while evincing a tenacity. Once having established itself in the 1780s, it became a fallback enterprise—something that many Appalachians returned to time and again, particularly in response to economic hardship. While moonshine is certainly a practice passed down through the generations, the number of people distilling it has varied greatly throughout the history of the United States. In the early nineteenth century, moonshine was a profitable industry, and cities were receiving massive shipments of whiskey from the mountains. By 1819, New Orleans was receiving more than two million gallons of untaxed moonshine whiskey a year from up the river.¹⁸ This commerce continued in the South through the Civil War.

The consumption and production of illicit white whiskey in the mountains, however, was anything but consistent in the postbellum period. Following the Civil War, agents from the Bureau of Internal Revenue began to enforce liquor taxation more strictly in the mountain South. Their methods proved to be relatively ineffective until 1878, however, when the Bureau vowed to give amnesty to those moonshiners who plead guilty in court and pledged to never distill moonshine again. This led to thousands of people turning themselves in, and many thought by 1882 that moonshining was a practice on the verge of death.¹⁹ This blossoming of whiskey

¹⁸ Dabney, 72.

¹⁹ Stewart, Bruce E. "Fire Up the Stills." In *Modern Moonshine: the Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-First Century* edited by Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 30-32.

making in southern Appalachia and a subsequent downturn that would result in claims of the practice's defeat would prove to be a cyclical rather than linear narrative.

By 1900, many people in the mountains had begun making moonshine again. This was largely a result of soil exhaustion and deforestation in the region paired with a nationwide depression that caused farm prices to plummet; thus, people again turned to whiskey making to sustain themselves.²⁰ Bruce E. Stewart writes that the return of moonshining to the region “was neither the result of geographical isolation nor the product of ethnic origins, as early-twentieth-century-writers claimed. Rather, it was a response to economic and social forces that had begun to transform Appalachia and other parts of the nation.”²¹ While I agree with Stewart's argument, I would add that the seclusion of Appalachia was essential to moonshining operations. After all, moonshining to the extent that it was practiced would likely not have been possible were it not for the seclusion of the creeks deep into the mountains that moonshiners built their stills on. Without this distance from roads, towns, and people, it would have been much easier for revenuers to discover and seize stills. Aside from this, Stewart's emphasis on moonshining as a response to social, economic, and political changes in the United States is quite useful in explaining the trajectory of moonshining, as well as the more recent emergence of legal moonshining.

January 17th, 1920 was the first day of national Prohibition in the United States. Prohibition reduced consumption of alcohol across the nation, but because there was no more production of legal liquor, the black market for liquor expanded greatly. Moonshine increased in value, and a gallon could be sold for ten to fifteen dollars a gallon. Because of the increased demand for moonshine, moonshiners began using ingredients other than corn in their stills to

²⁰ Stewart, 33.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

increase output and shorten the amount of time required to produce a batch of whiskey. Adding sugar to one's still would reduce the fermentation period by three quarters, and many would add other chemicals and substances to their whiskey to pull it off as a higher proof than it was. This fundamentally changed the nature of the whiskey.²² Moonshine regularly contained harmful chemicals because of these additions. At the same time, new types of stills were invented and put to use, which aided in expanded production.²³

After the end of Prohibition in 1933, moonshining continued in the mountains, largely due to economic hardship. In 1944, a nine dollar per gallon whiskey tax was imposed by the federal government, leading to increased demand for and production of untaxed whiskey. This demand continued into the 1950s, when moonshining became a sort of big business, with moonshiners focusing on producing as much whiskey as possible without regard to the quality of their product. People began making moonshine exclusively from sugar, or using car parts in their stills. Both of these new practices increased the health risks associated with moonshine consumption.²⁴ This "big business" model of moonshining, however, would not last very long.

After several fluctuations in the amount of moonshining happening in the U.S. through the twentieth century, many predicted moonshining to be dead after Operation Dry Up began in 1962. Operation Dry Up doubled the number agents of the U.S. Treasury Department's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division in South Carolina and launched a public information campaign about the risks associated with drinking illegal liquor. After its initial implementation in South Carolina, where illicit production of whiskey was reduced by 80 percent, it began to be implemented across southern Appalachia and achieved similar results.²⁵

²² Stewart, 35.

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

After Operation Dry Up and a variety of global economic and political shifts, moonshining became economically unfeasible for most who had made it in the past, leading many to conclude that moonshining as a practice was dying out.²⁶ Stewart quotes former sheriff of Swain County, North Carolina Bill Lewis as saying in 1996: “You had some of what I call ‘the old mountain people’ who made whiskey. I think they got old and I don’t think any of the younger people followed in their footsteps. People talk to me all the time about dying arts, and this really is one. It’s something that very few people are carrying on.”²⁷

Stewart points out, however, that the idea that moonshining had gone extinct was quite mistaken. Moonshining would later make a strong recovery, albeit in an almost unrecognizable form. White whiskey can now be found in many liquor stores in southern Appalachia and beyond. The emergence of craft distilleries producing moonshine today is a complicated topic when it comes to the history of the practice. After all, what makes whiskey moonshine? Is it really moonshine if it is legally produced, or is it simply unaged white whiskey? These questions are especially pressing concerning the demographics of contemporary legal moonshine distillers: “Like their clientele, most distillers who make legal moonshine are not ‘hillbillies,’ a derogatory term often used to describe those who produced (and continue to produce) illicit liquor in southern Appalachia. In many cases, they are urban, middle-class professionals or “hipsters” who brewed or distilled alcohol as a hobby and decided to leave their jobs to open distilleries.”²⁸ It is difficult to write of generational or traditional knowledge and practices in the context of legal moonshining, as most of those who make it took it up as a hobby and have no familial history of moonshining.

²⁶Stewart, 40.

²⁷ *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 18, 1996.

²⁸ Stewart, Bruce E., and Cameron D. Lippard. “Introduction.” In *Modern Moonshine: the Revival of White Whiskey in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Cameron D. Lippard and Bruce E. Stewart. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 13.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this rule. Tim Smith of the Discovery series *Moonshiners* has opened Tim Smith Spirits and now sells legally produced moonshine, whiskey, and other spirits. Some descendants of moonshiners in southern Appalachia have also opened up distilleries of their own and view it as a revival of the family tradition, such as Trey and Bryan Boggs, who founded Palmetto Distillery in Andersen, South Carolina. On the “About Us” page of the distilleries website, a statement about the heritage of the Boggs brothers is included:

The history behind our brand is rooted deep in the heritage of the Boggs family. Dock Boggs, a relative of Trey and Bryan was born in 1898. The youngest of ten children he began playing folk music in the early 1900’s and is recognized by the Smithsonian for his musical contributions to the genre. While Dock was trying to break out with his music career he began working as a coal miner. His first job in the mines was “trapping” meaning he controlled the traffic into and out of the mines. This was hard, grueling work that only paid \$0.07 per hour. Dock quickly realized that he needed to find another way to earn money so he began making and running bootleg to get by. Dock inspired Trey and Bryan to reignite the Boggs family tradition of bringing great tasting, high quality southern whiskey and moonshine to the masses...the only difference is that now the government gets their share.²⁹

Trey and Bryan Boggs see the opening of their distillery as a reignition of the Boggs family tradition. Thus, a tradition that was once lost has been brought back to life further down the line, and according to the Boggs’, “the only difference is that now the government gets their share.” For the Boggs brothers, the legality of white whiskey production has nothing to do with the essence of the product. It is still moonshine, and one of the things that makes it authentic is their family heritage of illicit distilling.

This authenticity derived from physical location, family heritage, as well as continuity through time can also be understood in the framework of *terroir*. The Oxford English dictionary defines *terroir* as “the complete natural environment in which a particular wine is produced, including factors such as the soil, topography, and climate,” as well as “the characteristic taste

²⁹ “About Us”, Palmetto Distilleries, <https://www.palmettomoonshine.com/about-us>.

and flavor imparted to a wine by the environment in which it is produced.” While the marketing of moonshine does not rely heavily on factors such as the soil type and climate in which the corn was grown, terroir offers nonetheless valuable insights into the moonshine market’s reliance on place, region, and history.

In her article on *terroir* and labor on tea plantations in Darjeeling, Sarah Besky explores this aspect of *terroir*, the aspect that relies on notions of a place as historically distinct in regard to its food product. Besky writes that “contemporary Darjeeling tea production under GI* was selectively linked to colonial plantation production. Darjeeling’s colonial past did not disappear, but it was revalued and made ‘suitable’ for contemporary consumers. An association with quality of taste and quality of production is essential to terroir, but that association tends to be based upon assumptions about historical continuity.”³⁰ The unsavory part of Darjeeling’s history, colonial plantation production, was modified to create a pleasant image of old tea plants and Nepali women in red *chaubandis*, which Besky describes as the “‘traditional’ dress of a united Hindu Nepal.”³¹ Besky, however, claims to have never seen this sort of dress: she usually saw the workers wearing men’s button-down shirts. The continuity of Darjeeling tea is certainly not how it is marketed, and one could argue that about moonshining as well, which will be discussed below.

Lower Class: Economic Desperation and Persistent Stereotypes

Moonshine was produced mostly by poor people. For most of its history, moonshining was the domain of small subsistence farmers. Part of the reason that moonshining has waxed and waned in popularity throughout history is the need for extra income, so other people who were

³⁰ Besky, Sarah. “The Labor of Terroir and the Terroir of Labor: Geographical Indication and Darjeeling Tea Plantations.” *Agriculture and Human Values* 31, no. 1 (2014): 87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-013-9452-8>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

not farmers would sometimes make moonshine as well. Economic necessity, along with political changes and forces, has been one of, if not the most important factor, in driving people to distill illicit liquor. As mentioned earlier, moonshining became prominent in the late eighteenth-century Monongahela River Valley because turning one's grain into whiskey turned a higher profit. It cost more to transport grain than to transport whiskey, as a single donkey that could only carry four bushels of grain could carry twenty-four bushels that were distilled into liquor.³² Farming in the mountains would have been economically nonviable were it not for the convenience that distilling one's grain afforded. At the end of the nineteenth century, when the U.S. Congress increased the federal liquor tax to \$1.10 per gallon, distilling legal whiskey became almost completely unprofitable. Distilling two bushels of corn would earn a measly fifty cents of profit for a legal distiller, while the same amount of corn would earn a moonshiner \$7.50.³³ The economic status of those making it along with the profitability of moonshine itself were what drove moonshining in the mountains.

This remained true in the twentieth century as well. Money was to be made from more than just moonshining, as bootlegging (or transporting moonshine) became profitable as well.

