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Rednecks, Hillbillies, and White Trash in the Living Room: A Rhetorical Analysis of Reality Television's Construction of Appalachian Regional Identity

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ABSTRACT

Reality television is one of America's guiltiest pleasures because it lets us peer into the lives of people who are both similar to and different from us. However, the narratives we see on the small screen are far from innocent; in fact, reality television plays a large role in directing how we make sense of the world and our place within it. To that end, this study examines how MTV's reality television series, *Buckwild*, constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity. This study utilizes ideological criticism to uncover how MTV engages in continued stereotyping of Appalachian people. Specifically, my analysis argues that *Buckwild* paints Appalachian people as inferior Americans living lives governed by gender double standards, ridiculous redneck contraptions, and fetishization, even an embrace of, of poverty and insularity. I conclude that this study reveals an urgent need for more critical engagement with reality television as well as an increased effort to rethink the way we understand Appalachian places and people.

Key words: *Buckwild*, reality television, Appalachia, identity, stereotype, ideological criticism

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Reality television is one of America's guiltiest pleasures. From fan favorites like ABC's *The Bachelor* to E's *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, everyone has a show that piques their interest. To most scholars, the fascination with reality television stems from the ability to glimpse inside the lives of people who are both similar to and different from us (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-699; Harkins 173; Wayne 994). Each week, we gather inside our living rooms, set our DVRs, and clear our calendars in anticipation of another depiction of how other people live their lives (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-699; Harkins 173; Wayne 994). Hence, reality television is a defining feature of our how we make sense of the world and our place within it.

Throughout my life, I – like most other Americans – bought into the hype of reality television. For years, I found new shows to binge watch and relate to; I was on my way to becoming the next big reality television connoisseur. Although I always found plenty to watch, I noticed there was never a program which represented the entirety of who I was or where I was from. As a native West Virginian, I was used to my home being left out of the national spotlight. For me, defending the "Mountain State" became my go-to ice breaker from an early age; I cannot count the number of times people assumed I lived in Richmond, Virginia after telling them about where I grew up. My past experiences in educating others on the important distinction between western Virginia and West Virginia (*yes*, *there is a difference*!) helped me realize the chances of West Virginia showing up on the small screen were slim to none.

Despite the improbable odds, my home state was thrust into the limelight in 2013 when MTV announced the release of *Buckwild*, a reality television series following the "wild and wonderful" adventures of nine young people from the hollers of West Virginia. As the days passed and the series premier drew closer, I thought to myself, "*This is it! This is the moment we*

have all been waiting for! The moment West Virginia gets the recognition it deserves!" However, the recognition I had long hoped for never materialized on screen; after the show's first episode began, my excitement turned to disappointment. The West Virginia depicted on television was a far cry from the life I experienced in the "Mountain State." To me, *Buckwild* was a terrible misrepresentation of the place and people I loved with all of my heart. The confusion I encountered while watching MTV's portrayal of my home kickstarted my interest in media representation and public perception. Thus, I became invested in studying reality television and its construction of identity. The current chapter provides the overall purpose of my study, rationales for its relevance, definitions of key terms, and an outline of my methodology.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine how MTV's reality television series, *Buckwild*, constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity. This study analyzes a reality television series which emphasizes the unique characteristics of Appalachian regional identity. In doing so, this study offers a better understanding of how reality television presents this particular identity in a derogatory manner. Specifically, this study utilizes rhetorical criticism to explore how *Buckwild*'s four main characters – Shain Gandee, Anna Davis, Joey Mulcahy, and Ashley Whitt – express Appalachian regional identity on the small screen. My analysis focuses on the only existing season of the show, which aired from January 3, 2013, to February 7, 2013.

Rationales

My study of MTV's *Buckwild* is important for several reasons. First, it extends the current scholarship on Appalachian regional identity. Although an expansive body of research about Appalachian regional identity exists (Cooper et al. 458-461; Reed 409-421), only a handful of studies examine how this specific identity appears on television. Most of the existing research

centers on reality television series such as: TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,* A&E's *Duck Dynasty,* and CBS's *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* (Friedman 78-80; Holladay 256-266; McGuire 5-14; Massey 365-376; Cooke-Jackson and Hanen 183-185). Thus, even though MTV's *Buckwild* provides researchers with new material regarding how reality television presents Appalachian regional identity, the series is largely ignored in academic literature. In fact, on the rare occasion scholarly studies do reference *Buckwild*, the program's significance within the genre is diminished because it is often glossed over (Miller 66-77; Klein loc. 2686). For example, in her content analysis, Miller described *Buckwild* as a "crude [and]. . .violent" show (72). While correct in her description, Miller's study of the series was brief and did not contain any information about how Appalachian regional identity is constructed throughout the series. As a result, a more in-depth examination of *Buckwild* is warranted; it will not only extend the current body of research on Appalachian regional identity and reality television, but also offer new insights on this particular program.

Second, my examination of MTV's *Buckwild* is needed because it sheds light on reality television's unwavering support for dominant worldviews while also drawing attention to how the genre portrays marginalized identities. To date, various studies discuss the pervasiveness of reality television (Wayne 990-1006); however, few acknowledge that our favorite series reinforce common narratives about how Americans ought to live (Winslow 269; Cloud 420-424; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). Although previous studies have uncovered how hit shows like ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* support the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies like the American Dream and heteronormativity, no existing research considers how programs featuring Appalachian regional identity factor into the equation. Thus, my analysis of *Buckwild* will highlight how the

presentation of Appalachian regional identity in MTV bolsters several of America's taken for granted ways to make sense of the world. Additionally, studying a series like *Buckwild* showcases how marginalized identities are subject to further criticism when presented on the small screen. Past research has uncovered how marginalized identities are often ridiculed despite their centrality in a given a reality television series (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). Even though this finding is a step in the right direction, more work must be done; there is a lack of academic literature devoted to how people expressing Appalachian region identity are victimized on screen. Therefore, the completion of this study not only emphasizes reality television's construction of distorted identities but also gives Appalachian regional identity the attention it deserves.

Finally, a study of this nature contains various practical implications for consumers of reality television. For one, this study gives audiences a more realistic conceptualization of the Appalachian regional identity and its construction the small screen. Furthermore, this study aims to dispel the assumption that everything audiences see on reality television is an unfiltered account of reality. Most importantly, the current study reveals that the recent rise in interest surrounding Appalachian regional identity is not an anomaly, but a carefully crafted phenomenon which has been occurring for decades. MTV's *Buckwild* is not the first nor last instance of Appalachian regional identity on the small screen. Thus, to better understand the current state of affairs concerning this particular identity and its placement within American popular culture, audiences must first familiarize themselves with the contextual history of Appalachia's representation in media.

Definitions

My examination of MTV's *Buckwild* is centered on a few key terms: *identity*, *Appalachia*, *stereotypes*, and *redneck*. Vignoles et al. defines *identity* as a concept that helps us better understand who we were in the past, who we are in the present, and who we are going to be in the future (2). In other words, a person's *identity* is a set of characteristics (e.g. gender, race, profession, hobbies, etc.) allowing them to remain connected to yet distinguished from others (Vignoles et al. 2; Burke 22). In its most basic sense, *identity* encompasses how we make sense of our ways of being in the world. In this particular study, *identity* is used to discuss the unique characteristics tying *Buckwild*'s cast to the geographic region of *Appalachia*. To Cooper et al., *Appalachia* is vast area of land spanning several states along the eastern half of the country (457). The current research uses *Appalachia* as a general descriptor for the area where MTV's series takes place.

With over 2,000 miles of mountainous terrain, *Appalachia* is a place unlike anywhere else in America (Cooper et al. 457-460; Reed 411-412). However, because its peculiarity, *Appalachia* is often subject to various negative *stereotypes*. Several scholars define *stereotypes* as a specific tactic of marginalization which belittles a certain group of people (Shelby 158; Hartigan 98; Ferrence 120-121). When describing the phenomenon, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen infer that whenever *stereotypes* are employed, a gross misrepresentation of someone or something is further engrained into our minds (qtd. in Shelby 185). Put differently, *stereotypes* are undetectable negative lenses which simplify our understanding of the world. Throughout this study, common *stereotypes* about *Appalachia* such as being a *redneck* will be referenced when analyzing *Buckwild*. Being called a *redneck* is a routine occurrence in *Appalachia*, especially if a person is unaccustomed to the region's lifestyle and culture. Oftentimes, *stereotypes* like being a

redneck are umbrella terms for referencing the many derogatory ways *Appalachian* people are described (i.e. calling someone a *redneck* is the same as calling someone a white trash hillbilly). For Hartigan, a *redneck* is someone who cannot assimilate into modern society (i.e. a person who struggles keeping up with white-collar jobs, cannot operate technological devices, etc.) (100-104). In other words, calling someone a *redneck* insinuates that they among America's most inept populations because they are only thought to possess the skills needed for basic survival (i.e. *rednecks* are well versed in hunting, gathering, fishing, etc.). The present study devotes a great deal of attention to how the *stereotype* of being a *redneck* factors into how MTV portrays an *Appalachian* person's *identity.*

Method

To examine how MTV's reality television series, *Buckwild* constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity, I utilized ideological criticism. Ideological criticism is method of analysis which uncovers how various forms of media aid our understanding of the world around us (Halualani 74; Foss 237-238). According to Foss, ideological criticism is an ideal method for studying reality television because it exposes the worldviews and perspectives the genre promotes to audiences (242). By employing ideological criticism, past scholars have expanded on how reality television gives audiences a detailed idea of not only how they are supposed to live but also how they are supposed to think (Winslow 277-280; Cloud 415-416; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 427-430). Therefore, in using ideological criticism, we develop a better idea of the role media plays in creating an idealistic lived experience for millions of Americans. Through the lens of the aforementioned method, I will analyze every episode of *Buckwild* and uncover some of the program's most dominant themes. I will then use those themes to shed light on how MTV uses *Buckwild*'s cast to reinforce several taken for granted ways of acting, thinking, and

experiencing our world. A more in-depth description of my specific methodological approach is found in Chapter III.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set the stage for the remainder of my study. I have articulated the purpose of my study, which is to examine how MTV's reality television series, *Buckwild* constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity. Furthermore, I have provided three reasons why my study is valuable. For one, this study extends the current body of research on how Appalachian regional identity is presented on the small screen. Second, this study draws attention to how reality television perpetuates dominant ways of making sense of the world through the continued marginalization of vulnerable identities. Lastly, this study offers practical wisdom to consumers of reality television in the hopes they will no longer assume everything presented on the small screen is an accurate depiction of reality. This chapter also contained definitions of key terms used throughout my study as well as a brief explanation of my chosen method of analysis. The next chapter focuses on relevant literature related to my topic of study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines how MTV's reality television series, *Buckwild*, cultivates a construction of Appalachian regional identity. To better understand the series, its four central figures, and the larger implications of identity portrayal on the small screen, this chapter aims to provide context relevant to the study. In this literature review, I first detail the concept of identity by highlighting how it is constructed, maintained, and categorized. Then, I discuss Appalachian regional identity in relation to its geographic location and central characteristics. Following these sections, I detail the negative perceptions associated with Appalachian regional identity and offer a brief overview of how this identity is presented on modern television through series such as CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. Finally, the chapter concludes with insight into the rising cultural status of reality television.

Identity

Identity is a concept that helps individuals better understand who they were in the past, who they are in the present, and who they are going to be in the future (Vignoles et al. 2). Put differently, identity refers to the dynamic ways we express ourselves. Some examples of identity include: gender, age, nationality, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Because identity is a well-researched concept within the social sciences, scholars discuss it in several ways (Vignoles et al. 1-6; Oyserman and James 117-120; Berzonsky 56-59).

Vignoles et al. note that identity is often categorized into two separate categories: the individual and the collective (3). Individual identity is a private understanding of who a person is (Vignoles et al. 3). Several attributes contribute to individual identity, including: "goals, values, beliefs . . . [and] standards of behavior" (Vignoles et al. 3). A person enrolling in college to pursue a career in the medical field exemplifies individual identity. By attending to their personal

goals, values, and standards, the person expresses aspects of who they are. Unlike individual identity, collective identity refers to how one aligns themselves with larger social parties and the effect those groups have on one's place in society (Vignoles et al. 3). Examples of collective identity include "ethnicity, nationality, religion, [and] gender" (Vignoles et al. 3). A man claiming to be a proud American citizen expresses collective identity via direct association with a given nationality. Thus, by associating himself with a larger social party or group (e.g. his country of origin), the man's collective identity is showcased.

However, identity is not just individual or collective; it is a complex combination of both categories. Many scholars note the "multifaceted" nature of identity (Vignoles et al. 1-6; Oyserman and James 117-120; Berzonsky 56-59). In describing identity this way, the concept's definition becomes more expansive in terms of its use and characteristics (Vignoles et al. 6; Oyserman and James 119). A young woman enrolling in college to pursue a career as an elementary school teacher highlights how a person's identity is created using both categories of identity. The young woman's choice to continue her education and become a teacher highlights her individual identity through the utilization of personal goals (Vignoles et al. 3). Once at school, suppose the young woman joins a club for young educators. By participating in this distinct social group, she bolsters her collective identity by associating with people who possess identities similar to her own (Vignoles et al. 3). As demonstrated above, the concept of identity is not a static collection of only individual or collective categorizations. Rather, it is both individual and collective. The young woman's individual identity as an elementary school teacher helps her realize her goals. Similarly, the young woman's collective identity as an aspiring educator helps her form relationships with others. Therefore, the interconnectedness of the individual and the collective is vital when people create and maintain an identity.