One resident of Cocke County, Tennessee told Emelie K. Peine:

A guy in a booth in a restaurant told me and, he mentioned those three places, that after World War II you couldn't buy a job there and even if you got one it was like twenty five dollars a week average pay back then. But he said if you were willing to take a few risks you could make as much or more money than that and all you had to do was drive a car to Asheville.³⁴

In a time when jobs were sparse, and the few jobs available did not pay well, producing or transporting moonshine was a sensible way to stay afloat. Moonshine was a very tangible part of the economy as well as the physical landscape of eastern Tennessee:

³² Willkie, H.F., *Beverage Spirits in America*, New York: Newcomen Society, 1947.

³³ Stewart, 33.

³⁴ Peine and Schafft, 99.

See all the effects on the economy? You had the people that made the stills, you had the people that fixed the cars, and all these different things . . . was a garage for years where they outfitted cars with those suspension systems. My brother used to tell me it was so they'd ride level goin' up a mountain. [But really it was so that] when it was loaded [with whiskey] it would come back down level. And then there was [Johnson] Motor Company. [Mr. Johnson] told me that his dad couldn't have made it without liquor money. That the cars [people] brought [in to be modified for running liquor were what kept the business alive]. That liquor money sent him to medical school. It's an economic necessity.³⁵

In this sense, moonshine, or the money that it produced, was woven into almost every aspect of life in some places. It created jobs, more work for mechanics, it created companies, and sent people to school. Many residents of Cocke County could point out to Peine various businesses like restaurants and hotels that were funded by moonshine. The effects of moonshine on both the economy and peoples' lives were visible from the street.

The poverty of moonshiners was necessarily linked to their derision as hillbillies. The resistance (and often violence) that farmers and moonshiners showed toward various federal taxes on whiskey and liquor contributed consequently to the stereotypical images of Appalachia that still persist today: “a strange, wild place of gun-toting, cousin-slaying, cock-fighting, impoverished white men and their largely invisible and burdened (or, alternately, hyper-sexualized) wives.”³⁶ Uneducated, antimodern, unprogressive, and backwards. As the rest of the country moved forward into the twentieth century, embracing new technologies, ideas, concepts about government's legitimate scope/reach, and possibilities for personal success, moonshiners seemed to the rest of the country to be stuck in uncivilized and distasteful old habits and behaviors.

These stereotypes and images have changed little over the years, and they have found expression in representations on television. Series such as *Green Acres*, *Beverly Hillbillies*, and

³⁵ Peine and Schafft, 100.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

Hee Haw in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed groups of rural, southern people (and sometimes moonshiners) with exaggerated stereotypical behavior for the purpose of comedy. One example of the contemporary persistence of these stereotypes can be found in Discovery's 2011 television series *Moonshiners*, which was popular enough to warrant ten seasons. The current description of the series of Discovery's streaming website reads:

Every Spring, a fearless group of men and women venture deep into the woods of Appalachia, defying the law, rivals and nature itself to keep the centuries-old tradition of craft whiskey alive. This season a new generation of moonshiners are striving to take the ancient art into the 21st-century, using age-old methods to produce new flavors and liquor varieties that could transform America's liquor landscape.

With fortune and glory on the line, old partnerships are tested, and young upstarts look to stake their claim on new territory. As the black market for white whiskey heats up, desperate shiners put new, dangerous still designs into service, while legendary old-timers come out of retirement to head back into the hills for one more run. All the while, the ever-present threat of the law continues to put the squeeze on those dedicated to America's original spirit.³⁷

The description of *Moonshiners* oozes this sort of lawless, backwards, and rugged concept of moonshiners. These are the “desperate,” or impoverished, moonshiners who build wild and dangerous new stills to pump out as much white whiskey as possible with the threat of the law always looming in the background. This image of the poor and crazy hillbilly has not faded over time, nor has the image of the “legendary” old moonshiner who retires after escaping the law for so long. Moonshining itself has become legendary and mythic through outside ideas and fantasies of what was happening over yonder in the depths of the hills. Traditional moonshining is associated with a way of life, a libertarian and self-sufficient politics, and a physical location. Those hills and hollers are integral to moonshine and moonshining, as contemporary legal moonshining shows us today.

³⁷ “About The Show - Moonshiners.” About Moonshiners. Discovery Communications LLC, n.d. Accessed May 4, 2021, <https://go.discovery.com/tv-shows/moonshiners/about>.

Revisiting Theoretical Approaches

In this project, I use the concepts of terroir and placemaking within a larger framework of authenticity as a theoretical approach in order to better understand contemporary moonshining in southern Appalachia. The weaving of ideal images and history of places into a product is one way in which *terroir* functions as a useful marketing tool and framework of analysis for moonshine. The emphasis on the environment and history as vital to the nature of the product can be found not only on wine bottles and boxes of tea, but on both jars of moonshine as well the art and cultural production surrounding them as well. Besky references a poster for Darjeeling tea in her article that reads: “The whole world now recognizes the fact that this magical brew owes its unique eloquence to its place of origin, the misty hills of Darjeeling.”³⁸ It is the *misty hills* of Darjeeling that endow the tea with its “unique eloquence” according to this particular marketing campaign. One of, if not, the most famous song that references moonshine, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” sung by John Denver, bears some striking resemblance to this campaign. The second verse of the song, sung about West Virginia, goes like this:

All my memories gather 'round her
 Miner's lady, stranger to blue water
 Dark and dusty, painted on the sky
 Misty taste of moonshine, teardrop in my eye

The taste of moonshine is *misty*, just like the mountains where it is made. It is this mystical, often imprecise, yet real association of moonshine with a particular place, culture, and history that makes it so marketable as a craft product. When one buys a jar of moonshine, they are in some sense buying some of the mist of the hills to take home with them. In this sense, *terroir* is in and of itself a sort of placemaking through product marketing. The reason behind these sorts of marketing practices, however, is not simply cultural (re)production or placemaking. Rather, this

³⁸Besky, 84.

emphasis on place and regional history allows producers to claim that their moonshine is authentic, which in turn allows them to better market it to tourists and locals alike.

Because contemporary moonshining is very much concerned with places, it should be investigated as a site for both cultural and economic reproduction in southern Appalachia. According to Peine and Schafft, “the cultural significance of moonshine is what keeps it alive even though the tradition was born of economic necessity.” While it may seem that illicit moonshining is once more on the brink of death, “the power of moonshine to shape the way that Appalachian culture, and specifically the social context of this county, is defined” is very much alive.³⁹ Moonshine has power to shape Appalachian culture, as well as the social contexts of more specific locations in which it is made. At the same time, moonshine is shaped by perceptions of Appalachian culture both within and outside of the region. The multitude of claims about what Appalachia is and what moonshine is produce ideas about authenticity that shape the marketing strategies of distillers. In this project, I explore just how contemporary legal moonshine shapes and is shaped by its physical location and context. Its association with a place/region is empirical and imagined simultaneously. Place is both reflected in moonshine as a product of a historical Appalachia and recreated imaginatively in contemporary contexts by newfangled artisan producers. Moreover, I explore the ways in which the relationships between moonshine, Appalachia, and the United States (particularly in the context of tourism) dictate the ways in which moonshine is produced, discussed, and sold through ideas about authentic

³⁹ Peine and Schafft, 107.

Chapter Two

Hair of the Dog: Historical Tenacity and Moonshine's 21st Century Revival

Contemporary craft moonshine production shows the tenacity of moonshining as a practice, product, idea, and cultural/regional signifier. As I discussed in the “generational” section of chapter one, moonshining has not been a consistent or linear practice in southern Appalachia. The cultural and economic landscapes of moonshining have shifted dramatically throughout the centuries as a result of variables such as the modification of cars to outrun law enforcement, new still technologies, increasing or decreasing pressure from local and federal governments, and the rise of sugar as a dominant ingredient in the product. In this chapter, I will dive into some of these specific topics with the help of my interlocutors. Many of the distillery owners and workers I interviewed have deep and historical connections to both the region and to moonshine, some through generations of moonshining and others through racing for NASCAR. What all of my interlocutors seem to agree on is that moonshine is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Appalachia. Whether or not they themselves view this as positive or negative, however, varies greatly. Today, starting a distillery is not nearly as difficult as it was twelve years ago; and after quite a bit of a lull, moonshine is back and can probably be found in your local liquor store. My interlocutors all produce some sort of moonshine that is legal and taxed, and which they understand and promote as authentic. To reach this point has not been smooth sailing, but a steep, winding, and rocky road.

In the first part of this chapter, I will explore the tenacity of moonshining as a practice over centuries of Appalachian history through the voices of some contemporary legal distillers. This long history of the resistance of moonshining to federal suppression has led up to

contemporary legal moonshining today. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the economic and cultural feasibility and persistence of contemporary legal moonshining as it relates to a larger history of moonshining in the Appalachian South. In particular, I analyze the ways in which authenticity is integral to selling legal moonshine in today's global tourist economy: rather than persisting as a way to earn extra income in times of need, today's moonshine persists as "a bit of the frontier in a bottle" and is marketed as such to those who would like to take some home with them.⁴⁰ As I discussed in chapter one, the prominence of moonshining in the United States has fluctuated greatly over time, and many have predicted its death as a practice at one point or another. Each time moonshine was predicted to die, there was a reason (be it economic or political) that it persevered. In discussing the tenacity of moonshine with its legal producers today, I attempt to illuminate the ways in which authenticity (and the desire for it) is a driving force of moonshine's latest revival. I focus on the ways in which producers claim that their moonshine is authentic while claiming that other moonshines are not, and what work these sorts of claims are actually doing. Is it simply a business strategy, or is there something more to it? That producers can make these claims and use them as marketing strategies, however, is due to the long history of moonshining in the region and the conceptions people have about both moonshine and Appalachia that this history has produced.

Trey and his brother were the first people to open up a legal moonshine distillery in the state of South Carolina. When I talked to him over the phone, I could tell that he was deeply passionate about distilling and about moonshine. He certainly had to be, given the long and arduous process of finding the loopholes in state law and going through complex legal processes to finally open up his distillery. This, however, was not the first subject that he brought up with

⁴⁰Gelt, Jessica. "Moonshine: A Clear Choice in Whiskeys," *The Charlotte Observer*, September 5th, 2012, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/latest-news/article9083378.html>.

me. When I asked him how and why he started making moonshine, he began talking about the name of his distillery, Palmetto Moonshine, and the nickname of the state of South Carolina, the Palmetto State. Trey was living in Florida for a while before he really began to miss South Carolina and decided to return and create Palmetto Moonshine.

Trey told me that “in the state of South Carolina the Palmetto is a well-known symbol of the Palmetto tree and so on, but if you go outside the borders, you know, across the U.S. most people don't know what a palmetto is. I've heard of pimento and ‘palmento,’ but everybody, most everybody has heard the word moonshine because it has been around for hundreds and hundreds of years.” Part of what Trey is talking about here is product recognition: the word moonshine is recognizable across the United States because of its endurance as a product for centuries. The Palmetto tree, on the other hand, is a more locally recognized symbol of the region that is not generally known by outsiders. It is not, however, a literal Palmetto tree that Trey is discussing. Rather, he is talking about the *symbol* of the Palmetto tree. It represents something. In this sense, he uses moonshine as a symbol as well. The use of the word “moonshine” in marketing his product *conveys* something to a wider array of customers that the word “palmetto” does not. Trey points out specifically that “everybody has heard the word moonshine” due to its long history in the United States, but there is much more behind the word moonshine than a long history. “Moonshine” is jam-packed with ideas and stereotypes: the Appalachian mountains, poverty, outlaws, hillbillies, and even blindness. Moonshine functions in many ways as a symbol in the United States and beyond, a symbol that can be utilized to market a product.

One could understand the collection of these ideas and stereotypes surrounding not only moonshine but also Appalachia as part of the conception of Appalachia as an internal frontier in the United States. That “everybody has heard the word moonshine” speaks to this canonization

of Appalachia as an internal frontier. It is reduced to a group of outsider understandings of the region as rural, uneducated, riddled with poverty and alcoholism (moonshine), and more recently riddled with drug addiction. These ideas are consistently built upon through literature and media, some examples being *Beverly Hillbillies* and the more recent *Moonshiners*. These continuous representations and re-representations of Appalachia play a major role in the persistence of its image as an internal frontier, and these outside representations often frame this status as permanent. Peine and Schafft write of “the power of moonshine to shape the way that Appalachian culture... is defined.”⁴¹ Moonshine certainly contributes to the definition of Appalachian culture, but moonshine has never been shaped solely by those who produce it. It is also shaped by those who represent it in television, movies, fiction, music, and popular culture. Thus, the tenacity of moonshine as a cultural product (both of Southern Appalachia and of the United States) may in part be due to its persistence as a media product. For moonshine to function as a symbol, large numbers of people must be able to use it and understand it as such, and this is largely due to the mythology surrounding it that is produced and reproduced in various forms of media.

At the same time that moonshine is portrayed as being dangerous, illegal, and produced by uneducated and illiterate hillbillies in the mountains, it is also being portrayed in a new light by those who produce it legally. Though many, if not most, of these producers riff on and reference the illegal and gritty history of moonshine, they also emphasize that their recipes were rigorously perfected through trial and error to produce a refined and clean product. Several interlocutors state on their websites that they use spring water in their distillation process, just as illegal stills located along creeks in the mountains would use. What is emphasized, however, is not the backcountry or illicit connotations of having to use springs deep in the hills, but the

⁴¹ Peine and Schafft, 107.

quality and purity of their ingredients that contribute to the superior quality of their products. It is the labor of perfecting the recipes and using the right ingredients that distinguishes these products from their competition. One interlocutor, Joe, told me:

A lot of people from the city, lots of people from the police department are my customers because I emphasize smooth, fine spirits and not just trying to get drunk. You know, we're not just a bunch of hicks out in the woods, making moonshine, trying to get rich. We're actually craftsmen and we're artists. And that's what I consider myself, an artist, and I make the smoothest spirit you will ever taste in your life.

Joe references common stereotypes about moonshine, but pushes against them. This is not your great-grandfather's backwoods moonshine, but a polished product. Whereas illegal moonshine is often described as setting one's mouth aflame, Joe describes his moonshine as "the smoothest spirit you will ever taste in your life." It is a craft product that he has devoted his life to, rather than a way to make extra income to make ends meet or a scheme to get rich. These sorts of portrayals of contemporary moonshine also shape the way that the product is thought of and the way that it continues to be a relevant product in Appalachia and the world. Though one is likely to find craft moonshine in a mason jar, this same moonshine would also likely be sealed and wrapped in a pleasingly designed label. That it is sealed and labeled signals that it is not *that kind* of moonshine, but something else. I emphasize "*that kind*" here because it is still considered to be moonshine by many, and in that way reshapes, or at least adds to, conceptions of the region and the product.

Contemporary craft moonshine is not, however, the only major change that has occurred to the product over the years. In the early years of the United States, unaged white whiskey was made by many people in order to better transport and make more money off of their corn crop, as I mentioned in the first chapter. Then, the whiskey was made exclusively out of grains. By the 1920s, however, distillers were using refined sugar to make liquor. The inclusion of sugar in the

distilling process changed the whiskey itself. Bruce Stewart quotes one “old-time” moonshiner as claiming that “there’s as much difference in the stuff they make today and the liquor they make fifteen years ago as there is in daylight and dark.”⁴² The liquor that people were making illegally, moonshine, was in reality not one type of liquor throughout history, but many. A liquor made of 100% corn is quite different from a liquor of 30% corn and 70% sugar. The term “moonshine,” therefore, refers more to a style of making liquor than a specific *type* of liquor itself. That moonshine can mean such a wide variety of things shows the adaptability of the word, product, and practice. Moonshine has been ever changing throughout history, and many of the types of moonshine made throughout time are made in some form legally today.

The ingredients that contemporary legal distillers use today differ greatly; this is due in part to distillers choosing whether they want to make a moonshine similar to that which was made two hundred, one hundred, or fifty years ago. Joe and Trey, for example, both make their moonshine from 100% corn. Their moonshine is an unaged white whiskey, more akin to the moonshines being produced before the prohibition. Using 100% corn also allows the moonshine to seem more “clean,” as corn and water are the only ingredients pre-fermentation. Some distillers still make so-called “sugar-shine,” which generally uses more sugar than corn. Sugar-shine is more contemporary than moonshine made exclusively from corn, and could be considered by some to be more authentic because it is the most commonly produced illicit moonshine. Because sugar reduces the fermentation period, most people making moonshine illegally decided to use it, as it raised profits. However, it could also be considered less “clean,” as sugar is often regarded as being unhealthy. The rise of sugar-shine also coincided with the rise of inedible and toxic ingredients in the moonshine that could cause health issues, as well as

⁴² Stewart, 35.

questionable still technologies such as substituting car parts for traditional parts of stills.⁴³ These conceptions about sugar in moonshine can make it less attractive than a pure corn liquor.

Frank lives and works in rural Tennessee, where he runs a distillery and farm-to-table restaurant. He also makes a sort of “traditional” moonshine, sugar-shine, at his distillery. There is a sort of ecosystem at Frank’s distillery and farm, as the cows eat the mash from the liquor and then are served themselves as steak or burgers at the restaurant. Frank does not like the term moonshine. He calls it a “hiccup of American history that moonshine exists at all.” This is not because he is against illegal distilling, but because he believes that every farm should have a distillery: it makes sense economically and ecologically. Therefore, it should never have been made illegal. Despite these feelings about moonshine, Frank still makes sugar-shine and brands it as such.

Three “old-time” moonshiners work for him at the distillery, and while they never worked with each other before working at the distillery, their recipes for making moonshine have always been one and the same. Frank attributes this to “moonshine” meaning one particular form of liquor in his county:

These old moonshiners, they all make the same recipe. It's 70% sugar, 30% corn sour mash moonshine. Everyone in the County makes the same thing. So if I had all these, if I had these different moonshiners, I thought they would all have their own distinct recipe, but they all made the exact same recipe. They didn't work together so that just shows you that the culture of moonshine in certain areas is so thick and established that it's just considered a thing. It's a commodity. The recipe is set, even though there's not, it's not written down, it's not in a book anywhere. It's just, that's what people make.

That these three moonshiners made the same product without ever having worked together speaks to a certain uniformity in the product, at least in Frank’s area: moonshine is moonshine, just like tequila is tequila or gin is gin. Though the product may have evolved throughout history,

⁴³ Stewart, 38.

everyone was essentially making the same thing at any given time. And this recipe is the same recipe Frank makes, 70% sugar and 30% corn. Frank says that “moonshine” never should have existed, and yet it is so “thick and established” that people who never worked with each other make the exact same product. This is another situation in which the perseverance or tenacity of moonshine as a feature of life in southern Appalachia is apparent. Despite the myriad efforts by federal and local governments to stop moonshining, Frank works with three men today who have all been separately making a product that has specific guidelines for what ingredients are used and in what amounts.

Though Frank’s recipe is quite specific, other legal distillers riff on old recipes quite a bit. Jack, for example, whose distillery is located in an urban area of Appalachian North Carolina, makes something called “Carolina Spirit.” Jack also does not like the word moonshine, but for very different reasons than Frank. Jack told me that he thinks the word “moonshine” comes with a negative connotation: “We don't like the term and what people associate with it. Which is why, you know, you're rarely going to hear us describe any of our products as like a moonshine or an aged moonshine.” This is part of the reason why their “Carolina Spirit” is not branded as Moonshine, but something slightly different. Another reason is because it is not made of just corn and sugar, but rather corn, cane sugar, barley, and hops. In a post on the distillery’s Facebook page, it is described as tasting similar to tequila. They suggest putting it in a Margarita or Paloma. It is marketed in this sense as something much more sophisticated than moonshine, something one can use in a cocktail.

Frank has been branching out as well, though he said that the traditional sugar-shine will always be available at his distillery. Because he is interested in grains, he has been making and

looking into making older recipes that do not involve sugar, and some that involve other locally sourced ingredients:

I prefer grains. So I'm really taking the sugar shine and I'll always make it and I'll always make it available, but I'm now kind of more interested in what they were making before, when the distilleries, you know, were legal and they had more time. So, uh, so some of the stuff I do is, I'm developing a gin that is based on the moonshine. You know, like a pure corn shine, but we do the botanical infusions into it, you know, and there's something called mountain gin, which I'm making now, which is basically like moonshine, but you can take like Eastern Red Cedar, Juniper berries, and, you know, peppercorn and different botanicals, Virginia Spicebush, and sumac, all local stuff, and making gin with that.

There is more of a sense of craftsmanship in this sort of liquor that involves more ingredients and is a recipe that one came up with oneself.

Frank's new liquor is, however, still deeply connected to the region and the landscape. This sort of liquor might even have more of a true *terroir* than a simple moonshine. It is made with locally sourced ingredients, some of which are specific to the region. That it is called *mountain* gin connects it to the terrain of the region, it is a gin made from the mountains themselves, or at least the plants that grow on them. Here, the adaptability of moonshine is quite clear. Mountain gin is still a product based on moonshine, and it is a riff on classic moonshine that ties itself even closer to the ground on which it is made. It becomes *even more* regional, and therefore potentially more authentic, through its addition of locally foraged botanical ingredients. Mountain gin can be seen as another way in which moonshine persists as a relevant liquor in the twenty-first century, as well as evidence of distilleries engaging in a sort of placemaking that ties their practice to both specific areas within Appalachia and the greater region.