Construction and Maintenance of Identity

Identity is both constructed and maintained. We construct identity through the repetitive actions we engage in such as the way we talk, the clothes we wear, and the activities we participate in. We maintain identity through repeated actions (e.g. always talking with an accent) and refusing to alter our identity when confronted with diverse perspectives (e.g. continuing to talk with an accent even though another person does not have one).

The construction and maintenance of identity hinges on the concept of self (Oyserman and James 119). The self is an ever-present conceptualization of an individual's past, present, and future (Oyserman and James 117). Thus, proper construction and maintenance of identity requires adequate knowledge of the self. Whenever a person expresses, alters, or denies aspects of who they are, they express the dynamic nature of self and identity. To Oyserman and James, the construction and maintenance of the self and identity are never complete; the two concepts are continually being "amended, revised, and even dropped depending on contextual affordances and constraints. . .[that] are not necessarily conscious and deliberate" (120). A person wearing a shirt advertising support for a specific political party, exemplifies the concept of identity expression, whereas a person modifying their physical appearance to get into an exclusive group or profession demonstrates the concept of identity alteration. Finally, a person disregarding their love of horror films just to fit in with peers illustrates the concept of identity denial. As indicated above, the concepts of self and identity are subject to constant evolution; without persistent adaption, the self and identity could not exist.

Identity is constructed and maintained as much in relation to our individual selves as to others (Shelby 157-158; Hartigan 99-101; Ferrence 114-119). According to Shelby, collective identity formation results from humankind's inherent desire for certainty, such that "individually

and in groups, we seem to need to define ourselves positively by defining other people negatively" (157). Shelby's notion of defining ourselves via the creation of differences parallels Burke's assertion that identification requires the presence of division (22). To Burke, the concept of identity, or belonging to one thing because we do not belong to another, is a central tenet of the human experience (22). In other words, a person's understanding of who they are requires a person to first understand who they are not (Burke 22). Hence, a person claiming they are not an athlete because they hate physical activity, struggle to comprehend sporting events, and fail to appreciate bodily competition constructs and maintains their identity via the expressing aspects of self which do not apply to them. Burke's idea of identification occurring through division leads to the processes of stereotypes and othering (22).

Most collective identities are derived from stereotypes and othering (Shelby 153-160; Hartigan 95-111; Ferrence 113-130; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 185-186). Cooke-Jackson and Hansen describe stereotyping as an unconscious "fixed mental image of a group that is frequently applied to all of its members" (qtd. in Shelby 185). Several other scholars note that although stereotyping makes grouping individuals easier, it deprives people of their humanity (Shelby 158; Hartigan 98; Ferrence 120-121). Therefore, stereotyping a group of individuals marginalizes them by "[ignoring] history, politics, economies, and culture" (Shelby 158). Like stereotyping, othering creates a noticeable divide between groups of people (Hartigan 95-98). When othering is used to employ a collective identity, a concrete dichotomy is established between a particular in-group and out-group (e.g. a varsity basketball team claiming they are better than the members of the marching band because they participated in competitive athletics in high school).

An example of a common collective identity is that of college students. This collective identity is broad because it applies to any person enrolled in higher education across the globe. However, the collective identity of college students is often created and maintained through stereotypes and othering. For instance, students at the College of Wooster differentiate themselves from students at Denison University by depicting Denison students as preppy individuals who only care about themselves. Imposing this negative stereotype onto Denison's students allows students at the College of Wooster to reinforce who they are by describing who they are not (Burke 22). Additionally, othering students at Denison University reinforces the collective identity of students at the College of Wooster. By framing Denison University students as privileged, College of Wooster students construct themselves as more down to earth. Thus, the use of stereotypes and othering are some of the most persistent ways groups create and maintain their collective identities via simultaneous unification and division (Burke 22). Similar to college students, another type of collective identity is that of regional identity.

Regional Identity

Regional identity is a form of collective identity; it is a reoccurring practice in which individuals name, claim, and orient both themselves and others to their surroundings (Cooper et al. 458). The practice of naming, claiming, and orienting occurs in many ways. One of the most common ways people name, claim, and orient themselves is through a connection with the element of place (Agnew 16).

Factors of Regional Identity. Drawing on Agnew's element of place (16), Reed (410) and Cooper et al. (460) suggest all regional identities are centered on the element of place. Neither one-dimensional nor easy to comprehend, the element of place consists of three distinct characteristics: locale, location, and sense of place (Agnew 16). Locale refers to the area in

which a large portion of daily activity occurs (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). More generally, it is the aspect of place encompassing the reoccurring functions of a person's specific lived experience (e.g. going to work every day, attending the same worship service every week, walking a dog at sunrise every morning etc.). Location is similar to locale, but instead focuses on the central connection between or among intersecting communities (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). As a characteristic of regional identity, it sheds light on the relationship between several communities within a given geographic area (e.g. the relationship between the Amish community and the community of the City of Wooster). Finally, sense of place is defined as the way individuals use physical settings to make distinctions, form identities, and satisfy interests (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). Hence, it is a key component of how people use geographic area to express a regional identity (e.g. a person who was born and raised in the state of Arizona expressing a southwestern regional identity). As exemplified above, all regional identities are unique yet united by the three distinct characteristics of place: locale, location, and sense of place (Agnew 16).

Aside from the concept of place, regional identities are also correlated with "rootedness," or a well-established connection to a physical setting (Reed 410). "Rootedness" and sense of place are closely related. However, there are some notable distinctions between the two concepts. "Rootedness" centers on a person's relationship with a geographic area after extensive separation from the setting (e.g. a man returning to his hometown after being away for 3 years), whereas sense of place refers to a person's overall conceptualization of area regardless of whether they have lived outside the setting or not (e.g. how a person from northcentral Ohio perceives the region as a whole) (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460).

Expressions of Regional Identity. Continuing to build on Agnew's element of place (16), Reed (410) and Cooper et al. (460) assert that a person's expression of regional identity often takes several forms: expression of regional identity via locale, expression of regional identity via location, expression of regional identity via sense of place, and expression of regional identity via "rootedness."

The following hypothetical example showcases the expression of regional identity via locale: consider the northeast coastal region of the United States, a region abounding with careers in the fishing industry. In this region, people have much higher probabilities of working as fishermen than almost anywhere else in the nation. Therefore, if a person who is employed as a fisherman goes to work every day and repeats tasks which are central to the locale of the area, their regional identity is reinforced via their daily lived experiences.

Regional identity is also expressed through location. For instance, imagine the communities of Wooster and Orrville. Even though the two communities are independent of one another, they have many commonalities. A factor connecting the communities of Wooster and Orrville is the area's Amish population; both communities are home to the largest group of Amish people in the United States. Thus, because Wooster and Orrville have similar demographics, the communities are connected by a shared regional identity distinct from larger metropolitan areas like Cleveland. Moreover, communities in a given location often express regional identity through life experiences. For example, a man living in a prominent district of Manhattan's upper east side will have different life experiences than a man living within a poverty-stricken neighborhood in the Bronx. Although both individuals are from the state of New York, their daily experiences affect their expression of regional identity. As demonstrated in the two previous examples (e.g. the relationship between Wooster and Orrville and the

relationship between Manhattan's upper east side and the Bronx), location plays a tremendous role in the creation and maintenance of regional identity. As one moves from larger to smaller geographic units (e.g. the United States, to Ohio, to Wayne County, to specific parts of Wooster), one's life experiences change significantly, causing the development of multiple regional identities within the same location.

People also rely on sense of place to express regional identity. For instance, a woman from Los Angeles and a woman from San Francisco express regional identity via sense of place. Although the two women are from the same state, their regional identities differ due to the way they describe their geographic areas. When constructing regional identity, the woman from Los Angeles may emphasize her proximity to Hollywood and celebrity communities, whereas the woman from San Francisco may highlight architectural structures like the Golden Gate Bridge and Lombard Street. Thus, the differences in how both women describe their home highlights how people use sense of place to express regional identity.

The final way a person expresses regional identity is through the concept of "rootedness." Imagine a person returning home after being away for an extended period of time. Upon their homecoming, the person confronts a multitude of nostalgic recollections including driving down the street of a childhood home and eating a favorite home-cooked meal. While experiencing these memories, the person is reminded of their relationship with the physical setting helped to shape them into who they are today. Therefore, a person's reflection on how certain locations influence their development showcases the concept of "rootedness" in relation to regional identity.

Perceptions of Regional Identity. Regional identity is a complex identity; it is connected to physical place and expressed in a plethora of ways. Yet, the complexity of regional identity

does not end after it is geographically situated. Regional identity has several differing perceptions surrounding it. A common perception of regional identity is that it is not constant or fixed (Reed 410). Specifically, Reed observed that one's understanding and expression of regional identity "can evolve over time, as one's connection to place changes across one's life span" (410). Put differently, regional identity is dynamic (Reed 410). One factor supporting Reed's theory of regional identity is age (410). For instance, suppose a child is born in rural Appalachia. Early on in the child's life, they take great pride in their regional identity because it is reinforced by those closest to them (e.g. their parents, grandparents, and teachers). However, the person's attachment to regional identity may change over time depending on specific contexts or life experiences. Later in life, the person may downplay or even forego their regional identity in college to better fit in with peers. The person's relationship with regional identity may also shift again in adulthood due to a desire to pass on regionally specific traditions to their children. Thus, as the above example indicates, regional identities evolve over time (Reed 410).

Moreover, when discussing regional identity, scholars suggest it is often perceived as a strict dichotomy of socially constructed "rigid boundaries" (Ferrence 120-121). Unlike the regional identities mentioned earlier, socially constructed regional identities simplify a person's general makeup (Ferrence 120-121). Socially constructed regional identities suggest humans adhere to specific sets of criteria without thinking. A person describing a man from southern California as a trendy, fame-obsessed beach dweller just because he resides in that area of the United States exemplifies the "rigid boundary" of socially constructed regional identities (Ferrence 120-121). Some scholars note that regional identities are often subject to predetermined sets of expectations (Ferrence 120-121). A person expressing a southern regional identity exemplifies the predetermined sets of expectations associated with socially constructed

regional identities. When people assume a southern regional identity, they are thought to possess more conservative ideologies, use grammatically incorrect speech, and occupy professions in manual labor. Therefore, a person expressing a southern regional identity is seen by others as a mere embodiment of expectations rather than someone who is multi-faceted (Ferrence 118-121).

Not all scholars agree with the static perception of socially constructed regional identities, however (Cooper et al. 459). Cooper et al. argues that regional identities created by others cannot be reduced to certain inflexible expectations (459). To Cooper et al., regional identities symbolize a tentative guideline of characteristics instead of a concrete list which must be fulfilled (459). According to this framework, people determine the elements of the socially constructed regional identity they embody (Cooper et al. 459). For instance, imagine a woman from the midwestern United States. Based on the aforementioned geographic location, the woman would be categorized as someone who works in the agricultural industry, possesses a conservative political ideology, and is personable. Nevertheless, suppose the woman is instead the owner of a successful transnational corporation, supports a liberal agenda, and does not enjoy socializing. Although the woman rejects most characteristics of the midwestern regional identity, her affiliation with the area is not lost entirely. She does not hold a job within the agricultural industry but could still respect the profession. Similarly, even though she aligns with a more progressive ideology, she could still agree with aspects of the opposing political party. As the above example illustrates, regional identities are not a fixed set of expectations to be fulfilled; rather, they are fluctuating principles shaped to reflect a person's understanding of themselves.

Finally, some scholars perceive regional identity as more specific forms of collective identity (Hartigan 100). According to Hartigan, regional identities are often interpreted as unique categorizations of people straying away from conventional society (100). Even though a concrete

definition of conventional society is difficult to ascertain, many suggest that whenever an individual is located within their preferred area of origin (e.g. the Midwest, southeast, northwest etc.), they exemplify characteristics of conventional society (Hartigan 97-98). When a person ventures outside of their home however, their regional identity becomes more apparent to both themselves and others (Hartigan 97-98).

The collective identity of college students can be broken down into more regionally specific identities. For instance, imagine two first-year students from different regions of the country are assigned to the same living space at the College of Wooster. Suppose one person is from Illinois, while the other is from West Virginia. Assuming both students possess a regional identity from their area of origin, they are now forced to interact with someone who expresses a regional identity different from their own. Therefore, because the two students' regional identities are dissimilar, they become more apparent to both themselves and others (e.g. the students' accents are more noticeable, and their mannerisms are more distinguished). This indicates that whenever a person ventures outside of their native region, their regional identity becomes a more central facet of who they are. Put differently, the geographic location of a person's college influences how they construct and maintain regional identity. One specific variation of regional identity deserving more in-depth analysis is the Appalachian regional identity.