Though Jack refrains from using the term "moonshine," he grounds his spirit in the state of North Carolina in a different way. The name "Carolina Spirit" is the first way that this connection comes across; it is a spirit specific to the Carolinas. The Facebook post in which the

spirit is advertised states “a classic Carolina spirit that has been distilled in our area of NC for over 100 years. Having a mash of grain, cane & hops makes it a bit different than most ‘moonshine’ out there.” Despite that it tastes different from most moonshine, and that it is compared to tequila rather than any kind of whiskey, the distillery still draws on the history of moonshine in Appalachian North Carolina. Though the cane sugar and the comparison to Tequila might suggest a warmer climate, the claim that this spirit has been made in the region connects it to both moonshine as a product and moonshining as a practice and a history.

For Jack, avoiding the term moonshine has everything to do with the “craft” quality of the spirits he is making. Sarah Besky writes that “for conscientious consumers, the locally bounded craft of artisans contrasts with the regimented (and arguably place-less) labor of industrial agricultural workers.”⁴⁴ While moonshine was never produced through regimented industrial labor, it has at certain times been mass produced (in very low quality) by moonshining “kingpins.”⁴⁵ This mass production, and the decline in the quality of the liquor that came with it, contributed to the reputation of moonshine as dirty, unpleasant, and dangerous. When I asked Jack about why he did not label his “Carolina Spirit” as moonshine, he said this:

If you're trying to do an elevated rendition of what used to be a moonshine and you put that on your label, all people expect is either this heavily sweetened flavor, almost like a liqueur kind of thing, or they're getting this just really high proof, roughly cut, almost abrasive, kind of a spirit. And, you know, neither one of those apply to what we're putting into a bottle, and they don't even really apply to what a lot of people are putting into bottles that are trying to revive some of these very, sort of, traditional regional spirits.

His “Carolina Spirit” is an “elevated rendition of what used to be a moonshine.” Because people often have negative understandings about what moonshine is and how it tastes, labelling this particular liquor “moonshine” could damage sales or cause people not to take his liquor

⁴⁴ Besky, 87.

⁴⁵ Stewart, 36.

seriously, in Jack's view. Despite this, the name of the liquor stills refers to the history of moonshine in the region. This suggests that there is still something to be gained—a sort of authenticity—from connecting one's craft product with the history of moonshining, as well as with local hands rather than with factories. It also suggests that moonshine as a signifier of a particular way of life and a particular geography persists in contemporary craft distilling despite any negative connotations it may have.

During my research I looked at many websites of distilleries in and around southern Appalachia, and many produce liquors with names similar to "Carolina Spirit." These spirits are generally unaged white whiskeys, and though their makers avoid calling them moonshine for various reasons, their names almost always suggest that they are a part of a longer history of localized distillation of a regional spirit (moonshine). Some examples of this are "Old City Heirloom Corn Whiskey," "Lincoln County Lightning," "Old Natchez Trace White Whiskey," and "Southern Star White Whiskey." Some of these names, such as "Old City Heirloom Corn Whiskey," imply a long history with the use of words like "old" and "heirloom." Others are more explicit in their references to moonshine specifically, such as "Lincoln County Lightning," which references "white lightning," another colloquial term for moonshine. In this way, even when distillers choose not to use the term "moonshine" for any given reason, they often associate in one way or another the unaged white whiskeys that they make with the history of regional moonshining.

These sorts of references point not only to the history of moonshine, however. They also point to a geographic imaginary, or a collection of ideas about a place that forms over time and is influenced by history, media, and politics among other things. Appalachia's geographic imaginary could be called something like the internal frontier or the impoverished mountains. It

consists of images like hillbillies drinking moonshine, lack of education, poverty, ramshackle houses, etc. These geographic imaginaries can be used to attract tourism; and moonshine, which is often marketed to tourists, can be seen as an example of this. That moonshine can be marketed in such a way may be partially responsible for its survival as a product and a practice in spite of the many historical claims of its death. Dodman and Rhiney write that “it is indeed possible that tourist demands for particular types of food may help to encourage the maintenance of local food traditions in the face of the encroaching globalisation of tastes.”⁴⁶ Tourist demand for moonshine has in many ways brought moonshine back to life, albeit in a new and flashier form.

Furthermore, the tourist demand for a product like moonshine, which can be seen as exotic in both its history of illegality and its origin in a part of the United States commonly seen as secluded and fundamentally different, poses the question of authenticity. Tourists generally desire authentic experiences and products in their travels, and this holds true for tourists looking to drink some moonshine on their trip down south. This is a tough desire to fulfill, however, as one must ask: what kind of moonshine is truly authentic?

The Gen-u-ine Article

Authenticity is a very fraught term in general, and it is even more fraught in the context of moonshine. At first, one might think that the only authentic moonshine is moonshine that is made illegally, and to be more specific, moonshine that is made illegally in the mountains of

⁴⁶Dodman, David, and Kevin Rhiney. “‘We Nyammin?’ Food Supply, Authenticity, and the Tourist Experience in Negril, Jamaica.” *New Perspectives in Caribbean Tourism*, 2008, 127–44. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203931271-14>.

Appalachia. This idea quickly becomes complicated, however, when one looks at the varying definitions of authenticity. With moonshine, a paradox begins to emerge:

By this definition of authenticity as originality, commercial moonshine will always be rendered inauthentic by its very nature of being legally produced and sold. In this respect, it becomes even more important for commercial distilleries to engage and construct other versions of authenticity. Finally, authenticity is understood in terms of what is “authorized, certified, or legally valid” (Bruner 1994, p 400). Authoritatively, commercial moonshine through its legal status, has the potential to be more authentic than persisting illegal moonshine still being manufactured in the region today.⁴⁷

Different definitions of authenticity position different types of moonshine as being authentic or not, particularly in regards to the legality of their production. While one definition suggests that commercial moonshine is always inauthentic because traditional moonshine was made illegally, another claims that commercial moonshine is inherently more authentic than illicit moonshine precisely because of its legality. That Rosko presents readers with such widely differing definitions of authenticity poses the question: can authenticity, with all of its ambiguity, be a useful framework for understanding moonshine? I will argue that it is, and not because one type of moonshine is more authentic than the other. The concept of authenticity is integral to understanding the current commercial production of moonshine because authenticity is what many distillers are trying to sell. Furthermore, it is utilized to make one’s own product more desirable, while at the same time being weaponized to devalue the products of others. In this sense, the desire for authenticity on the part of producers and consumers very well may be one of the most important spurs for moonshine’s recent revival.

While Rosko offers two distilled definitions of authenticity to complicate conceptions of contemporary moonshining, there are still more to consider. Johnston and Baumann name five aspects of authenticity in regards to food: geographic specificity, history and tradition, simplicity,

⁴⁷ Rosko, 355.

ethnic connection, and personal connection. Later, they name a sixth: exoticism.⁴⁸ In the context of moonshine, all of these aspects aside from ethnic connection (with a few exceptions in regards to scottisch/irish heritage) are commonly employed in marketing strategies. I will explore these themes in detail later in the chapter. What Rosko's definitions make clear, and what Johnston's and Baumann's categories make even clearer, is that "authenticity itself is not an inherent attribute of any object; rather, it is [the] result of ongoing negotiation between producers and consumers."⁴⁹ Because one definition of authentic moonshine precludes legally produced moonshine from being authentic, producers must negotiate with consumers to claim that authenticity.

In the context of moonshine, however, these negotiations are not exclusively made between producers and consumers. Authenticity is not so easily claimed when making a product legally that was originally produced illegally. Thus, producers must negotiate with each other for authenticity. While they claim the authenticity of their own products, they often disparage the authenticity of the products of others. The relative newness of legal production and the tenuous relationship of these products to the illegal moonshine of the past provide ample grounds for sparring. The opinion that other producers of legal moonshine are making some sort of inferior product that should not be classified as moonshine was shared by several of my interlocutors. These claims mostly have to do with the ingredients producers use to make their products, but occasionally reference the methods they use as well. Frank offered a particularly condemning account:

"I think the distilleries in tourist areas have mutated it into a disgusting monster, and they also just are so big that they're not making traditional moonshines anymore, making the neutral grain spirit, just like vodka, and flavoring it and calling it moonshine. And the

⁴⁸ Johnston, Josée and Baumann, Shyon, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 74-90, 97-91.

⁴⁹ Byrd et. al., 139.

United States government does not have a category for moonshine, so I could, you know, take ethanol and flavor it and call it moonshine. It's totally legal. So what that has done to moonshine is basically, it made 99% of the people that have tried moonshine, have never really tried historic moonshine. So unless you know what you're drinking, you know, the label says moonshine, but it's never been made illegally, with flavors from another planet. You know, it's just not moonshine. It's some sort of chemical creation. And it's not even illegal.”

The image of this “moonshine” as a disgusting monster and a chemical creation is particularly striking, especially given the simple and historic moonshine that it is compared to. Because Frank is making moonshine from an old local recipe that uses only corn and sugar, he can claim authenticity in the face of the “chemical creations” that other distillers are producing. What makes this chemical moonshine unauthentic is its lack of history and simplicity, its lack of personal connection, and its lack of geographic specificity. After all, this chemical stuff is made in tourist areas, sites of intense and rapid development that play on geographical specificity while their global character and occupants suggest a lack thereof. Frank’s distillery, on the other hand, is located on a farm in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, a location in which moonshine has been made illegally for centuries and continues to be made illegally today.

Another aspect of Frank’s distilling practice that is important to note is that he has been experimenting with other liquors recently, a “mountain gin” in particular. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, the fact that the mountain gin is a traditional sugar shine infused with local botanicals creates an image of an even more localized moonshine. This mountain gin is interesting to consider in relation to Frank’s antipathy towards flavors, as it suggests that there are good and bad ways to modify traditional recipes. Infusion with local botanicals only makes the association of the product with the region stronger, while a flavor like cotton candy does the opposite. Flavors seem to make moonshine more appealing to some customers, however, as

flavored moonshines are produced by a large number of distilleries. One could also argue that Frank's simple addition of botanicals to a traditional recipe makes the product more authentic than a flavored non-traditional moonshine. Frank touches on four of the five main aspects of authenticity provided by Johnston and Baumann, and while the other producers he describes have none of these, his product possesses all four.

Joe Michalek of Piedmont Distillers speaks about the question of flavors as well. For Michalek, who produces many fruit flavored moonshines, the way in which the fruit shines through the beverage is essential. He is not, however, satisfied with how other distillers use flavors:

I know the category is popular right now, and a lot of people are jumping in. But many of them are making a different kind of product—they're not high-proof, and they're using extracts and coloring rather than real fruit. If your proof is lower, say 40 or 60 rather than 100 like ours, you'll obviously save money on excise taxes. But you end up with something totally different. It's almost like a ready-to-drink cocktail. So I think our product will stand up to them and survive, because of all the extra expense and effort we go through.⁵⁰

The emphasis here is on method: flavoring moonshine with real fruit creates an authentic product, while using extracts and coloring does not. Similarly, a 100 proof moonshine is more authentic than one with a lower proof. The comparison of these other moonshines to “ready-to-drink cocktail[s]” is in many ways a disqualifying statement. Not only is the product not moonshine, but it is not even liquor. Instead, it exists in the gray area of the “totally different.”