Appalachian Regional Identity

When travelling across the eastern United States, one will encounter one of America's most underrated regions: Appalachia. At first glance, Appalachia may not appear as more than a collection of mountains, valleys, hills, and hollows. However, the region is far greater than an aggregation of trailer parks and coal mines. The Appalachian region spans over 2,000 miles and

encompasses thirteen states including: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (Cooper et al. 457). Past scholars have devoted attention to the Appalachian region and its distinct qualities; many scholars agree that Appalachia is not only a geographic land mass, but a specific setting with its own regional identity and characteristics (Cooper et al. 457-460; Reed 411-412). Appalachia is not just a destination on a map; it is a place abounding with pride, passion, peculiarity, and perseverance. Most importantly, it is a place millions of Americans call home.

The exact boundaries of Appalachia are debated. Some scholars refer to the region as a miniscule collection of America's southern-most states in the east, while others believe it is a broad area of land spanning from "Alabama. . .to New York" (Cooper et al. 457; Reed 411). Past research also indicates the confines of Appalachia are contingent upon a person's physical location (Cooper et al. 458). Hence, a person from eastern Kentucky has a different understanding of where Appalachia is located compared to a person from southern Nevada. Based on these findings, it is assumed that a universal definition of the region does not exist (Reed 411-412; Cooper et al. 457-458). However, for the purpose of this study, Appalachia refers to the diverse area of land ranging from southern New York to the northernmost portions of Alabama and Georgia (Cooper et al. 464).

Characteristics of Appalachian Regional Identity

The concept of Appalachian regional identity dates back to the late nineteenth century (Cooper et al. 458). To Cooper et al., this regional identity was created when a group of Americans encountered "a strange land and peculiar people in the southern mountains" (458). Hence, Appalachian regional identity developed because the area and its inhabitants were

different from the rest of the United States in terms of topographic makeup, economy, and culture (Cooper et al. 458). Massey also noted that people from the region were often characterized as "white trash, hillbillies, or rednecks" because of their existence on the "low rung on the socio-economic ladder" (368). Additionally, when discussing the Appalachian regional identity, Hartigan claimed that "rednecks" are distinct because of their inability to thrive in modern society (e.g. working a desk job or a sitting in on a business meeting), while remaining successful in accomplishing basic life skills (e.g. hunting, fishing, cooking etc.) (100-104).

Although Appalachian regional identity is a specialized form of expression, it observes the central characteristics of regional identity (i.e. locale, location, and sense of place) (Agnew 16). To Reed, "a region such as Appalachia possesses all three components [of regional identity] . . .it is a geographic region . . .it is both connected to and separate from broader networks; and there is a definite sense of place" (410). Much of the existing research supports Reed's notion that Appalachian regional identity is a prime example of the concept (Holladay 261; McGuire 7; Wood 18-20; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 197; Harkins 175; Shelby 153-155; Huber 157-158). Recall that the characteristic of locale is defined as the area in which a large portion of daily activity occurs (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). The distinct lived experiences of Appalachian people in religious settings exemplifies locale in relation to this specific regional identity. Holladay noted that the practice of "organized religion. . .[is] a hallmark feature of [Appalachian] culture" (261). When considering "organized religion," McGuire claims that evangelical Christianity accounts for significant portions of Appalachian religious practices (7). A 2016 study bolsters McGuire's claim, finding that states in the geographic region of Appalachia (e.g. Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, West Virginia, Georgia etc.) have the most "highly religious" populations in the country (Lipka and Wormald); in Appalachian states, over

60% of people attend worship services, pray, and believe in God (Lipka and Wormald). Hence, because "organized religion" is so prominent in Appalachia, the daily lived experiences of people residing there are defined by the characteristic (Holladay 261). To the Appalachian regional identity, spirituality is more than a moral compass, it is a way of life.

The Appalachian regional identity also expresses the characteristic of location. Recall that location is the connection between multiple intersecting communities (Agnew, 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). When considering location in terms of Appalachian regional identity, scholars suggest occupation plays a large role in an identity's categorization (Wood 18-20; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 197; Harkins 175). Coal mining is one occupation reinforcing Appalachian regional identity (Wood 18-20; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 197; Harkins 175). Coal mining is a niche occupation; it requires a certain skill set and poses significant risks to a person's well-being. Therefore, coal miners in Appalachia perform work categorized as dangerous, dirty, and degrading. Yet, their work as coal miners sets them apart from surrounding communities. By working in an environment many others consider undesirable, the Appalachian regional identity becomes distinctive. For Appalachians, coal mining is much more than a source of employment; to them, it is a means of marking who they are and where they live.

Finally, sense of place is important to Appalachian regional identity. Recall that sense of place refers to how people use geographic area when making sense of regional identity (Agnew 16; Reed 410; Cooper et al. 460). Many scholars assert that the topographical features of Appalachia strengthen the regional identity's sense of place (Shelby 153-155; Reed 410). Appalachia's topography is unlike anywhere else in the United States. The region's rolling hills and plunging valleys give the area a unique atmosphere. For instance, in Michigan, people cannot experience the beauty of autumn leaves changing colors across mountaintops.

Additionally, although California has beautiful beaches, it lacks the rural backroads containing some of America's most scenic locations. Appalachia's landscape allows residents to differentiate their home from all other parts of America. For example, an Appalachian driving across United States would recognize the moment they leave and re-enter the area because the scenery is so distinct. In other words, the geographic makeup of Appalachia is a key component of how its regional identity is developed. Life in the mountains is something Appalachians are proud of, something they get to call their own. For them, a crucial aspect of identity is creating a sense of place in their home among the hills.

Modern Televisual Representations of Rednecks, Hillbillies, and White Trash

The Appalachian regional identity is unique. Yet, perhaps because of its uniqueness, it is one of the most ill perceived regional identities in the United States. Many scholars concur that the negative perceptions surrounding Appalachia and its people are too expansive to count (Shelby 156; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186; Ferrence 126). Some of the negative perceptions are more common than others, however. Three of the most normalized negative perceptions of Appalachian regional identity are that all Appalachians are lazy, illiterate, and poor (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126).

The normalization of negative perceptions about Appalachian people (e.g. all Appalachians are lazy, illiterate, and poor) is due in large part to how such perceptions are disseminated. Research suggests that these perceptions are so successful because of their comedic nature (Shelby 156; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186; Huber 150). According to Shelby, many other regional identities (e.g. Jewish people, Irish people, Polish people etc.) have been marginalized through comedy for centuries. However, most of these

regional identities are no longer targets of ridicule because such jokes are now considered offensive (157-158). The same sentiment cannot be expressed about the Appalachian regional identity. The Appalachian regional identity is the focal point of America's jokes about the languid, unintelligent, and impoverished and yet, almost all of the laughter comes from populations living outside of the area (Shelby 157-158; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188). Several scholars have noted that the most prevalent negative perceptions of this regional identity are seen in the comedic routines of celebrities like Jeff Foxworthy (Shelby 155; Huber 150). Similarly, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen suggest the Appalachian regional identity has developed wide-reaching negative perceptions due to popular television series like CBS's *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* (183-185).

Indeed, research indicates that the proliferation of negative perceptions of Appalachian regional identity is attributable to the region's depiction in popular culture, particularly in television programs (Shelby 155; Hartigan 95; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 184). In the pages that follow, I detail three popular television programs whose central characters represent the Appalachian regional identity: CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. Then, I discuss the rising cultural status of reality television, highlighting how repeated consumption of the genre impacts audiences' perception of the communities depicted in these programs.

Representations in *The Beverly Hillbillies*

CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies* was one of the earliest representations of the Appalachian regional identity on the small screen. The 9-season sitcom ran from 1962 to 1971 (Eskridge 48; "Beverly Hillbillies"). During its on-air existence, *The Beverly Hillbillies* was "at or near the top

of the Nielsen ratings" each week, suggesting that the show was one of the most watched popular culture artifacts of its time ("Beverly Hillbillies").

The show centers around the Clampetts, a poor southern family which stumbles upon excessive wealth after discovering oil on their land ("Beverly Hillbillies"). After accumulating a 25-million-dollar fortune, the family uproots from their hometown of Hooterville, Missouri and heads to one of America's most exclusive communities: Beverly Hills, California (Eskridge 50; "Beverly Hillbillies"). Once in Beverly Hills, the Clampett family struggles to adjust to life among one of the country's swankiest populations. Unlike their neighbors, the Clampetts reject norms of high society, relying on their Appalachian regional identity to make sense of the expensive new world around them ("Beverly Hillbillies"). Although the Clampetts travel to a place where toting guns and walking barefoot is outlawed, the family still embraces their southern upbringing with pride, even if it subjects them to ridicule.

Most of the show's content stems from juxtapositions between the Clampett and Drysdales families ("Beverly Hillbillies"). Despite the Clampett family's centrality in the series, the Drysdales are always depicted as superior because of their refined manners and adherence to the Beverly Hills lifestyle ("Beverly Hillbillies"). Hence, the Clampetts lack of identification with the regional identity of Beverly Hills frames them as backward, uneducated, simplistic, and frivolous with their fortune ("Beverly Hillbillies"). Examples of the Clampett's inferior characteristics include their southern accents (e.g. using y'all rather than you all), their preferred style of dress (e.g. Stetson cowboy hats and overalls rather than a business suit and tie), and their hobbies (e.g. hunting and fishing rather than shopping and golfing).

The Beverly Hillbillies halted production in 1971 (Eskridge 50; "Beverly Hillbillies"). However, in 2002, CBS tried to recreate a spinoff of the series geared toward reality television

(Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 183-184). The proposed series titled, *The Real Beverly Hillbillies,* would document a rural Appalachian family's journey from the hollers of Kentucky to the hills of California (Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 183-184). While searching for a cast, CBS offered monetary rewards to "several of Kentucky's poorest counties" hoping to find a "multigenerational family willing to move into a Beverly Hills mansion for a year" (Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 183). Despite CBS's interest, the show was never produced. The series was cancelled after Appalachian advocacy groups protested against CBS and its efforts to make Appalachian regional identities the center of further mockery (Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 183-184).

Representations in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*

Another popular culture artifact centering on the Appalachian regional identity is TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo.* The 4-season reality television series aired from 2012 to 2014, accumulating between "two and four million television viewers" (Massey 365-366; Friedman 78). Overall, the series captured an in-depth look at a southern family living in rural Appalachia; *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* highlights the life of Alana Thompson, a rambunctious six-year-old who enjoys competing in national beauty pageants (Massey 365-366; Friedman 78).

At first glance, Thompson seems indistinguishable from most other children her age participating in beaty pageants. However, Thompson and her family are immediately separated from other beauty pageant families because of their expressions of Appalachian regional identity. To Friedman, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* exemplifies the "deep American South" by showcasing a rural Georgian family as run of the mill hillbillies who love their lifestyle, regardless of what outsiders think (79). Friedman's assertion about the Thompson's mirrors sentiments expressed in CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*; both television programs frame

Appalachian regional identity as ridiculous (Friedman 79; "Beverly Hillbillies"). Yet the actors portraying this identity on the small screen are unphased by such wide-spread humiliation (Friedman 79; "Beverly Hillbillies").

Many of the aforementioned stereotypes about the Appalachian regional identity are represented throughout the TLC series. The most prominent stereotypes include backwardness, incivility, and indigence (Friedman 83-86; Massey 368-370). *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* exemplifies the stereotype of backwardness when the Thompsons participate in activities like "mud-diving and bobbing for pigs' feet" (Friedman 83-86). The Thompsons express incivility by engaging in farting competitions (Friedman 83-86). Finally, the cast of the TLC series showcases indigence whenever they "[use] coupons very strategically to lower [the] family's grocery bill" (Friedman 83-86).

Representations in *Duck Dynasty*

A final popular culture artifact highlighting the undesirable characteristics of Appalachian regional identity is A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. The 11-season reality television series ran from 2012 to 2017. Several scholars note the tremendous success of the show (McGuire 5; O'Sullivan 367). In particular, O'Sullivan found that *Duck Dynasty* is "the highest rated non-fiction series in cable television history" (367). During the season four premier alone, the series accumulated 11.8 million viewers (McGuire 5; O'Sullivan 367).

Similar to series like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Duck Dynasty* follows the Robertsons, a family of huntsman living in rural West Monroe, Louisiana. Although the series shows the Robertson family traversing their property with four-wheelers, guns, and camouflage outfits, it also chronicles their unlikely success story running a hunting equipment business (O'Sullivan 367-368). The Robertson's rags to riches narrative parallels the

Clampett's earlier achievements in *The Beverly Hillbillies*; however, *Duck Dynasty*'s cast found financial prosperity by manufacturing duck calls, not finding oil in their backyard by happenstance (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; "Beverly Hillbillies").

A&E's *Duck Dynasty* mirrors many other reality television series showcasing Appalachian regional identity; it contains several stereotypes about the region and its people. Examples of these stereotypes include unconventionality, dirtiness, and reckless financial habits. The Robertsons express unconventionality in their speech (e.g. using y'all instead of you all). Additionally, they exemplify dirtiness in their physical appearance (e.g. their long-matted beards and uncombed hair) (O'Sullivan 367). Finally, the Robertsons demonstrate financial recklessness by purchasing extravagant products which serve no real purpose (e.g. buying a machete just to destroy warehouse supplies).

Despite the many negative stereotypes in A&E's *Duck Dynasty*, the series also includes positive depictions of Appalachian regional identity (O'Sullivan 368; McGuire 6-7). For instance, every episode of *Duck Dynasty* concludes with the Robertson family sitting down together, sharing a meal, and praying (O'Sullivan 368; McGuire 8). The show's emphasis on the Robertson's values related to community and morality frames Appalachian regional identity as respectable rather than ridiculous. Furthermore, the Robertsons reliance on "hard work" showcases another positive depiction of Appalachian regional identity in *Duck Dynasty* (McGuire 6-7). Throughout the series, the Robertson family states they would not have achieved the success they have today if they did not have a "good work ethic" (McGuire 6-7). Thus, the acknowledgement of determination to succeed in *Duck Dynasty* presents people expressing Appalachian regional identity as motivated, rather than lazy.

As demonstrated, popular reality television programs like CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and A&E's *Duck Dynasty* make Appalachian regional identity the star of the small screen. These programs do not just depict lifestyles of particular communities; they also represent reality television's rise to the peak of prime-time entertainment in the modern American household (Wayne 990).

The Rising Cultural Status of Reality Television

Although reality television has existed for decades, several scholars believe it has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the twenty-first century (Wayne 990; Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-698). In recent years, reality television has garnered attention for several reasons. For one, the genre's place on the lower end of the cultural hierarchy spectrum bolsters its watchability. The spectrum of cultural hierarchy is a fictional categorization of popular culture artifacts from low-brow to well refined (Wayne 990). When a cultural artifact is placed lower on the hierarchy, it is generally more accessible, understandable, and relatable to audiences. A&E's *Duck Dynasty* is a prime example of a cultural artifact on the lower end of the hierarchy because it is broadcast on cable, has a simple plotline, and depicts characters many audiences can connect with. Conversely, when a cultural artifact is placed higher on the hierarchy, it is typically more niche. Italian opera exemplifies a cultural artifact on the higher end of the hierarchy because it is only broadcast on certain channels and is performed in a foreign language. Hence, reality television's low-brow cultural status causes it to appeal to broader audiences and achieve higher consumption rates (Watson; Harkins 173).

Several scholars argue that reality television is popular because it acts as a mirror into the lives of ordinary people (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-699; Harkins 173; Wayne 994). According to Harkins, the common person's narrative "[plays] a central role in shaping public

perceptions of American society and values" (173). Thus, because the off-screen audiences connect with the on-screen actors, mediated plotlines parallel unmediated experiences (Wayne 994). A&E's *Duck Dynasty* exemplifies how audiences connect with reality television programs via the depiction of compatible lived experiences. For instance, even though the Robertson's are wealthy, they do not spend their fortune on expensive homes or elaborate clothes. The Robertsons appear on screen in average living quarters and everyday attire, implying that like the program's viewers, the family lives a lifestyle which is not flashy nor excessive. Furthermore, the characters of *Duck Dynasty* are often seen at work in the company's warehouse, suggesting that most members of the Robertson family still hold a normal job despite their financial success. The Robertson family's hard work on *Duck Dynasty* makes the show more relatable because it highlights the lived experiences of most audiences. As exemplified above, the normalized appearance and lifestyle of the Robertsons shows audiences that the people on the small screen are just like them; they live in similar homes, wear similar clothing, and work similar jobs. Thus, because the small screen parallels the existence most people experience, reality television is relied upon for depicting accurate representations of life.

Reality television is also popular because it implies that the middle-class is America's most important demographic (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 699). To Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, reality television's only purpose is to "[propagate] middle-class norms" (699). Therefore, the genre depicts middle-class lifestyle and culture often (e.g. working a blue-collar job, earning a median income, having average or slightly above average intelligence, and holding standard social mobility). Prominent reality television programs emphasizing middle-class lifestyle and culture include: TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. In both series, the characters embody middle-class lifestyle and culture all the time; it is obvious in the jobs

they work (e.g. a desk job or a warehouse assistant), the way they dress (e.g. camouflage overalls or blue jeans and a t-shirt), and the way they interact with others (e.g. neighborhood barbeques or family dinners). Hence, because the characters promote the average American's lived experience, middle-class lifestyle and culture becomes more desirable. Finally, Stiernstedt and Jakobsson note that the working-class (i.e. middle-class) accounts for almost half of the United States' population (qtd. in Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 706). Thus, by showing audiences people who are similar to them over and over again, reality television generates an over-representation of the working-class (i.e. middle-class) in many of the genre's programs (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 710).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have detailed the concept of identity via its construction, maintenance, and modes of categorization. The chapter also emphasized the unique nature of the Appalachian regional identity. Furthermore, it included a synopsis of the Appalachian regional identity's portrayal on the small screen through programs such as CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. This chapter concluded with information regarding the rising cultural status of reality television and its ability to create and sustain fixed perceptions of reality. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach I used to perform my analysis of MTV's *Buckwild.*

CHAPTER III: METHOD

In the previous chapter, I reviewed scholarly literature on identity, Appalachian regional identity, televisual representations of Appalachian regional identity, and the rising cultural status of reality television. This review provided a foundation for my Independent Study's examination of how MTV's *Buckwild* cultivates a construction of Appalachian regional identity. In this chapter, I first describe the artifacts used in my study. Then, I detail the method of ideological criticism, which I use in my study, and describe how this method has been used by other scholars in their examination of the cultural messages of reality television. Finally, I conclude the chapter by outlining the specific methodological approach and observational guidelines I used when conducting my study.

Artifacts

For my Independent Study, I analyzed all 12 twenty-minute episodes of MTV's *Buckwild*, which aired from January 3, 2013, to February 7, 2013 ("Buckwild"). Often described as a backwoods country spin-off of MTV's *Jersey Shore*, *Buckwild* follows a group of nine rebellious young adults from the rural towns of Charleston and Sissonville, West Virginia ("Buckwild"; Memmott). A majority of the series' footage centers on the daily lived experiences and romantic relationships of this rag-tag group of West Virginians. Each episode showcases traditional redneck activities the group often participates in such as: "gunfire, mud fights. . .body licking, reckless driving, garbage throwing, and using a dump truck as a swimming pool" (Memmott).

Although *Buckwild* showcases the adventures of nine friends from the hollers of West Virginia, not every person in the series is given an equal amount of screen time. Thus, the show's four main characters are considered to be: Shain Gandee, Anna Davis, Joey Mulcahy and Ashley

Whitt. Shain Gandee, otherwise known as "Gandee Candy," is a hardworking self-proclaimed redneck who takes great pride in his family and the place he calls home. Anna Davis, otherwise known as "The Ringleader," is a well-to-do country girl who is not afraid to get messy, give orders, speak her mind. Joey Mulcahy, otherwise known as "Justin Beaver," is an easy-going hillbilly Casanova who also doubles as Shain Gandee's best friend. Ashley Whitt, otherwise known as "The Tomboy," is a rowdy southern belle who is no stranger to stirring up trouble. As demonstrated above, *Buckwild* offers a particular construction of the geographic region of Appalachia as well as individual and collective expressions of Appalachian regional identity.

Type of Study

For this study, I used ideological criticism to analyze how central "beliefs, values, and assumptions" about Appalachian regional identity are expressed and reinforced through reality television (Foss 237). The use of ideological criticism facilitated my discovery of the worldviews held by people expressing Appalachian regional identity and bolstered my understanding of how on-screen presentations of this particular identity shape audience perceptions of this community's gender, class, race, and socio-economic status (Foss 237).

Ideological criticism is a method of analysis with foundations in structuralism, Marxism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and semiotics (Foss 237-238). Several scholars note that when used rhetorically, ideology encompasses a predetermined understanding of how a group or culture articulates their sense of belonging in the world (Halualani 74; Foss 237-238). Some examples of well-known rhetorical ideologies include: "patriotism. . .Christianity. . .vegetarianism, and survivalism" (Foss 238). According to Foss, ideological criticism illuminates how different forms of ideology (the dominant, the negotiated, and the oppositional) are reinforced via communication and media usage (242). Therefore, this method of analysis

uncovers the specific worldviews of a particular group, culture, or organization by drawing attention to the artifacts (e.g. television series, films, literary texts etc.) it produces.

In most cases, ideological criticism requires two steps: the deliberate break down of an artifact and the coding of said artifact (Foss 241-243). Breaking down an artifact refers to picking apart every aspect of a communicative experience or media text; it involves exposing who the central actors are, examining what they believe, and evaluating how they present their preferred agenda, so it is accepted without question (Foss 238-241). After a researcher picks apart an artifact, the process of coding begins. Coding an artifact refers to grouping individual elements of said communicative experience or media text until a larger ideological framework becomes apparent (Foss 243). The process of coding can take various forms. For instance, one can group elements of an artifact based on "major arguments, types of evidence, particular terms, metaphors. . .shapes and colors" (Foss 243). Once an artifact is coded, one can then determine the specific ideology the artifact espouses (Foss 245-246). Hence, the core steps of ideological criticism (i.e. breaking down and coding an artifact) are essential in discovering how ideologies are reinforced via communication and media usage (Foss 242). It is through this particular method of analysis that a more accurate understanding of the world and our place within it becomes possible.

To Foss, ideological criticism is one of the best methods for examining reality television because it exposes the perspectives reality television promotes to audiences (242). Most research on reality television and ideology mirrors Foss' assertion; when using ideological criticism, several scholars found that the genre typically reinforces dominant or hegemonic ideologies (Winslow 277-280; Cloud 415-416; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 427-430). In other words, a majority of what is presented to audiences on the small screen claims to be a blueprint of how

everyday people are supposed to live. Some of the most common dominant or hegemonic ideologies found in reality television are the American Dream (Winslow 277-280), romantic promise (Cloud 415-416), and heteronormativity (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 427-430).

Due to the surreptitious nature of hegemonic ideologies, scholars using ideological criticism often evaluate the formulaic structure of reality television to uncover the particular ideologies emphasized within a given program (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 429). The evaluation of a reality television series occurs in many ways. For instance, once an artifact (i.e. a certain reality television program) is chosen, scholars decide how much of the artifact they want to engage with (e.g. a set number of episodes, a full-length season, an entire series etc.) (Winslow 267; Cloud 426; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 430). After a scholar finalizes their degree of artifact engagement, they determine the elements of the artifact they want to examine. Examples of what past scholars have examined include: "non-discursive codes" such as "camerawork, editing [and] framing" (Winslow 270), the number of times a particular action or event takes place (Cloud 419; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 431-439), and audience responses or reactions (Cloud 426-430). Thus, the deliberate examination of elements in reality television provide scholars using ideological criticism a strong foundation for exposing a program's creation and maintenance of specific perspectives.

When past scholars examined the elements of a reality television series, many found most programs utilize marginalized identities when reinforcing dominant ideologies (Winslow 269; Cloud 420-424; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). Even though members of marginalized communities (e.g. the poverty stricken working-class, single desperate women, and gay men) are considered central character types within the genre, their on-screen presence supports the operation of conventional society (Winslow 269; Cloud 420-424; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix

432-433). Thus, non-traditional lifestyles are rarely given any sort of autonomy or respect despite their frequent appearance on the small screen.

Popular reality television series like ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, ABC's *The Bachelor*, and Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* all demonstrate how marginalized identities bolster dominant ideologies (Winslow 269; Cloud 420-424; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). The marginalized figure of the "moral and deserving" poor family is used in ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to reinforce the dominant ideology of the American Dream (Winslow 269). Essentially, the "moral and deserving" poor family in the series normalizes the American Dream by implying that when less fortunate people conform to the tenets of honesty, dedication, and humility higher degrees of success is attained (Winslow 269-275). Similar to *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the marginalized identity of the single desperate woman in ABC's *The Bachelor* reinforces the hegemonic ideology of romantic promise (Cloud 415). Although female contestants in ABC's *The Bachelor* are deemed central figures, they would not exist without the male figure's affection. Thus, the use of the single desperate woman's identity in ABC's *The Bachelor* supports the perspective that proper romantic relationships begin instantaneously and last as long as a man is interested (Cloud 422-424). Finally, the marginalized figure of the gay man in Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* reinforces the dominant ideology of heteronormativity (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). Even though Bravo's hit series depicts gay men as the all-knowing source of aid, straight men are still considered superior (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 432-433). Put differently, the central reasoning behind the homosexual man's appearance in Bravo's program is to increase the heteronormative man's likelihood of success. Therefore, by allowing the straight man to profit off of the gay man's

existence in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the dominant ideology of heteronormativity is strengthened in each episode of Bravo's series (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 438).

As demonstrated above, past research examining reality television via ideological criticism offers several interesting findings. These prior methods of application were drawn upon when carrying out my own ideological analysis of MTV's *Buckwild*.