Claims could be made, however, that Michalek's moonshine is not really moonshine and also exists in this realm of the “totally different.” Michalek uses a neutral grain spirit to make his moonshine rather than a corn whiskey. This means that the flavor profile of the spirit is quite

⁵⁰ Spivak, Mark. *Moonshine Nation: the Art of Creating Cornbread in a Bottle*. (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, an imprint of Globe Pequot Press, 2014), 134-5.

different than that of an unaged corn whiskey, or what is traditionally considered to be moonshine. Troy Ball of Troy and Sons Distillery in Asheville, North Carolina said in an interview with Mark Spivak:

We want to remain a real brand and not become a tourist brand. Right now, the risk with the whole moonshine category is that there are so many bad products out there that are tainting the opportunity for moonshine. And of course there are people who are really making vodka and passing it off as moonshine, which works because it's much softer.⁵¹

While Ball is not speaking about any one distiller in particular, it is easy to imagine someone making a claim that Piedmont Distillers' moonshine is really more of a "vodka," as they use a neutral grain spirit rather than a corn whiskey. What Michalek claims is authentic about his moonshine is the flavor of the fruit that is exactly the same as the first (peach-flavored) moonshine he ever tried.⁵² Others, however, might argue that fruit flavors are irrelevant compared to the type of liquor used. These disparities in what distillers claim as authentic allow them to portray their own products as authentic in comparison to myriad others that are really just "faking it."

In a 2019 study, Byrd et. al. assess the ways in which distillery owners claim authenticity for their moonshine on their websites, comparing Appalachian and non-Appalachian distilleries. Many of the aspects of authenticity (or lack thereof) that Frank references above appear on these websites. The study used 20 Appalachian and 44 non-Appalachian distilleries that make moonshine, a ratio which they describe as being similar to that of all Appalachian distilleries and non-Appalachian distilleries in the country. Patterns begin to emerge when comparing the words of Appalachian and non-Appalachian distilleries. "Handcrafted," for example, is a theme used by 25% of Appalachian distilleries and 39% of non-Appalachian distilleries. This could be due to

⁵¹ Ibid., 183.

⁵² Ibid., 114-115.

the inability of non-Appalachian distilleries to use themes like “family identity,” “historical identity,” and “legality” at the rate that Appalachian distilleries do. Appalachian distilleries used these themes significantly more than their non-Appalachian counterparts, while non-Appalachian distilleries used themes like “local ingredients,” “handcrafted,” and “small batch” more than the Appalachian distilleries.⁵³ What becomes clear is that authenticity means something quite different for distilleries in Appalachia than it does for distilleries outside the region.

Even producers in Appalachia that shy away from the word “moonshine,” such as Jack, sometimes use historical connections to claim authenticity for a product that is advertised as being tweaked and “improved.” Jack’s Carolina Spirit not only references the history of moonshining in North Carolina, but is based on a recipe that is over one hundred years old:

We ended up with this fellow's family recipe, and it's a recipe that's been made in our area for well over a hundred years. The person we got it from is 80 years old and his grandfather was making it. I would say probably our rendition of it is a bit more, uh, sophisticated, mainly because we're able to use a lot more actual scientific equipment to make sure our cuts are a lot tighter.

Despite making a product that he describes as more “sophisticated” due to both the use of contemporary technology and a tweaked recipe, the historical connection forged through the use of an old regional recipe could make his product seem more authentic than other similar products that lack this connection. Furthermore, the use of this recipe creates not only a historical connection, but a geographic specificity as well. If one were to take the recipe that Jack uses and make the product in Idaho, for example, the effect would not be the same. The production of an old regional recipe within that same geographical space creates a stronger image of authenticity than the use of the recipe would elsewhere. In this way, though he produces something that he

⁵³ Byrd et. al., 157.

chooses not to call moonshine, Jack still creates a sense of authenticity with the history of moonshining in the region.

Using Johnston and Baumann's aspects of authenticity within food, one could easily claim that moonshine distilleries in Appalachia are more authentic than those outside of it. These distilleries touch on geographical specificity, family connections, and historical connections at a higher rate than non-Appalachian distilleries. Byrd et. al. suggest that this may not be the case: "Moonshine does not have to be produced in an illegal still deep in the Appalachian Mountains to be authentic. The legalization of distilling in the South and rise of craft distilleries around the country mean *spirits related to moonshine* can be created and sold around the country,"⁵⁴ While the authors complicate the authenticity of moonshine, they do not go so far as to say that *moonshine* can be created and sold around the country. Rather, they opt for "spirits related to moonshine." In a sense, they are skirting around the regional politics that Frank is engaging in: what can be called moonshine? The difference between how the authors answer this question, or at least address it, and how many producers address it, is that the authors opt for a certain ambiguity. "Spirits related to moonshine" could mean any number of things, as well as any degree of closeness to something that is explicitly moonshine. Frank, on the other hand, describes these products as something that is explicitly *not* moonshine.

Another interlocutor of mine, Cody, shared these same sentiments. Cody, who owns Howling Moonshine Distillery in western North Carolina, wanted to make an authentic moonshine in part because of the negative impressions that lower quality products would make on outsiders.

They weren't authentic, so I kind of wanted to put something out there that was authentic to represent our culture. It's a big part of this area's culture and history. And, it's really frustrating to see all these companies come out and we try to capitalize off of the name

⁵⁴ Byrd et. al., 141. [Author's emphasis].

“moonshine” and make a product that’s nothing like what a real moonshine is. And it’s pretty terrible, and then it leaves people with bad impressions about our culture and society without an actual representation of it.

Authenticity here becomes a means to accurately and positively represent one’s culture and society. While still being deeply connected to the product, authenticity’s consequences reach beyond the product and into the concepts and places that formed the product in the first place. In a sense, the authenticity of the product becomes directly connected to the authenticity of one’s understanding of a certain people or place: the false moonshines that Cody describes leave people with false conceptions of both Appalachia and the people that live there.

The differing authenticities that Jack, Frank, and Cody present regarding moonshine show that authenticity is something quite malleable, and the conceptions that various distillers hold about the authenticity of a particular moonshine differ greatly. Heather Paxson writes of the ways in which terroir can be reverse engineered, citing cheese-making in Vermont as an example. In order to create a terroir for cheese made in Vermont, an argument had to be made for specific cheese-making practices that allow the environment to influence the product as much as possible. Rather than claiming a terroir for pre-existing products with a long history of production in a specific area, cheese-makers had to come up with methods that would create this specific Vermont terroir.⁵⁵ This sort of reverse-engineering can be seen in distillery production of moonshine today, though it focuses less heavily on creating a place-specific practice. Rather, one sees a sort of tweaking of older recipes to make a “better” moonshine, and an understanding of moonshining as a practice not easily mastered. This tweaking and bettering of a traditional recipe is how Trey describes the process of creating his product:

⁵⁵ Paxson, Heather. "Locating Value in Artisan Cheese: Reverse Engineering Terroir for New-World Landscapes." *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 3 (2010): 447-49.

I mean, it takes somebody who trusts somebody and a lot of you wondering why would they share with you their recipe? It's kinda like you could get Betty Crocker's recipe. Anybody can get a recipe off of Google. Um, just about anything you can imagine or dream up or haven't even dreamed up yet is on Google, but there's still an art. There's still an art to making moonshine. There's still an art to doing anything. And you know, the small tweaks and the little things that make a difference in just making a product and making a great product. And so we took the best of all those different bootleggers, the positives that we liked, and it's like anything from a winery or brewery or distillery, you gotta make notes.

Though Trey received his original recipe from someone who produced moonshine illegally, he decided not to reproduce this recipe exactly. Rather, he took aspects of other recipes and tweaked his recipe with his own ideas until he created something he was satisfied with. This is the “art” of making moonshine, for Trey. This “art” is where the craft aspect of the product comes in, and this “crafted” aspect produces a sort of authenticity outside of the realm of moonshine itself and its history. The authenticity produced by this craft quality has to do with a certain attention to detail and a personal recipe that was tweaked and tweaked until it was perfected.

Some distillers, however, might argue that this craft aspect makes a moonshine less authentic because drinking it is likely a different experience than drinking a moonshine produced illegally from an older recipe. Frank, or any of the moonshiners he works with, could be one of these distillers. In his area, everyone was making the same type of moonshine: 30% corn and 70% sugar. Moonshine was such a staple product there that, according to Frank, one had to make it using this particular recipe. Otherwise, it would not be considered moonshine. Thus, despite being produced in the region and being based on older recipes, certain recipes would not be considered moonshine. One could claim that Frank’s moonshine is less authentic than Trey’s, however, by following Trey’s logic: if Frank is using an old recipe that he has not done anything to change, could it be considered a “Betty Crocker’s recipe” of moonshine—one that is outdated or imperfect? To be clear, I am not making any claims of authenticity here for either Frank’s or

Trey's moonshine. Rather, I am pointing out the different (and often conflicting) lines of logic used by distillers that point to a product's authenticity or its lack thereof. In order to sell a product like moonshine, one must advocate for one's own product, and different distillers do this in different ways. One of these ways is to claim that other products are simply not as authentic as theirs.

Chapter Three

While distillers negotiate between themselves for authenticity, they also negotiate with consumers. Distilleries are, after all, profit-oriented businesses, so the opinions of customers are more important than those of fellow distillers. Claims about the authenticity or lack thereof of competing products and brands are one way to make one's product appear to be more authentic than others, but there are several more strategies aside from this one. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which distillers communicate authenticity to customer bases through descriptions of both their products and moonshine in general, the language used in articles and ads in newspapers, as well as the imagery on moonshine labels and packaging. The ways in which legally produced moonshine is talked about and represented are largely intended to entice consumers. Placemaking and terroir continue to be themes in this chapter, as they are used as marketing strategies to make moonshine appealing to local and visiting customers in the region as well as customers across the country and sometimes the globe. The distinctness of moonshine as both an Appalachian spirit and an American one allow distillers to market legal moonshine as a deeply historical and situated beverage despite its relative newness both to local consumers and (inter)national tourists.