Specific Methodological Approach

I chose to use MTV's *Buckwild* in my study for two reasons. Primarily, it was selected because of its alignment with the genre of reality television. The program was also used because it showcases individual and collective expressions of Appalachian regional identity. Before conducting my analysis of *Buckwild*, I performed extensive research on the series. This allowed me to become better informed on the program's historical, political, and social context. After completing my research, I generated a set of observational guidelines to use when watching the series. These guidelines helped me identify when and how MTV's program expressed Appalachian regional identity on the small screen and the implications of such expressions in relation to the series' ideology. Furthermore, my observational guidelines uncovered how *Buckwild* depicted Appalachian regional identity in terms of gender, class, and socio-economic status. Once I developed my set of observational guidelines, I met with my advisor to discuss them. After my observational guidelines were approved, my analysis of MTV's *Buckwild* began.

My analysis required me to watch the series in its entirety. Knowing *Buckwild* was comprised of 12 twenty-minute episodes, I decided watching each episode multiple times would yield a more comprehensive study. Thus, my analysis was divided into two stages: the initial viewing stage and the secondary viewing stage. During the initial viewing stage, each episode of *Buckwild* was watched in chronological order (i.e. beginning with the series premier and ending

with the season finale). I watched one episode of the program a day. This was done so I did not experience information overload or burnout while engaging with the program. In initial viewing stage, each episode of *Buckwild* was played from start to finish without interruption. Furthermore, the series was always watched from the comfort of my room when I was alone. This was done to ensure my study had uniform settings and research conditions. Upon the conclusion of each episode during the initial viewing stage, I free wrote for five minutes. All of my responses were typed, dated, and saved in a folder on my personal laptop. Free writing allowed me to capture my primary reactions to each episode of *Buckwild*. Additionally, free writing throughout the initial viewing stage helped me garner a broader understanding of the series before applying my set of observational guidelines.

After the initial viewing stage was completed, the secondary viewing stage ensued. All aspects of the secondary viewing stage (e.g. the order in which I watched the series, the number of episodes I engaged with per day, the settings, and conditions of my research, etc.) were identical to the initial viewing stage. However, during the secondary viewing stage, I paused each episode at the halfway point to take notes on how the show applied to my set of observational guidelines. All of my observations from the secondary viewing stage were typed, dated, and saved in the same folder used in the initial viewing stage.

Once both stages of data collection were finished, I compared each episode's notes from the initial and secondary viewing stages. While doing this, I noted any interesting similarities, differences, and emerging codes. Moreover, I examined each episode's notes from the secondary viewing stage in relation to one another. This allowed me to develop more standardized responses to my set of observational guidelines. Re-evaluating each episode's notes from the secondary viewing stage also helped me discover key themes within MTV's *Buckwild*.

Observational Guidelines

To discover key overarching themes within MTV's *Buckwild*, I developed a specific set of observational guidelines which were implemented throughout my study. My observational guidelines were generated in the form of pre-writing analysis questions. These questions were used every time I engaged with the series and focused on two distinct points of inquiry: how the program portrayed the worldviews of people expressing Appalachian regional identity and how on-screen presentations of this particular identity influence audience perceptions of this community's gender, class, and socio-economic status. A complete list of the pre-writing analysis questions used in my study is documented below:

1.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures act when presented on-screen?

2.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures define themselves and the region they call home?

3.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures define others and outside locations?

4.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild,* how do the four central figures interact with one another? Who do each of the four central figures interact with most often? What kind of language do they use? What kind of topics do they discuss?

5.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures portray romantic relationships? Which of the four central figures, if any, are interested in and/or actively pursuing romance? How do the four central figures exhibit emotional or physical affection toward others?

6.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, what activities and/or experiences are depicted? Which of the four central figures, if any, benefit from these activities and/or experiences? Which of the four central figures, if any, suffer from these activities and/or experiences?

7.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, what social norms, cultural values, or political opinions, if any, do the four central figures express? What social norms, cultural values, or political opinions, if any, do the four central figures deny?

8.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, what kind of lifestyle do the four central figures portray? How do the four central figures define their lifestyle?

9.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, do the four central figures express any common stereotypes or negative assumptions associated with the Appalachian regional identity? If so, what are they and where are they most noticeable?

10.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures depict Appalachian regional identity in relation to gender? Are specific gender roles or expectations apparent? If so, what are they and where are they most noticeable?

11.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures depict Appalachian regional identity in relation to class? Are class unifications or divisions apparent? If so, what are they and where are they most noticeable?

12.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the four central figures depict Appalachian regional identity in relation to socio-economic status? Are socio-economic distinctions apparent? If so, what are they and where are they most noticeable?

13.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, how do the non-discursive elements (e.g. camera angles, music, lighting, editing, framework etc.) impact the series' presentation its four central figures?

14.) In this episode of MTV's *Buckwild*, what generalizations about Appalachian regional identity, if any, do the four central figures convey to audiences? What are the implications of such generalizations?

Conclusion

In this chapter I described the method by which I analyzed MTV's *Buckwild*. The chapter offered a brief synopsis of the series, its content, and its four main characters. Additionally, the chapter detailed the methodological approach of ideological criticism and its application to reality television. The chapter also included a step-by-step explanation of how my study was executed. Finally, the chapter concluded with information regarding the specific observational guidelines and pre-writing analysis questions implemented during my examination of the series. The next chapter undertakes an in-depth analysis of how MTV's *Buckwild* constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

This study aims to examine how MTV's *Buckwild* constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity. In the previous chapter, I described the method by which I analyzed the series. I also highlighted information pertaining to the show's content and four main characters, described how past scholars have used ideological criticism when studying reality television, and outlined the specific process of how I obtained and examined my artifacts. In the current chapter, I undertake my own ideological criticism of the program and its portrayal of Appalachian regional identity. I first discuss the national and local context surrounding MTV's *Buckwild* at the time of its release. Then, I offer insight into how the show was received by MTV's executive producers and the broader American public. The remainder of the chapter presents key findings from my analysis in which I argue *Buckwild*'s construction of Appalachian regional identity engages in perpetuating a gender double standard, ridiculing redneck ingenuity, and fetishizing poverty and backwardness.

Context of MTV's *Buckwild*

The release of MTV's *Buckwild* was situated within a unique moment of United States history. Although the program aired for just over a month, it showcased never-before-seen perspectives on various on-going events outside the world of the show. Thus, to better understand the series, its four central characters, and the larger implications for identity portrayal on the small screen, I begin my analysis by providing national and local context surrounding the release of the show.

National Context

Buckwild aired from January 3, 2013 to February 7, 2013. Upon its release, the program encapsulated several national developments spanning across a two-year period (i.e. 2012 and

2013). Like all other historical eras, the years of 2012 and 2013 contained a plethora of newsworthy events at the national level. However, events related to the topics of racial tension and gun control dominated a majority of American national news media at the time (Reuters; "Top 10").

Racial tension was a reoccurring topic in American national news media throughout 2012 and 2013 (Reuters; "Top 10"). The explosion of racial tension first spiked in February 2012 when Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager from Florida, was murdered by George Zimmerman (Reuters). The story was covered extensively and continued to make headlines even after Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges in July 2013 ("Top 10"). Another source of racial tension chronicled in American national news media in 2012 and 2013 was the presidential election between incumbent Democratic President, Barack Obama and Republican candidate, Mitt Romney (Reuters). Although this particular event did not contain any instances of criminal behavior or death, it drew attention to existing disparities between the country's racial groups at the time. Even though Obama won the 2012 election without question, racial tension was exacerbated by repeated national news media coverage of some states (e.g. West Virginia) refusing to acknowledge an African American man as the newly elected President of the United States (Routers; Reeve).

The topic of gun control was also a central component of national news narratives at the time. An exponential increase in unprovoked mass shootings (e.g. the movie theater shooting in Colorado, the Sikh Temple shooting in Wisconsin, the Empire State building shooting in New York, the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Connecticut, etc.) caused heightened debates over gun control in American national news media in 2012 (Reuters). Domestic coverage of this

controversy extended well into 2013 when a significant amount of gun control legislation was proposed, debated, and repealed over the course of a six-month period ("Top 10").

Hence, 2012 and 2013 contained a variety of historical events centering on racial tension and gun control (Reuters; Reeve; "Top 10"). The widespread coverage of these two topics in American national news media not only shaped the general public's perception of the world around them but also, influenced the entertainment media (e.g. reality television) produced during the two-year period. Although the national context surrounding MTV's *Buckwild* was a key factor in determining the show's reception, the program's local context also impacted the series' brief existence on the small screen.

Local Context

Although several scholars have made Appalachia the centerpiece of their research (Cooper et al. 457-460; Reed 411-412), the region rarely receives positive media attention. In particular, for West Virginia – the portion of Appalachia where MTV's *Buckwild* was filmed – the likelihood of making front page headlines was slim. However, during 2012 and 2013, the Mountain State found itself at the center of three separate controversies within American national news media.

The Democratic presidential primaries of 2012 marked one of the only instances when West Virginia commanded the narrative of American national news media (Reeve). During the event, many believed Obama would garner several votes nationwide because he had no "serious opponent" running against him (Reeve); yet Obama suffered a drastic drop in popularity when polls indicated that almost 50% of Democratic voters in West Virginia preferred a convicted felon over the incumbent presidential candidate (Reeve). Rather than casting a ballot for Obama, nearly half (i.e. 40.6%) of West Virginia's Democrats rallied around Keith Russell Judd, a man

who had been incarcerated in a Texas state prison since 1999 for financial extortion and "making threats in letters to the University of New Mexico" (Reeve). The Mountain State's overwhelming support of a white-collar criminal for Commander-in-Chief as opposed to a well-educated African American man who was elected to office in years past shocked many living outside the state (Reeve). Thus, West Virginia's choice to elect an unlikely candidate for the 2012 presidency not only amassed significant national news media coverage but reinforced many of the assumptions regarding racial bias often associated with the Appalachian region (O'Sullivan 378-382; Holladay 260-261; Shirley 42-43).

Aside from the Democratic Primary debacle of 2012, West Virginia also dominated American national news media coverage when the Obama administration and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began phasing out industrial coal use in 2013 (Plumer). During that year, the coal industry's decline was attributed to a complex combination of robust anti-fossil fuel policy and widespread depletion of non-renewable resources (Plumer). At the time of these changes, the state's prosperity was almost entirely dependent on coal; it offered employment to thousands of West Virginians and funded a majority of the state's economy annually (Plumer). Therefore, because the coal industry's decimation affected the state of West Virginia disproportionately, it became the focal point of America's narrative on backwardness once again (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126; Plumer).

The murder of West Virginia teenager, Skyler Neese marks final time the Mountain State obtained the spotlight of American national news media in 2012 and 2013 ("West Virginia Girl"). To date, Neese's death is considered one of the biggest scandals in West Virginia history ("West Virginia Girl"). In January 2013, Neese's slain body was discovered by her best friend who later confessed to carrying out the murder with the help of an accomplice during the

summer of 2012 (“West Virginia Girl”). The teenager’s tragic killing left the rural community in shambles, insinuating that West Virginia was a place where uncivilized people commit crimes even hardened convicts deem unthinkable (“West Virginia Girl”).

As demonstrated above, the years of 2012 and 2013 represent the few occasions in recent history when West Virginia occupied centerstage in American national news media. From supporting a convicted felon’s campaign for presidency (Reeve) to the dismantling of the coal industry (Plumer) and the cold-blooded murder of an innocent teenager (“West Virginia Girl”), the Mountain State was chronicled as a place and people whose existence in the United States served as a point of repeated ridicule (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126). Therefore, when MTV announced its plan to offer a fresh perspective of West Virginia via the reality television series *Buckwild* in 2013, audiences were hopeful that the newest depiction of the state would present a more accurate view of Appalachia. However, MTV and its touted new program failed to live up to expectations (Memmott; Smith).

Reception

During its brief on-air existence in 2013, *Buckwild* “[pulled] in an average of 3 million viewers per episode” and was deemed one of the most popular weeknight shows for young adults in the United States (Smith). Although the program’s ratings imply that it was well-received by the broader American public, a great deal of controversy surrounded MTV’s portrayal West Virginia and its inhabitants (Smith; Memmott). According to some scholars, very few of MTV’s executive producers found the show inaccurate or offensive toward the Appalachian region (Memmott). In fact, some of the series’ production crew claimed situating a show like *Buckwild* in West Virginia generated a deeper sense of respect for a region which is often overlooked by the rest of American society (Memmott).

Although MTV's positive sentiment about *Buckwild* was echoed among the program's creative directors, such praise was not reciprocated by West Virginia natives (Smith; Memmott). A majority of the state's population was appalled by how MTV's program showcased Appalachia and refused to view or support the continuation of the series (Memmott). The dismay over *Buckwild*'s representation of the region was prevalent throughout West Virginia that state officials contacted MTV and requested all future production of the show be cancelled (Memmott). MTV ignored the request initially, but discontinued *Buckwild* in April 2013 after the unexpected passing of Shain Gandee (Smith).

In general, the reception of MTV's *Buckwild* was rife with mixed opinions (Smith; Memmott). While some claimed the series offered an authentic account of Appalachia by those who knew the region best, others argued the show was just another attempt to make Appalachia the butt of America's jokes about poverty, incivility, and backwardness (Smith; Memmott). Although the controversy over which populations reaped benefits from MTV's *Buckwild* may never be settled, one aspect remains indisputable; everyone who watched the program developed a unique understanding of Appalachian regional identity. Now that I have offered adequate insight on the series' reception, I undertake my own analysis of *Buckwild* and its construction of Appalachian regional identity on the small screen.