This sentiment appears somewhat frequently in newspaper articles about legally produced moonshine, as well as in interviews with distillers. Perhaps it is best summed up by a 2012 article from *The Charlotte Observer*: "Once a back-road country cousin in the South, it [moonshine] is taking on a new life as a city-slicker all over the country."⁵⁶ This article about the emergence and popularization of legal moonshine personifies moonshine as a somewhat vague

⁵⁶ Gelt, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/latest-news/article9083378.html>.

southern stereotype, the back-country cousin. This “back-road country cousin,” however, is leaving the backroads for city streets. Here the author references a classic transformation story: the country bumpkin who moves to the big city and undergoes various changes. This statement speaks not only to the legalization of moonshine, but also to a certain kind of commodification which makes it attractive to urban consumers. The article riffs plenty on the apparent contrast between this backcountry beverage and its newfound cosmopolitan consumers, claiming that some “appreciate it because it’s a bit of the frontier in a bottle. To drink it is to drink in the history of American whiskey.”⁵⁷ The appeal of moonshine, at least in this article, is that one can take the frontier (Appalachia) and bottle a bit of it up for those who do not live there. This seems to be the ultimate claim of authenticity: moonshine here is portrayed as a place and its history imbued into a product that one can purchase and consume outside of the place itself.

Many distillers also agree with the idea that the appeal of moonshine to consumers is largely due to the history that it embodies. Joe Michalek of Piedmont Distillers said that his “customers are buying into the American heritage. It’s the history and the intrigue.”⁵⁸ The conception of moonshine as a distinctly American product that is representative of the history of liquor in the United States makes it attractive to consumers. Its current appeal for consumers can perhaps be understood as part of a larger trend of older or historical products becoming repopularized among middle to upper middle class consumers; it is similar, in a sense, to the reemergence of vinyl records and the like. That Michalek speaks of intrigue, however, suggests another aspect of moonshine’s appeal that is both connected to and distinct from its age. This intrigue may be connected to moonshine’s image as something that is illegal, out-there, and edgy.

⁵⁷ Gelt, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/latest-news/article9083378.html>.

⁵⁸ Spivak, 135.

To drink moonshine suggests a sort of openness to experimenting or a daringness that contemporary consumers may want to display.

Trey, in an interview with *Sun News* of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, says that these same aspects of moonshine are why he loves making it. “I love the history of it, the rebel spirit of it, the mystique of it, just like our customers do. It says a lot about what the South is and I think it’s important to remember where you came from and how you got here.”⁵⁹ The mystique and rebel spirit of moonshine—which may be vaguely translated as its past—make it attractive both to producers and consumers. According to Trey, they also say something about the South. Here, moonshine participates in placemaking by communicating something about the larger region from which it originated. The mystique and rebel spirit of moonshine do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they belong to moonshine alone. Rather, these attributes belong to “the South” as well—that part of the country proud, arrogant, and outlaw enough to have once seceded, to have violated the Union compact and to have started a civil war. Moonshine plays a role in communicating that both inside and outside of the region. When I talked to Trey, he brought up the appeal of moonshine as a souvenir: “They’re looking for a piece of the South to take back home. And what better thing to take back to your friends and family than a jar, a Mason jar of moonshine?” This resonates with Jessica Gelt’s assessment of moonshine in the *Charlotte Observer*, that it is a bit of the frontier in a bottle. For tourists, moonshine is like a distillation of the South.

This distillation, however, omits some ingredients that tourists may find troubling. After all, legal moonshine differs from its illegal predecessor in many ways, and one of these is its regulation. Part of the reason why legal moonshine is so attractive to tourists is because it holds

⁵⁹ Windsor, Pam. “Moonshine goes Mainstream.” *Sun News*. Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. September 5, 2015, <https://www.myrtlebeachonline.com/news/business/article33367803.html>.

this rebel spirit and mystique that Trey speaks of without any of the risk associated with illegal moonshine. One need not worry if there is anything in the jar that will destroy an optic nerve and cause blindness because it is regulated by the government and sealed for your protection. While Rosko posits that this legality may, in fact, make moonshine *more* authentic, there is a way in which a legal moonshine's connection to illegally made moonshine is attractive to consumers.⁶⁰ This idea comes through in Trey's thoughts on the mystique and rebel spirit of moonshine, but it is even clearer when looking at the sheer number of contemporary legal distilleries who cite a family history of illegal moonshining. Returning to Byrd, Lellock, and Chapman's statistics, one can see how these sorts of claims are made more commonly in Appalachian distilleries than other distilleries in the United States. Byrd, Lellock, and Chapman found that 65% of distilleries in Appalachia reference family history on their websites, while this theme is only present on 46% of non-Appalachian distillery websites. Similarly, 40% of Appalachian distilleries reference legality websites, while that number is only 30% for the non-Appalachian distilleries.⁶¹ Even distillers who do not have family histories of moonshining, like Frank, Joe, and Jack, often reference recipes that they received from people who distill(ed) moonshine illegally. These sorts of connections allow distillers to retain some semblance of moonshine's illegal history that is attractive to contemporary consumers while at the same time assuring these consumers that the products are safe and regulated. A safe and contemporary association is forged with the rough edges of moonshine's past.

There is another, albeit likely smaller, section of consumers for whom moonshine is attractive because they themselves have family histories of moonshining. A few of my interlocutors mention this phenomenon, and several other distillers mention it in the literature

⁶⁰ Rosko, 355.

⁶¹ Byrd et al., 157.

surrounding moonshine. Joe, for example, told me about a large number of customers who expressed excitement about visiting his distillery for this very reason:

So everybody made moonshine up here, everybody. So it's pretty wild now running a modern day distillery. When they come in all these people tell me, well, yeah, my grandfather used to have a still down on this creek or that creek or whatever, but it was an absolute way of life for all of Appalachia during the thirties, forties, and fifties and beyond.

This is one of the ways in which moonshine is marketed to local consumers who are not interested in the product as a souvenir. It becomes something that consumers can see as part of their own family history and genealogy, a connection more explicit than the broader connection of regional heritage. Chivous, Cody's business partner at Howling Moonshine of Asheville, North Carolina, attributes this phenomenon to a "fascination with genealogy." He says that "people have been doing a lot of research about their ancestry," and that "folks around here are curious about the role moonshine may have played in their family history."⁶² Moonshine then becomes a means not only of expressing American, Southern, or Appalachian identity, but family and personal identity as well.

This type of marketing to locals who may or may not have family histories of moonshining can also be understood as marketing of nostalgia. The revival of moonshine as a legally produced and taxed product conjures images of the days in which moonshine was a prominent illegal product. Kevin Hoover writes in a 2014 article from *Sun News* of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina that "today's moonshine is trying to cash in on nostalgia."⁶³ This nostalgia manifests itself in myriad ways, one of which is in the packaging of the product itself. When Trey asks what better thing there is to take back to your friends than a Mason jar of moonshine,

⁶² Spivak, 196.

⁶³ Hoover, Kevin. "Is Modern Moonshine a Novelty or Homage to Tradition?" *Sun News*. Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. July 31, 2014.

this nostalgia is clear. Moonshine is quite frequently sold in Mason jars or another type of jar similar in appearance. In the Byrd et al. study, Mason jars were the most frequently used bottle style, and more commonly used within Appalachia than outside of it.⁶⁴ These jars conjure a distinctly rural past, as they are generally used to preserve foods. Old Tennessee Distilling Company explains why Moonshine is packaged this way:

There's a reason modern moonshine distillers have stuck to the age-old jar — tradition. In the south, everything is canned, from fruit preserves to green beans to alcohol. It's simply part of our culture. Also, there's the tradition of "passing the jar" to friends — and mason jars are easily resealable and easy to pass around. The mason jar is a unique part of moonshine the [sic] that pays homage to our southern roots.⁶⁵

To package moonshine in such a way is to communicate this history and this context to consumers. It conjures a sort of nostalgia for that less urbanized and more rugged past. Jugs are another type of bottle that moonshine is sold in that have a similar effect. Along with Mason jars, jugs bearing an "XXX" are a widely recognizable symbol of moonshine, particularly moonshine from the era of Prohibition (see Figure 2). Despite having a similar effect, jugs are not as widely used for moonshine as Mason jars or short/bourbon bottles, according to Byrd et. al. This is perhaps due to their size, as one would have to purchase significantly more of the liquor at a higher price. They are still, however, more widely used than tall/vodka-style bottles. This suggests an inability of tall or vodka-style bottles to conjure this nostalgic effect that other sorts of bottles can.

⁶⁴ Byrd et al., 165.

⁶⁵ Admin. (2019, April 17). 3 moonshine facts you might not know. Retrieved from <https://www.oldtennesseedistillingco.com/3-moonshine-facts-you-might-not-know/>



Figure 2. Moonshine jug marked “XXX” next to an old ring of keys.⁶⁶

It is important to note that nostalgia is not the only effect of these moonshine marketing strategies. They also situate moonshine as a distinctly rural, southern, and Appalachian product. Unlike other craft products which fulfill desires for an idyllic rurality, moonshine departs from this pattern by presenting an image of a more rugged (and potentially dangerous) rurality.⁶⁷ This is most clearly conveyed by the themes that appear on the labels of the products. Byrd et al. cite mountain scenes and mountain culture imagery, state imagery, animals, and simple labels with only the brand name being the most common themed imagery to emerge from their data. Mountain and mountain culture imagery was the most common label theme for Appalachian distilleries, with 47% of distilleries using it. The mountain culture theme includes images such as mountains, “miners, old-fashioned pickup trucks, horse-pulled plows, or a hound dog sitting on a porch next to a pottery jug marked XXX.”⁶⁸ Byrd, Lellock, and Chapman write that “overall,

⁶⁶ Admin. (2019, April 17). 3 moonshine facts you might not know. Retrieved from <https://www.oldtennesseedistillingco.com/3-moonshine-facts-you-might-not-know/>

⁶⁷ Wright, Wynne, and Weston M. Eaton. “Representing Rurality: Cider Mills and Agritourism.” Essay. In *Craft Beverages and Tourism, Volume 2: Environmental, Societal, and Marketing Implications*, edited by Carol Kline, Susan L. Slocum, and Christina T. Cavaliere, 65–82. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

⁶⁸ Byrd et al., 164.

mountain imagery was not as relevant to non-Appalachian distilleries; instead they focus on the brand name or other imagery, such as the devil or a hipster.”⁶⁹ In other words, distilleries in non-Appalachian states like Idaho or Wyoming are branding the drink with newer and less stereotypical imagery. On the other hand, distilleries within Appalachia continue to reference and make use of imagery surrounding mountains and mountain life.