Perpetuating a Gender Double Standard

When examining reality television, past scholars have stressed the importance of gender roles (Cloud 430-431). According to Cloud, several reality programs like ABC's *The Bachelor* not only support but reinforce gender binaries and the performance of hyper-femininity (414). Often, when women are presented in reality television programs (e.g. ABC's *The Bachelor*), their gender identity is overemphasized in terms of how they dress (e.g. over-the-top expensive

gowns), behave (e.g. fight over male attention), and emote (e.g. speaking in overly dramatic tones) (Cloud 421-423). Thus, within the context of the small screen, women are usually confined to a particular type of on-air existence which prioritizes stereotypical heteronormative feminine behavior.

However, MTV's *Buckwild* is a prime example of how some reality television series have simultaneously expanded upon and encapsulated gender roles on the small screen. In fact, the limited existing research on *Buckwild* fails to illustrate the importance of the program's content when it comes to the portrayal of gender (Klein loc. 2742). Rather than being characterized as hyper-feminine, the women of *Buckwild* are caught in an inescapable double standard. In particular, Anna Davis and Ashley Whitt battle gender specific roles. Throughout the series, if Davis and Whitt express too much femininity (e.g. refusing to ruin their makeup by playing in the mud, obsessing over male attention, behaving dramatically, etc.), their Appalachian regional identity is compromised because they do not align with the area's rowdy atmosphere. Conversely, if the women express too much masculinity (e.g. riding a bull, operating heavy machinery, rolling around in the mud, etc.), their Appalachian regional identity is compromised once again because if their refusal to conform to more subservient expectations of women within the region. Hence, the women in *Buckwild* are forced to perform a part they can never perfect; for Davis and Whitt, the ideal blend of the feminine and masculine is unachievable. Put differently, because *Buckwild*'s women are held to an unattainable double standard, their presence throughout the series is overlooked and undervalued. MTV's reliance on uncivilized behavior throughout the series is one example of its perpetuation of a gender double standard.

Spotlighting Uncivilized Behavior

Buckwild's inconsistent treatment of its cast's uncivilized behavior generates a gender double standard. Even though everyone in the series disregards the fundamentals of etiquette and hygiene, each person's gender is an essential factor of how a specific action is perceived by audiences. The show suggests that when men demonstrate uncivilized behavior in *Buckwild*, their actions are considered acceptable and are taken as a harmless joke. Yet, when women act in the same way on screen, their actions are categorized as inappropriate and are more likely to stir up tension within the group.

Throughout the series, Shain Gandee engages in multiple uncivilized behaviors. In one episode, he moons his friends while standing atop a large rock while camping. Instead of being taken as an offensive gesture, Gandee's willingness to expose himself was categorized as a lighthearted gag which made the group's outing more memorable. After completing the lewd action, the other men and women on the camping trip dismiss the event as a boyish prank; the men scoff at Gandee while giving him supportive cheers, while the women roll their eyes. The widespread positive reaction to Gandee's stunt indicates that engaging in uncivilized behavior is not only expected but encouraged among Appalachian men. In other words, by showing his bare buttock on national television, Gandee not only garners a laugh from his friends, but reinforces MTV's idea that an Appalachian man's lack of manners is a humorous side effect resulting from the region's low-class lifestyle and culture ("Pitching").

Although Gandee's brief instance of nudity is downplayed as mere immaturity *Buckwild*, the same conclusion cannot be drawn when a female character does something similar. In another episode of the show, Ashley Whitt declares she has to use the restroom while riding in a friend's car. After proclaiming, "I think I have to poop," Whitt sticks her rear end out the

window of the moving vehicle for the rest of the state highway to see ("Paint"). Instead of being considered an immature gag, Whitt's action depicts her as repulsive. Whitt's negative depiction in the episode stems from the reaction her friends, who judge her for displaying vulgarity on national television. Specifically, one man riding in the car with Whitt casts his gaze away from her before she completes the action and continues to look unamused long after the stunt concludes. Furthermore, upon seeing her friend's buttock, another woman from the series makes fun of Whitt's crude behavior claiming, "Look at Ashley's ass" ("Paint"). Unlike the supportive cheers following Gandee's prank, Whitt's stunt is met with pushback. Her male friend's refusal to look at her after she exposed her butt implies that Appalachian women become less ladylike when adopting a more masculine sense of humor. Additionally, the other woman's objectifying statements about Whitt's provocativeness signifies that when Appalachian women expose themselves, they are deemed unbecoming. Thus, MTV's gender double standard causes Whitt to be seen unfavorably by everyone: she is denounced from the feminine perspective because of her failure to act as a respectable Appalachian woman while on screen; yet, she is also denied the prerogative to perform the type of humor used by Appalachian men. In a second move, MTV's emphasis on Appalachian relationship dynamics also serves as an outlet for the program's perpetuation of a gender double standard.

Emphasizing Appalachian Relationship Dynamics

While *Buckwild* relies on uncivilized behavior to perpetuate a gender double standard, it also emphasizes the unique nature of Appalachian relationship dynamics to stress the inequality between the show's male and female characters. Like most other reality television series about Appalachian lifestyle and culture (e.g. *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, etc.), *Buckwild* presents the man as the head of household. In most Appalachian romantic

relationships, men perform more dominant roles, while women occupy more submissive ones. Hence, whatever the man desires, he receives. Although MTV notes that love in Appalachia is not always conventional, it implies that when traditional gender hierarchies are disrupted, all chances of romance go awry.

For example, Joey Mulcahy displays immense control over his relationships throughout the series. In one episode, Mulcahy's upper hand in relationships is referenced when he decides he wants to have sex with another woman from the show. After his friends learn sleeping with Shae Bradley was Mulcahy's ideal birthday present, the group wastes no time making the wish a reality ("Birthday"). Mulcahy's blunt statement about his physical attraction to Bradley indicates that in Appalachian relationships, women are often objectified, leading to romantic encounters based on lust rather than genuine emotional connection. Thus, by highlighting his desire to sleep with Bradley rather than have a monogamous relationship with her, Mulcahy categorizes women as the less powerful gender whose sole purpose is to be used for man's pleasure. Additionally, the amount of effort his friends put into making sure Mulcahy's birthday wish does not go unfulfilled further bolsters the inequality of Appalachian relationship dynamics in *Buckwild* ("Birthday"). His friends not only encourage Mulcahy's lustful request but tell Bradley she is the one person responsible for making his birthday worthwhile. Put differently, if Bradley does not oblige Mulcahy's advances, MTV suggests that everyone's night will be ruined. Hence, by presenting Mulcahy's request as a life-or-death scenario, Bradley's submissive status in the relationship is reinforced because she is given no real choice in the matter and is expected to accept Mulcahy's commands without question ("Birthday").

Mulcahy's birthday party is not the only instance of Appalachian relationship dynamics in the series. Ashley Whitt's repeated violation of traditional gender hierarchies throughout

Buckwild strengthens MTV's perpetuation of a gender double standard on the small screen. In one episode, Whitt and another male character venture to a vacant truck parked in the woods to have sexual intercourse ("Fast"). During this event, Appalachian relationship dynamics are reversed. In this scene, the male character does not initiate nor dominate the physical romance; rather it is Whitt who takes control of the event's trajectory. Whitt's battle with MTV's perpetuation of a gender double standard is reinforced via her failure to blend the feminine and masculine components of her gender effectively. In the rest of the series, Appalachian women are never seen dictating physical relationships. Thus, by initiating sexual contact with the man, Whitt damages her feminine credibility because she asserts dominance instead of submission. In the truck, Whitt commands the man to "warm [her] up, stupid" ("Fast"). In making such a bold statement about her own physical desires, Whitt convolutes traditional gender hierarches by setting the sexual relationship in motion and determining the boundaries of the entire interaction. Whitt's use of derogatory name calling (e.g. calling the man "stupid") in the scene also captures one of the only instances in the series when men, rather than women, are submissive within Appalachian romantic relationships ("Fast"). Thus, Whitt's alignment with the feminine perspective decreases during the encounter due to her overt promiscuity and refusal to let a man assert control over the romantic relationship. In other words, Whitt's actions prevent her from becoming the ideal Appalachian woman because she refuses to contain her sexual desires while also acting in accordance with the more dominant roles of a romantic relationship. Whitt's alignment with the masculine perspective is also compromised in the scene because of her emotional response after the encounter concludes. Rather than downplaying the situation like most Appalachian men, Whitt becomes worried about how her actions will affect her reputation among the group. Hence, Whitt's increased emotional concern after having sex with another

character hinders her masculine credibility because she fails cannot disregard the implications of her lustful actions.

As demonstrated above, *Buckwild*'s emphasis on the unique nature of Appalachian relationship dynamics perpetuates a gender double standard. However, the show's frequent use of romantic encounters is not the only example of MTV's commentary on Appalachian gender expectations. The series' reliance on humor and ridicule also facilitates the show's perpetuation of a gender double standard.

Use of Humor and Ridicule

Buckwild's use of humor and ridicule is the final way the program perpetuates a gender double standard. In the second episode of the series, Anna Davis uses humor and ridicule to emphasize MTV's ideas about Appalachian gender expectations. While participating in a one-on-one interview, Davis makes fun of a female friend for being too feminine with her romantic emotions, saying, "We all know Cara has a thing for Tyler. She should just grow a pair and admit it, like don't be such a vagina" ("Dump"). Davis' derogatory interpretation of her friend's plight supports MTV's perpetuation of a gender double standard; her juxtaposition of the male and female genitals when describing her friends' emotions highlights the complex battle between gender binaries Appalachian women confront every day. By stating that Cara must man up and "grow a pair," Davis suggests it is unacceptable for women to be so secretive about their desires, even if they occupy more passive roles in romantic relationships. The assumption here is that Cara must be more masculine if she wants her relationship to be more successful. Furthermore, Davis' claim about her friend being a "vagina" supports the perceived superiority of maleness. By categorizing the female anatomy as something to be ashamed of, Davis draws attention to some of the negative aspects associated with womanhood such as: being more submissive, more

emotional, and more hesitant to pursue their own desires. Therefore, if Davis' friend downplayed her emotions and viewed the situation from a more masculine perspective, her degree of respect among her peers and romantic partners would increase exponentially.

As demonstrated above, Davis' use of humor and ridicule in *Buckwild* bolsters the series' perpetuation of a gender double standard. Throughout the program, the male performance of gender is straightforward; as long as they satisfy a specific set of criteria centered on uncivilized behavior, domination, and toughness, their identity as Appalachian men is confirmed. However, the same conclusion cannot be drawn for the women in *Buckwild*. For them, the performance of gender is much more convoluted; rather than having a predefined set of criteria, the women must walk a razor thin line between the masculine and feminine perspectives. Although Ashely Whitt and Anna Davis exert valiant efforts to confirm their existence as Appalachian women in *Buckwild*, they are never victorious in the fight for female validation on the small screen.

Ridiculing Redneck Ingenuity

When studying Appalachian regional identity, several scholars focus on the many peculiarities associated with the demographic and its representation on the small screen (Friedman 83-86; Massey 368-370; O'Sullivan 367-368; McGuire 6-8). The overt acceptance of poor hygiene in TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (Friedman 83-86) and attraction to people with unkempt appearances in A&E's *Duck Dynasty* (O'Sullivan 367) are some of the most prominent peculiarities about Appalachian regional identity showcased on reality television. Although past scholarship devotes attention to uncovering the nuances of this particular form of identity expression, it fails to acknowledge a key characteristic of Appalachian regional identity: redneck ingenuity (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; Klein loc. 2822). Redneck ingenuity refers to whenever an Appalachian person uses the resources immediately available to them to entertain

themselves or pass time. Examples of such resourcefulness in MTV's *Buckwild* include: trash can sledding, plastic barrel bull riding, racing a children's toy down a hillside, and filling a waterbed with creek water.

On the rare occasion redneck ingenuity is mentioned in academic literature, the characteristic is either celebrated (e.g. the fame and fortune obtained by the Robertson Family after inventing an innovative hunting device in A&E's *Duck Dynasty*) (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368) or downplayed as "inventiveness" which can be reproduced by anyone outside Appalachia (Klein loc. 2686). However, not all reality television series about Appalachian regional identity offer only passive celebrations or fleeting references to redneck ingenuity (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; Klein loc. 2686); MTV's *Buckwild* makes the characteristic a central theme throughout the show rather than an element which is glossed over. Instead of being admired for their resourcefulness, *Buckwild*'s cast is often ridiculed for how they spend their free time in the holler. In particular, Shain Gandee and Joey Mulcahy are often characterized as inferior members of society because of how they behave on screen. In other words, in lieu of being considered geniuses whose unique inventions expand perceptions of American innovation, Gandee and Mulcahy are depicted as idiots whose antics cannot be taken seriously by their friends or the broader American public. Hence, *Buckwild* traps Appalachian regional identity in a never-ending cycle of mockery; because the show depicts Appalachians' outlandish behavior on screen, redneck ingenuity is regarded as a joke rather than an admirable source of untapped potential. MTV's emphasis on the cast's handcrafted contraptions is one reoccurring instance of the series' ridicule of redneck ingenuity.

Depending on Handcrafted Contraptions

Buckwild's emphasis on the cast's handcrafted contraptions highlights the show's ridicule of redneck ingenuity. In particular, the program suggests that even though Appalachian inventions are interesting, they are not impressive. Put differently, MTV implies anyone can be resourceful, but only certain types of resourcefulness can be considered admirable. Even though they are effective means of passing time, the inventions from *Buckwild* are presented as juvenile attempts to entertain oneself as opposed to ingenuous ways to make the most out of the few resources one has.

Throughout the series, every cast member takes part in some form of hillbilly innovation, indicating that creativity with one's possessions is a central component of Appalachian regional identity. However, some cast members place more importance on resourcefulness than others; most times, whenever MTV displays redneck ingenuity on the small screen, Shain Gandee is at the epicenter of all the action. In fact, MTV categorizes Gandee as the mastermind behind almost every instance of redneck ingenuity in *Buckwild*. During one episode, Gandee decides to beat the summer heat by constructing a swimming pool in of the bed of a dump truck using industrial plastic lining, old mattresses, and a water hose ("Dump"). After obtaining the rights to a dump truck, Gandee works hard to make his handcrafted contraption a reality. While constructing the pool, Gandee is shown throwing industrial plastic liners and mattresses around the dump truck's bed. This implies that whenever redneck ingenuity is utilized, it is neither neat nor methodical. In other words, although Gandee gets the job done, eventually, MTV classifies his plan of action as mediocre at best. Once the pool was finished, Gandee is shown standing inside the contraption as he tells his friends, "Get up there and look out that window! It looks good!" ("Dump"). Following the sequence of Gandee's prideful exclamation, his invention is shown in greater

detail. Not only is the pool dirty and unsafe but leaking and overflowing at the same time. Thus, Gandee's inability to produce a perfectly put together product allows MTV to turn his sense of accomplishment into a moment of mockery by drawing attention to his shortcomings rather than his triumph. Additionally, the narratives provided by *Buckwild*'s other cast members during the scene contribute to the program's ridicule of Gandee's latest instance of redneck ingenuity. For example, upon seeing the dump truck swimming pool, one of Gandee's friends describes him as a "redneck MacGyver" ("Dump"). In comparing Gandee to a celebrated fictional hero, but detracting from it by adding "redneck," his friends make Gandee's inventions comedic rather than innovative.

Gandee's redneck ingenuity in *Buckwild* does not end after his creation of a dump truck swimming pool. In another episode of the series, Gandee constructs a "West Virginia water slide" ("Sexts"). When describing his latest handcrafted contraption, Gandee says "When it's hot around here, we don't need no water park or no pool or nothing. All we need is some soap, a tarp, and a hill. That's how we cool down around here in these parts" ("Sexts"). Gandee's redneck ingenuity is showcased in his description of the invention because the contraption only requires a few household items and West Virginia's natural landscape. Thus, by allowing Gandee to talk about his newest creation without interruption, the program mocks redneck ingenuity via emphasizing that Gandee and his friends are so backward they are entertained by even the simplest commonplace materials. After Gandee finishes describing his "West Virginia water slide," the handcrafted contraption is shown in greater detail ("Sexts"). Once again, MTV characterizes Gandee's latest hillbilly innovation as unsafe. The hillside where Gandee places the tarp for the water slide is steep and overgrown with weeds; the treacherous landscape implies the location is both dangerous and poorly taken care of. Moreover, the placement of Gandee's

handcrafted contraption is not ideal because it is situated next to one of the holler's busiest roadways; the invention's haphazard positioning indicates that one wrong move down the hill could not only make *Buckwild*'s cast dirty, but also seriously injure them. The series' ridicule of redneck ingenuity is reinforced further when one of Gandee's friends falls down while trying to help set up the "West Virginia water slide" ("Sexts"). During the sequence, Gandee's friend is seen standing on the hillside, squirting dish soap onto a tarp. While the person in completing the task, MTV inserts a soundbite of the drumroll which foreshadows comedic events; after the drumroll finishes, Gandee's friend falls to the ground, signaling the completion of slapstick stunt. MTV's insinuation of an impromptu comedic routine on screen is further supplemented by cast's reaction to the unintended accident; upon seeing their friend fall on the new invention, everyone laughs, rather than rushing to assure the person was not physically hurt. Thus, by juxtaposing Gandee's newest creation with a comedy skit with musical cues and audible laughter, redneck ingenuity is depicted as something to be made fun of rather than celebrated. The program's depiction of handcrafted contraptions is not the only instance where redneck ingenuity is mocked, however. The repetition of bodily injury while using handcrafted contraptions also strengthens MTV's humiliation of redneck ingenuity.

Embracing Bodily Injury

The relationship between the use of handcrafted contraptions and the development of bodily injury in *Buckwild* is quite deep; there is hardly an instance in the series where hillbilly innovation does not result in some degree of physical harm. In other words, redneck ingenuity and bodily injury have a reciprocal relationship in the show; whenever redneck ingenuity is utilized, injury ensues. Due to the program's continual display of the cast's cuts, scrapes, blood, and bruises after engaging with a handcrafted contraption, MTV implies that even though

redneck ingenuity is unique, it is poorly thought out. In fact, MTV's categorization of the Appalachian's pride amidst their ineptness echoes several longstanding stereotypical representations of Appalachian regional identity on the small screen (e.g. the Clampett Family in CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, The Thompson Family in TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, etc.) (Freidman 83-86; Massey 368-370; "Beverly Hillbillies"; Eskridge 50). Hence in conflating bodily injury with comedy, *Buckwild* asserts that if one participates in redneck ingenuity, one not only possesses a simplistic sense of pride but also inflicts unnecessary pain on oneself for the slim chance of an eventful experience.

Most times, the male characters in *Buckwild* receive the brunt physical harm on screen. However, no matter the extent of their injuries, the men flaunt their scars with pride. During one episode, Joey Mulcahy receives serious burns to his body after constructing a homemade potato gun out of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipes, wiring, and leftover explosive powder ("Birthday"). Upon creating the makeshift vegetable launcher, Mulcahy attempts to see if his newest invention works. When Mulcahy struggles to operate the device, one of his friends encourages him stick his head into the barrel of the contraption claiming, "Put your head in there again, goofy" ("Birthday"). By referring to his friend as "goofy," Mulcahy's friend gives various stereotypical meanings to Mulcahy's redneck ingenuity ("Birthday"). On one hand, characterizing Mulcahy as "goofy" gives rise to the Appalachian stereotype of backwardness because only idiots can operate such an unwieldy invention (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126). On the other, characterizing Mulcahy as "goofy" harkens the Appalachian stereotype of illiteracy because he lacks the common sense need to avoid physical harm ("Birthday"; Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126). Aside from drawing attention to prominent Appalachian stereotypes via his friend's

commentary, Mulcahy's insistence on getting his handcrafted contraption to work displays a blatant disregard for the many dangers associated with starring down the barrel of a loaded gun. Mulcahy's actions in the scene reinforce MTV's implication that for Appalachians, achieving redneck ingenuity is more important than basic safety. Put differently, by showcasing Mulcahy's reckless behavior, *Buckwild* suggests accomplishing redneck ingenuity requires people subjecting themselves to unnecessary bodily injury.

Furthermore, Mulcahy's burns from the potato gun are the direct results from his engagement with the handcrafted contraption; if he did not create the potato gun, he would not have set his face and hair ablaze. Thus, by framing the scene as an unavoidable sequence of cause and effect, MTV asserts Mulcahy's lack of agency in the outcome of the situation. In other words, the show implies that because Mulcahy participates in creating the potato gun on his own volition, he has no choice but to accept the consequences of his actions (i.e. setting his face and hair on fire) ("Birthday"). Additionally, after seeing Mulcahy hurt himself, his friends are shown laughing rather than rushing to his rescue. By emphasizing the humor in Mulcahy's physical harm alongside his friends' inability to take the situation seriously, MTV presents the negative results of redneck ingenuity as a lighthearted joke rather than a valid means of concern.

Mulcahy burning himself on a potato gun is not the only instance of bodily injury via redneck ingenuity in *Buckwild*. In the series' final episode, Shain Gandee showcases the unavoidable cause and effect sequence on the small screen once again. However, Gandee's physical harm does not take the form of setting his body ablaze; instead, Gandee breaks his nose, causing it to bleed ("Ramped"). The handcrafted contraption responsible for Gandee's injury is a homemade plywood ramp which catapults riders down a steep hill and into a nearby lake. When showing the hillbilly innovation on screen, MTV draws attention to the ramp's lack of safety.

The show's footage of the ramp includes several close-up shots of splintered wood which appears as if it could break at any moment ("Ramped"). Therefore *Buckwild*'s emphasis on the danger surrounding Gandee's participation in redneck ingenuity sets the progression of action and injury into motion. Put differently, by highlighting the many hazards associated with the creation before Gandee goes down the ramp, MTV claims his broken nose is the unavoidable outcome of his actions.

Additionally, MTV ridicules redneck ingenuity via bodily injury by depicting Gandee as overly excited for the potential to acquire a new scar. During the scene with the homemade plywood ramp, Gandee is not the first cast member to take part in the fun; before Gandee takes his turn on the contraption, the program shows him watching his friends in total amazement. While watching other people zoom down the ramp, Gandee is shown grinning, laughing, and clapping his hands in anticipation ("Ramped"). Gandee's excitement to participate in the dangerous activity indicates that whenever Appalachians engage in redneck ingenuity, all possibility of harm is disregarded. To Gandee, the pain he experiences as a result of redneck ingenuity (i.e. a broken nose) is an acceptable price to pay for the chance at a good time. In other words, as long the activity provides entertainment value, it is completed no matter the circumstance.

Indeed, MTV's mockery of redneck ingenuity via Gandee's broken nose extends far beyond the injury itself. After receiving a bloody nose upon landing in the lake, Gandee is shown emerging from the water with his fist in the air and a smile on his face ("Ramped"). Gandee's response to the injury suggests that despite the toll the activity took on his body, he is proud his redneck ingenuity was a success. Therefore, by showcasing Gandee's reaction to physical harm, *Buckwild* draws attention to the prominent stereotype of all Appalachians being reckless with

their well-being (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126). After Gandee's triumphant expression in the water, the program's cameras zoom into his face, focusing on the severity of his injury. Gandee's face is shown battered, bruised, and covered in blood. However, none of his friends appear eager to help him and instead, make light of his current condition. Upon welcoming Gandee out of the lake, one of his friends refuses to help while pointing out, "Dude, your mustache is red" ("Ramped"). MTV's inclusion of lighthearted commentary about Gandee's injury implies that any harm resulting from redneck ingenuity is not only funny but deserved. In other words, *Buckwild* suggests if Gandee's closest friends cannot take his broken nose seriously, then the broader American public has no reason for concern. Hence, because MTV equates redneck ingenuity and bodily injury to stand-up comedy, the physical harm Gandee experiences is presented as an outcome to be mocked, not mirrored.

As demonstrated above, Mulcahy and Gandee's embrace of bodily injury exemplifies MTV's ridicule of redneck ingenuity. The series implies that the cast's handcrafted contraptions are unconventional definitive sources of physical harm. Thus, MTV's presentation of the connection between hillbilly innovation and physical harm is not only straightforward, but reciprocal. By giving comedic overtones to all instances of redneck ingenuity and bodily injury in *Buckwild*, MTV subjects the Appalachian regional identity to even greater ridicule.

Fetishizing Poverty and Backwardness

Most scholarship on televisual representations of Appalachian regional identity focuses on the area's abundance of poverty (Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126). Some scholars believe the link between poverty and the Appalachian region is not coincidental but intentional (Precourt 86). According to Precourt, poverty's

historical prominence throughout Appalachia normalized the phenomenon, causing minimalistic lifestyles and low-class cultures to become core characteristics of the region (98-99). Hence, the repeated presentation of Appalachia as home to America's most impoverished populations fosters the stereotype that to be Appalachian is to be poor (Precourt 86; Shelby 154-155; Hartigan 100; Cooke-Jackson and Hansen 186-188; Ferrence 126).

While the existing literature addresses the many ties between poverty and Appalachia, much of it incorrectly assumes Appalachians will continue buying into the "American Dream" despite the region's misfortune (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; "Beverly Hillbillies"; Eskridge 50). The rags to riches narrative of Appalachians working their way up the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder is contained in various popular television programs such as CBS' *The Beverly Hillbillies* and A&E's *Duck Dynasty* (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; "Beverly Hillbillies;" Eskridge 50). For instance, the Clampett family's willingness to abandon their rural lifestyle and start anew in one of the country's wealthiest regions (i.e. Beverly Hills, California) reinforces the American Dream throughout *The Beverly Hillbillies* ("Beverly Hillbillies"). In other words, the Clampett family's poverty is outlawed from the onset of CBS' series. Even though the characters maintain ties to their Appalachian regional identity while on screen, their desire to climb the ladder of success trumps the "rootedness" they have with their hometown of Hooterville, Missouri ("Beverly Hillbillies;" Reed 410). Thus, whenever Appalachians appear on television, the idea of enjoying an impoverished lifestyle is considered inappropriate or un-American; despite the scarcity of resources in the region, Appalachians are expected to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," forging a better life for themselves, especially when presented on the small screen (McGuire 7-9; O'Sullivan 368; "Beverly Hillbillies"; Eskridge 50).