Figure 3. Sugarlands Silver Cloud Tennessee Sour Mash Moonshine⁷⁰

That Appalachian distilleries use imagery of mountain culture speaks to the importance of place and placemaking for them in selling their products to their particular consumer bases. Neither the historical nor contemporary moonshine industry was responsible for creating these images, however. Rather, they were produced by various forms of media commentary on mountain life via television series, books, and newspapers, and by products like Mountain Dew. This type of imagery came to define Appalachian and mountain culture, however, for those

⁶⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁰ *Sugarlands Distilling Co.* Sugarlands Distilling Co., n.d. Accessed 21 April, 2021. <https://www.sugarlands.com/products/silver-cloud-tennessee-sour-mash-moonshine/>.

outside of the region. By referencing this traditional imagery and recasting it in a positive light, contemporary Appalachian distillers are selling a product that is not only “a bit of the frontier in a bottle” or a piece of the South to take back home, and thereby contributing to a continually (re)forming Appalachian geographic imaginary. The images that Byrd, Lellock, and Chapman describe as typical for moonshine labels have been produced by a long history of portrayals of Appalachia and the people who live there by those who live outside of it.

The use of this imagery can have many effects: on the one hand, one could argue that it only reinforces and perpetuates stereotypes that are harmful to the region and stunts economic growth. One could also argue that distillers are reappropriating this imagery to create “high quality” products that challenge these stereotypes. Rather than portraying moonshine as a deadly concoction that will blind you, they portray it as a craft product with a long and noble history. This interpretation can extend to incorporate the way in which distillers talk about their competition. Revisiting a quote from Cody I discussed in the last chapter, one can see the ways in which these authenticity claims function both to portray one’s own product as superior while at the same time expressing frustration with the way that moonshine and Appalachian culture have been historically portrayed and understood by outsiders:

It's really frustrating to see all these companies come out and we try to capitalize off of the name “moonshine” and make a product that’s nothing like what a real moonshine is. And it’s pretty terrible, and then it leaves people with bad impressions about our culture and society without an actual representation of it.

While producers argue amongst themselves over what constitutes an authentic product, they are united in two things: a desire to sell their product and a desire to construct a positive image of Appalachia. Not only is Cody claiming authenticity for his own product, but he is speaking to a way in which bad renditions of moonshine affect peoples’ ideas and conceptions of Appalachian culture and society. What this suggests to me is that, for many distillers, creating a high quality

product and using stereotypical Appalachian imagery produces a more positive connotation for that imagery, which in turn generates positive feelings about Appalachia itself.

In this way, distillers aggressively assert themselves as creative placemakers. This placemaking happens through creating a positive twist on a product historically described as dangerous and disgusting, and associating this new, quality moonshine with a new and positive Appalachia. This is a negotiation between producers and consumers: to portray this new, quality moonshine as authentic is to change ideas about both what moonshine is today as well as what it has been historically. One way to do this is to put traditional mountain imagery on the jars and bottles of this new and improved moonshine, explicitly conveying this connection between the drink and the region to the consumer. As Cody says, a bad rendition of moonshine will only leave consumers with negative ideas about moonshine and Appalachia. A good rendition of moonshine will create a more positive image of the product and place in the consumer's mind. As Trey told me, everyone knows what moonshine is, and everyone knows that it comes from the mountain South. Thus, by reconstructing moonshine, distillers are also reconstructing Appalachia. This reconstructing of moonshine and the region has personal stakes as well: it is often distillers' heritage that they are recasting and attempting to positively portray to consumers. Those distillers who have roots in the region are invested in selling the South and Appalachia not only because it benefits their businesses, but also because they are proud of their heritage and want the rest of the country and world to see this.

The idea that stereotypical imagery is used to draw people into buying moonshine that will end up changing their perspectives on both the drink and the region is supported by the words of Piedmont Distillers' Joe Michalek. He says: "our customers are buying into the American heritage. It's the history and the intrigue. And while a lot of people may buy it initially

because of the intrigue factor, we're getting our repeat business because of the juice in the jars."⁷¹ Michalek sees this history and intrigue, something conveyed by the labels and bottles of moonshine, as something that convinces people to try moonshine for the first time. This, however, is not the reason that the distillery continues to do well. Rather, it is "the juice in jars." The quality of the product pushes the moonshine beyond the realm of exotic intrigue and into the realm of pleasurable experience. It becomes something that one drinks not simply for its novelty, but for the pleasure of drinking something one finds to be enjoyable. This can in turn create positive associations with the region. One can then imagine a jar of craft moonshine sitting in a liquor cabinet next to a bottle of Grey Goose or Patron. One article on moonshine's reemergence claims that, despite its presumed unlikelihood, one sometimes finds "moonshine sitting next to a bottle of Glenmorangie single-malt Scotch."⁷² While still retaining an air of novelty or difference, craft moonshine can be incorporated into a mainstream drinking culture.

Part of what this incorporation of moonshine into a mainstream drinking culture means is a change in the way the liquor is consumed. Traditionally, moonshine is a liquor one drinks "straight," that is, without ice or mixers. Today, legally produced moonshine is widely consumed as an ingredient in cocktails. This is sometimes as new to distillers as it is to their customers. Chivous of Howling Moonshine says that when he first got into making moonshine, he was not at all familiar with mixology or the cocktail scene. As he learned more about it, he was "really impressed with the creativity a lot of these bartenders and bar managers show when they come up with some of these cocktails."⁷³ Cocktails provide a new, and perhaps more widely acceptable, way of consuming moonshine. As opposed to drinking it straight, which consumers

⁷¹ Spivak, 135.

⁷² Taylor, Rupert. "Moonshine Makes a Comeback: A Quick Look at the Illicit Alcohol." *Delishably*. Delishably, May 30, 2017. <https://delishably.com/beverages/Moonshine-Makes-a-Comeback>.

⁷³ Spivak, 202.

might associate with the image of a “hillbilly drunkard” taking swigs from a mason jar up in the mountains, cocktails contain a lower amount of alcohol by volume. Cocktails, like wine, can also be considered a sort of “lifestyle beverage,” similar to wine.⁷⁴ Thus, moonshine is incorporated into a particular “lifestyle” as it is incorporated in cocktails. Furthermore, they are seen as “creative” products which speak to a certain skill at combining flavors on the part of the bartender. In Mark Spivak’s *Moonshine Nation*, each section about a contemporary legal distiller ends with a few different cocktail recipes for that distillery’s moonshine. This is one example of the way in which moonshine is portrayed to distant audiences by writers who specialize in food and drink. The suggestion is not simply to drink the liquor, but to experiment with it and drink it in the form of a cocktail. Furthermore, the names of these moonshine cocktails often riff on classic and familiar cocktails, such as the “Apple Pie Manhattan” or the “Harvest Moon Margarita.”⁷⁵ Using moonshine in classic cocktails is another way in which the once taboo beverage is made mainstream.

The entry of moonshine into the cocktail scene in Appalachia and beyond is one way in which contemporary legal moonshine has pushed the boundaries of what was imagined to be possible for this liquor. This pushing of boundaries is something referenced by many distillers, as I have shown throughout this project. One distiller, Jeff Gould, described these new developments in moonshining to the *Kansas City Star* in 2014:

What you’re seeing here is a new twist to an old industry. The twist is the abundance of flavors, the fancy, health-code-abiding distilleries and the aggressive business plan. But the base is a collection of old family recipes and an appreciation for where moonshine came from.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Alant, K., & Bruwer, J. (2004). “Wine tourism behaviour in the context of a motivational framework for wine regions and cellar doors.” *Journal of Wine Research*, 15(1), 25. doi:10.1080/0957126042000300308

⁷⁵ Spivak, 168 and 189.

⁷⁶ Shaw, Erin. “Moonshine Makes a Big Resurgence in South Carolina” *Kansas City Star*. 05 February 2014.

Here, contemporary legal moonshining is described as a new development in an “industry” that has long been present in the South. Gould describes the twist as being made up primarily of three new developments in moonshining: flavors, fancy (and regulated) distillery technologies, and an aggressive business plan.

I have dwelled at some length on flavors and distillery technologies in this project, as well as on how these new developments relate to marketing strategies and business plans, but another site that deserves consideration is the distillery itself. Distilleries are the places in which these business strategies come into action: they are sites of production, distribution, consumption, and sale. They are also places which one visits for an experience. Visits to moonshine distilleries across the South generally take a similar form: a tour followed by a tasting. In some states, like South Carolina, these tours are required in order to hold tastings. For Trey, this law that could potentially be an inconvenience became an opportunity to allow customers to experience moonshine more fully. This became apparent as tours came up in our conversation about the various bureaucratic hindrances to running a distillery.

We've changed a lot of just stupid things. Like, if you come in the store, you've got to have a tour before you can get a tasting. No problem. We give a tour and we give a great tour. You can see how moonshine's made, you can visit the still, take pictures with it. You can see it, touch it, taste it, smell it while it's cooking. So you get that full tour.

In providing tours and tastings, distilleries present moonshine as being as much of an experience as it is a product. This experience is also multifaceted, as there is a sensory layer (seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling) as well as a more touristic layer (visiting the still, taking pictures with it). This system of a tour followed by a tasting recalls images of the more established practice of vineyard tours and tastings, where one is taken around the grounds to see the vines and grapes which produce the wines one tastes at the end of the experience. At the end of such an outing, one generally purchases a product to take back home as well. This is another way in

which contemporary moonshining is connected to ideas of terroir, as the distillery (and the stills) function as the vineyard through which one is led, and educated about before tasting the product. One prominent difference between these two forms of experience and consumption is that, in the case of the moonshine distillery, one does not see the fields of corn as one would see the vineyards at a winery.

These sorts of experiences play a major role in attracting customers, as they turn distilleries into not only sites of liquor production, but also into tourist attractions. A quote from Troy Ball in Mark Spivak's *Moonshine Nation* which I discussed earlier in the project speaks to this phenomenon. Ball says "we want to remain a real brand and not become a tourist brand." This quote is followed by a claim by Spivak that, despite Ball's resistance to the idea of being a tourist brand, "Troy and Sons is well on its way to becoming a tourist destination."⁷⁷ At the time (2014), the distillery was averaging around 5,000 visitors annually. Spivak adds to this statistic a personal experience on the night before his visit to the distillery, when a taxi driver suggested during a casual conversation that he and his wife should make a point to visit Troy and Sons while in the area.⁷⁸ This type of word-of-mouth advertising likely attracts customers who may not necessarily be interested in moonshine at all, but rather are looking for tourist attractions and experiences while visiting the area. Distillery tours then become part of a business model in which people are attracted to the distillery for the experience and potentially leave with a jar of moonshine in hand. Furthermore, they allow distilleries greater opportunities to present their products as authentic. The personal dynamics of a tour, in which participants meet distillers and see the equipment, allow distillers to talk in depth about the process of making moonshine and

⁷⁷ Spivak, 184.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 185.

why their moonshine is authentic or high quality. Participants can also see the process first-hand, so they do not simply have to take a distiller's word for it.

Distilleries can also be sites of historical education about moonshining in the distillery's region. The educational value of these tours to customers and visitors is apparent at Palmetto Distillery in Anderson, South Carolina. The distillery describes visits to the distillery and how the distillery attracts customers on their website:

Our informational brochures have found their way into hotels and visitor centers across South Carolina and Georgia, drawing many first time tourists to downtown Anderson and exposing many more travelers to our beautiful area. Even people who don't drink alcohol have requested to purchase some of our moonshine because it is a piece of history.⁷⁹

From this one can see another way in which distillery tours and vineyard tours are distinct from each other. The fact that people who do not drink alcohol have toured the distillery and purchased moonshine as "a piece of history" shows how distillery tours are not only about seeing how a product is made, trying it, and buying it, as is the case in many vineyard tours. Rather, the distillery tour can function also as a history lesson. The moonshine can be purchased not only as something to drink and enjoy, but also as a piece of history, a souvenir, which reminds one of the distillery tour experience and the history of Appalachia. This speaks to the placemaking ability of contemporary legal moonshine, as well as its ability to create an "authentic" experience. Rosko writes that "Distilleries see their production of authenticity directly connected to reclaiming positive narratives of both moonshine, East Tennessee and greater Appalachia. In this way, a sense of place is achieved for these distilleries through the notion of educating their customers."⁸⁰ Moonshine is not the only thing that is being produced and sold here: rather, history and place are being produced and sold along with it.

⁷⁹ "The Distillery." Palmetto Distillery. Palmetto Distillery, n.d. <https://www.palmettomoonshine.com/distillery>.

⁸⁰ Rosko, 364.

One particularly interesting example of the way in which distilleries sell history and place with their moonshine can be found in the label of Palmetto Distillery’s Palmetto Whiskey, an aged whiskey that the distillery began to make after establishing themselves with their moonshine. The whiskey and the label were “patterned after that of the South Carolina Dispensary, the state run liquor monopoly that operated from 1893 to 1907.”⁸¹ This type of



Figure 4. Asheville Distilling Company’s Outdoor Seating Area⁸²

hyper-localized branding can reach beyond the territory of moonshine and into the territory of mainstream liquors as well. In this example, there is a sense of irony in that makers of moonshine (a liquor associated with an anti-government mentality) are also making a whiskey

⁸¹Windsor, <https://www.myrtlebeachonline.com/news/business/article33367803.html>.

⁸² *Outdoor Seating Area of Asheville Distilling Company*. n.d. Asheville Distilling Company. <https://ashevilledistilling.com/>.

based on that of a state run liquor monopoly. What this does, however, is put various local histories of liquor production in conversation with one another at the site of the distillery. Not only can one learn about moonshine at the distillery, but other local liquor histories. Distilleries have a certain museum-like quality to them when considered in this light. The stills, despite generally being new when purchased by the distillery, are presented as a sort of historical equipment making a historical beverage which one can see and touch on a tour led by an “expert.” This museum-like quality becomes even more clear when one considers the newness of the distillery space.

Not only are the spaces new in that distilleries have only been legal in southern states for about a decade, but their appearance is generally quite contemporary as well. There is in many cases a juxtaposition, then, between the historical aspect of the stills and the newness of the space they are in, similar to the way in which historical objects are displayed in contemporary museum spaces. For example, Asheville Distilling Company, where Troy and Sons Moonshine is distilled, has an outdoor seating area surrounded by large glass garage doors and brick, with light bulbs strung above the picnic-table seating to provide ambient lighting in the evening (see figure 4). In this way, the distillery draws on restaurant, brewery, and distillery design that can be found across the United States. Another aspect of the distillery tour experience that is important to consider is where these distilleries are located. The source of moonshine has traditionally been hidden stills deep in the mountains, but as I suggested at the beginning of chapter one, one is more likely to find some today on Main Street. Palmetto Distillery, for example, is located in the heart of downtown Anderson, “in the backyard of the courthouse,” as Trey puts it. This location is important because it changes the experience of buying and drinking moonshine. Rather than

having to drive up into the mountains, one can stay in the center of town. In fact, after a distillery tour, one could walk to a restaurant and eat dinner with their family.

This location of moonshine distilleries positions moonshine in a much more cosmopolitan position than it ever has been in before. Despite being widely consumed in the United States historically, the source of production was always hidden and shadowy. Today that has changed drastically: with distilleries often being located in urban and suburban areas of southern Appalachia, moonshine production is happening largely in an urban and touristic economy. This is how distilleries such as Troy and Sons become tourist attractions attached to a destination like Asheville. The location of urban distilleries can, in this way, create strong connections to place. Despite participating in a global and tourist economy, distilleries can become attached not only to the region or a specific town or place, but to a *destination*, or a site to which people travel for touristic pleasure.⁸³ Thus, distilleries further emplace Appalachia while at the same time expanding it through a national and global tourist economy, effectively changing the reputations of moonshine and Appalachia simultaneously.

⁸³ Cavaliere, Christina T, and D. Albano. "New Jersey Craft Distilleries: Sense of Place and Sustainability." In *Craft Beverages and Tourism, Volume 2: Environmental, Societal, and Marketing Implications*, edited by Susan L. Slocum, Christina T. Cavaliere, and Carol Kline. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 104.

Conclusion

The legal moonshine industry in Appalachia is still quite new, having been created in the late aughts and early 2010s. Despite this, the industry has already established itself as one that will be prominent in Appalachia for decades to come. In this project I have shown the ways in which contemporary legal moonshine is a force in shaping both moonshine in general—both legal and illegal—as well as Appalachia. The concept of authenticity has been integral to legal moonshine’s rise to prominence due to its influence in shaping the ways distillers make their moonshine as well as the purchasing decisions consumers make when buying it. Beyond influencing their production methods, authenticity is a framework in which distillers criticize the products of the competition. This criticism functions both as a way to claim their product as more authentic than the products of others as well as a way to voice frustration with how Appalachia is portrayed and hope for how it can be portrayed in the future. The desire for an authentic product on the part of both distillers and consumers has played a major role in this contemporary stage of moonshine’s past, changing a history in which economic desperation has been the primary reason for moonshine’s proliferations and declines. It is deeply important to the placemaking practices of distillers and how they relate their products to the physical landscape of the region.

The distillery in this sense can be seen as a new place which, while being in many ways familiar to a chic/educated/middle-class customer base, remains distinctly Appalachian by way of the product it sells, the branding it uses, and the history of which it is a part. The moonshine distillery can be seen as a profoundly contemporary site at which Appalachian histories mingle

with Appalachian presents, fueled by a desire for local, authentic products and tourism experiences. The contemporary designs of distilleries appear familiar to consumers from across the country, while the imagery and history presented within their walls remain firmly emplaced within the region. Furthermore, the newness of the distillery is largely responsible for its position as a site of authenticity negotiation. As I discussed in my introduction, it is difficult to claim legal moonshine as authentic when its predecessor was illegal. In negotiating their respective authenticities, both legal moonshine and distillery spaces argue for a new moonshine and a new Appalachia, this new Appalachia being one in which legal moonshine and distilleries can thrive.

Thinking about moonshine distilleries as new and yet distinctly Appalachian and historically situated places is helpful in understanding how they push moonshine beyond what was previously thought possible for the product. Though at times widely consumed throughout the country, moonshine has been historically illicit and taboo. These new legal distilleries have not only confronted that taboo and made moonshine more acceptable to the general public, but they have also in some cases transformed it into a lifestyle beverage. Moonshine, being previously understood as the bad kind of alcohol as opposed to legal and regulated liquors—has found a new home in cocktail bars and upscale restaurants. In this way, moonshine's contemporary reemergence departs significantly from its past surges in production. No longer is it being produced solely out of economic desperation, but because it has taken on a new meaning in an increasingly globalized world. It can be seen as one part of Appalachia's incorporation into this global tourist economy, as well as part of a (re)forging of local and regional identities within it. Moonshine's (re)forging of local and regional identities within a global tourist economy has also had significant effects on the geographic imaginary of Appalachia as an internal frontier. Distilleries work to break down this geographic imaginary by incorporating moonshine into

mainstream drinking practices and promoting it as a high quality beverage, while at the same time preserving aspects of the imaginary through marketing practices that rely on stereotypical conceptions and imagery.

Potential for Future Research

While several researchers have situated legal moonshine production in the context of local and global tourist economies, emerging foodways, and neolocalism, the industry remains new and rife with research possibilities. One of these possibilities is the political implications of today's legal moonshine production. While I have shown the ways in which distilleries use moonshine to transform the ways in which people think about Appalachia, much remains to be explored. Slocum, Cavaliere, and Kline write that in the realm of craft beverages "it is possible that every purchase by either the producer for ingredients or end consumer is indeed a political action with political ramifications," and that this "could be a core essence of the craft-turn."⁸⁴ This possibility raises numerous questions when considering moonshine specifically. Is there a certain erasure of a historical moonshine that happens when distillers produce legal moonshine that is significantly different? Though moonshine has always been a commodity itself, are the producers and consumers buying into a commodified Appalachian identity or a commodified historical anti-government/libertarian politics? Is the vision distillers have of Appalachia shared by many or by few, and who is part of this vision? These are only a few questions among many that warrant further research.

The perspectives and experiences of those who consume legal moonshine is yet another area for potential future research. Like this project, much of the literature surrounding legal moonshine focuses on the voices and choices of those who produce it. The production of legal

⁸⁴ Kline, Carol, Susan L. Slocum, and Christina T. Cavaliere. *Craft Beverages and Tourism, Volume 2: Environmental, Societal, and Marketing Implications*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 220.

moonshine is abundant in complexities, as I have shown in this project, and there is much more to be explored. Further research on the consumer side of this relationship would add an important layer to this body of research. Such studies have been undertaken by researchers in the realm of craft beer, which illuminate the reasons why consumers choose to first try and/or continue to purchase the beverage.⁸⁵ A study such as this would add context to distillers' claims about why their customers purchase their products, and it would contribute to a more robust understanding of legal moonshine's role in Appalachia and beyond.

Moonshine is a product that simply will not quit. Despite myriad claims historically that the industry was on its last legs, that its grave had already been dug, moonshine has risen from the ashes time and time again. Its latest revival is a testament to its tenacity: distilleries have essentially inverted the ways in which moonshine is produced and consumed. Today one can make moonshine in the backyard of the courthouse, with no need to hide one's stills from the revenuer. There's no need to hide it in the basement either, now that it can be ordered at a cocktail bar. A simple way to look at this transformation is that moonshine has moved from the private realm to the public realm, and becomes more and more public as time goes on. It is precisely this shift that has allowed distillers to change the landscape of both moonshine and Appalachia. Moonshine has moved from mountains to Main Streets, and who knows where it will go next.

⁸⁵ Long, John; Velikova, Natalia PHD; Dodd, Tim; and Scott-Halsell, Sheila (2018) "Craft Beer Consumers' Lifestyles and Perceptions of Locality," *International Journal of Hospitality Beverage Management*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 1.

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