Although the concept of the American Dream saturates a variety of television programs devoted Appalachian regional identity, not every show conforms to plotlines of unending evolution. MTV's *Buckwild* is one of the only existing reality television series where lifestyles of poverty and backwardness are relished. In fact, MTV centers a majority of their program around the low-class lifestyle and culture of Appalachia; however, past scholarship on the series fails to elaborate on the unique socio-economic makeup of the region and instead makes passing reference to ways in which poverty is not only expected, but "celebrated" amongst West Virginians (Klein loc. 2686). MTV's deliberate stress on the cast's apparent embrace of their poverty fetishizes the phenomenon by turning it into a lifestyle choice rather than acknowledging its systemic roots. By over-emphasizing the lack of opportunity in rural West Virginia, MTV asserts that if Appalachians take pride how they live (e.g. Friedman 83-84), there is no need to offer them any sort of support or aid. Put differently, because Appalachian people have created and maintained unconventional lifestyles for themselves, they have no choice but to be content with it. The series' romanticization of the rural American small town is one example of *Buckwild*'s fetishization of poverty and backwardness.

Romanticizing the Rural American Small Town

Buckwild's fetishization of poverty and backwardness is often chronicled via the cast's overt infatuation with the rural American small town they reside in. A majority of the series takes place in the dilapidated hollers of Sissonville and Charleston, West Virginia. Despite the program's showcase of run-down houses, pothole filled roadways, and abandoned infrastructure, the cast members' view of their hometown echoes Friedman's implication that even though most Appalachians lack monetary funds and stable employment, they possess a tremendous sense of pride in the place they call home (83-84). Of all the show's characters, Shain Gandee plays the

biggest role in MTV's romanticization of the rural American small town. Due to Gandee's repeated adoration of West Virginia and the holler he grew up in, *Buckwild* not only bolsters the "rootedness" associated with an Appalachian's regional identity (Reed 410) but creates the illusion that once an Appalachian reaches certain level of poverty, they embrace it. Hence, the show depicts poverty as a lifestyle choice rather than acknowledging that the attitudes shown on the small screen are a means by which people experiencing poverty try to come to terms with their lot in life.

In the second episode of the series, Gandee romanticizes the rural American small town by giving a detailed tour of Sissonville, West Virginia ("Dump"). While on the tour, the scenery appears uninviting to outsiders. For example, the imagery used to describe Gandee's holler includes dirty old trailers, rusted out industrial pipes, seedy bars, and single lane roads ("Dump"). Additionally, Gandee's tour includes footage of a man working on a farm while feeding his herd of livestock ("Dump"). MTV's use of video illustrating people working blue collar professions which are typically associated with less modern ways of life reinforce the stereotype that people expressing Appalachian regional identity occupy a lifestyle of poverty and backwardness without hesitation (Friedman 83-86; Massey 368-370). In other words, by only showcasing careers which were prevalent in previous eras of existence (e.g. subsistence farming), *Buckwild* suggests people living in Sissonville, West Virginia have no choice but to maintain impoverished and backward lifestyles because they rely on antique methods of survival. Therefore, to audiences who have little to no knowledge about the region, MTV's presentation of such an insular place and people is a prime reference to exactly what the region is and what it is not. Put differently, by splicing together aspects of Gandee's tour, his explanation of the rural American small town is turned into a pre-packaged version of Sissonville, West Virginia MTV

deems suitable for the rest of the country to experience, rather than a more genuine interpretation of the holler.

Gandee's speech throughout the second episode of *Buckwild* further romanticizes the rural American small town ("Dump"). For instance, Gandee's pride in being a poor Appalachian is evident from the onset of his tour of the holler when he states, "If you're from West Virginia, you don't want to leave West Virginia 'cause that's all you know. Hell, that's all you need" ("Dump"). In this statement, Gandee displays his "rootedness" to the Appalachian regional identity via suggesting that anyone who is born in the "Mountain State" has no desire to leave the area (Reed 410). By telling audiences he cannot envision himself existing anywhere outside of his own impoverished holler, Gandee exhibits pride in his Appalachian upbringing even though it is an unideal lifestyle and culture to most. Gandee's proclamation about his hometown also draws attention to the notion that despite the region's lack of resources, Appalachians do not "need" anything else to exist in their place of residence ("Dump"). In other words, as long as Gandee has a roof over his head, clothes across his back, and food on his plate, he can survive in Sissonville, West Virginia. For Gandee and the rest of *Buckwild*'s cast, being successful does not equate to having an abundance of material items or excessive wealth; for them, fulfillment is found in the irreplaceable experiences derived from their innovative spirit. Thus, MTV's use of Gandee's minimalistic outlook strengthens the program's romanticization of the rural American small town by implying that Appalachians are among the only people who are at peace without participating in the American Dream. In doing so, MTV others Appalachian people within their own country by presenting them as oddly comfortable, even happy, with circumstances most people deem unacceptable ("Dump"; Burke 22).

The brief interactions between Gandee and his neighbors in the holler capture another instance of MTV's fetishization of poverty and backwardness ("Dump"). On Gandee's tour of the holler in the series' second episode, he is shown engaging with another man who is walking on the side of the road. While Gandee and the MTV film crew showcase the area, one of the cameras zoom in on a man who remains anonymous aside from his brief conversation with Gandee. When Gandee's truck passes him by, the man flashes a huge smile, waves, and shouts "Hey Shain!" ("Dump"). This intense greeting between the passerby and Gandee glamorizes the rural American small town by reinforcing the misleading idea that everyone living in an Appalachian holler knows one another. Although the interaction between the two men seems endearing on the surface, MTV presents it so that Appalachian neighborhoods are defined as places which not only lack sufficient resources and cleanliness but crams vast amounts of people into tiny spaces. The video footage of the greeting categorizes Gandee's companion as someone who lacks sufficient resources because he is walking along the roadside rather than driving a car. Furthermore, the clip illustrates the man as someone who struggles with hygiene by highlighting the dirt smeared across his body. Finally, the scene sheds light on the intentional proximity Appalachian people have to one another in the holler via the man's willingness to get Gandee's attention in a location which is traditionally not intended for social encounters (i.e. the roadside) ("Dump"). Hence, MTV's emphasis on Gandee's interaction with another man from the holler romanticizes the rural American small town by insinuating that West Virginians, like most other Appalachians, find unconventional comfort, unity, and pleasure in being poor and backward ("Dump").

As demonstrated above, Gandee's tour the holler bolsters *Buckwild*'s fetishization of poverty and backwardness via the romanticization of the rural American small town. However,

the series' glamorization of life within the dilapidated neighborhoods of Sissonville, West Virginia is not the only instance where poverty and backwardness is glorified within the program. The cast's refusal to leave the holler exemplifies another way MTV fetishizes poverty and backwardness.

Hesitating to Leave the Holler

The cast's refusal to leave the holler exemplifies another way MTV paints its characters as provincial, backward, and content with the stagnancy of their lives. A majority of the series takes place deep inside the hollers of Sissonville, West Virginia. However, throughout the show, some cast members venture outside of their hometown to experience the "big cities" of Charleston or Morgantown (e.g. going to a nightclub, going to a chain restaurant in a metropolitan plaza, etc.) ("Paint"; "Double"). Whenever MTV chronicles the cast's adventures away from the holler, most of the characters are shown having the time of their lives. Nevertheless, not everyone in *Buckwild* shares the same sentiment about the hustle and bustle of suburbia. Shain Gandee is one of the only men on the show to refute any and all ideas about leaving the place he calls home. To Gandee, the thrills of city life are unnecessary distractions from reality; for him, there is unparalleled beauty in insular lifestyles. During the entirety of the program, Gandee's actions mirror Burke's theory on othering (22). Regardless of where he is, what he is doing, or who he is interacting with, Gandee identifies and maintains differences between himself and those who are unlike him (e.g. comparing himself to other people in a nightclub in Morgantown, West Virginia) ("Paint"). Therefore, MTV uses Gandee's aversion to external people and places to strengthen their fetishization of poverty and backwardness in *Buckwild*.

In the fourth episode of the series, Gandee's hesitation to leave the holler is shown when his friends plan a trip to a popular nightclub in Morgantown, West Virginia ("Paint"). When asked if he wants to attend the group's adventure, he makes a confused face and responds by asking, "What's that? Why do I need to go to this?" ("Paint"). Gandee's initial questions are followed by blunt rejection as he states, "I don't even know about this. . .I don't know. . .I don't want to leave the holler. . .No, I ain't going up there" ("Paint"). Gandee's confusion and refusal to go to a nightclub in the city highlights MTV's implication that Appalachians are opposed to difference; they are most comfortable in their own habitat and take pride in defining themselves in opposition to people and environments which are different than their own (Burke 22). Put differently, by leaving the holler, Gandee must step out of his insular community and indulge in a lifestyle which rejects his "rootedness" to rural Appalachia (Burke 22; Reed 410). For Gandee, staying in a location where he is considered successful is superior to experiencing alternative ways of life ("Paint"). Thus, by drawing attention to Gandee's distaste for foreign places and people, *Buckwild* suggests that instead of being integrated into more modern ways of life, Appalachians should remain confined to a lifestyle of poverty and backwardness because it is their most comfortable state of existence.

Later in the same episode, Gandee's hesitation to leave the holler is referenced once more when one of his friends offers sarcastic commentary about his unexpected journey to Morgantown, West Virginia ("Paint"). While driving to the city, Ashley Whitt comments on Gandee's once in a lifetime trip claiming, "I can't believe Shain is leaving the holler to go to a big city. He's only been in like an elevator one time and he got seasick" ("Paint"). Whitt's framing of the event sheds light on the notion that Appalachians rarely leave their home; her exaggerated statement also suggests that on the off chance an Appalachian does venture outside

of the holler, they cannot handle even the simplest excursion without incident. Put differently, in emphasizing the unlikeliness of Gandee's journey via Whitt's description, MTV fetishizes poverty and backwardness by implying American society – and Appalachian people – is better off when Appalachians remain in an insular state of existence.

As demonstrated above, Gandee's hesitation to leave the holler exemplifies MTV's fetishization of poverty and backwardness. In highlighting Gandee's hatred for unfamiliar places and people, *Buckwild* suggests Appalachians do not only accept a lifestyle of misfortune but prefer it when compared to alternative methods of survival. Furthermore, by presenting Gandee's experiences in more advanced areas as an unfortunate happenstance, MTV infers Appalachian people are best served when they remain within the bounds of their insulated existence. Although MTV's insular depiction of Appalachia appears harmless on the surface, it breathes new life into the assumption that the region and its people amount to nothing more than unfortunate byproducts of their own ignorance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how MTV's *Buckwild* constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity on the small screen. After elaborating on the series' context and reception, I used ideological criticism to develop a better understanding of three key themes and modes of representation within the series. My analysis found that by enforcing a gender double standard, ridiculing redneck ingenuity, and fetishizing poverty and backwardness, *Buckwild* reinforces the overarching idea that Appalachia is home to one of America's most pitiful population groups. The next chapter discusses my study's major conclusions, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Overall, MTV's presentation of West Virginia and its inhabitants as "a place founded on freedom; the freedom to do whatever the f**k you want" reinforces several stereotypes about Appalachian regional identity ("F' the Neighborhood"). As we have seen, careful analysis of *Buckwild* uncovers just how potent reality television is in constructing how certain identities are categorized on screen. Throughout the series, MTV's perpetuation of a gender double standard, ridicule of redneck ingenuity, and romanticization of poverty and backwardness causes audiences to view the group of young West Virginians – and the broader Appalachian region – through a narrow lens. My study's previous chapters have set the stage for the present moment; together, we have defined the purpose and rationales of my study, examined past literature on the topic, evaluated my methodological approach, and discussed three key themes from my analysis. In this final chapter, I will first highlight my study's major conclusions. Then, I will expand on some of the implications and limitations associated with my study. Finally, I will conclude by making a few recommendations for future research and offering my final thoughts.

Major Conclusions

Despite being one of the only instances where Appalachian regional identity is spotlighted on the small screen, *Buckwild* provides audiences with stereotypical notions of Appalachia. Throughout the show, MTV traps the region and its people in a web of commonplace assumptions; there is not a single episode of the series where Appalachians are depicted as something more than America's dirtiest, dumbest, and most destitute population. In just highlighting overused clichés, MTV bolsters many of the pre-exiting narratives about Appalachia (e.g. CBS's *The Beverly Hillbillies*). The show's replication of pre-existing narratives also strips the region of its diversity, encouraging the circulation of similar media

content in the future (e.g. A&E's *Duck Dynasty*, TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, etc.). Watching *Buckwild* causes an incorrect conflation of media representation and public perception because MTV's depiction of Appalachia mirrors what most audiences have already seen, heard, or experienced about the region on the small screen. Hence, the series perpetuates the problematic notion that if audiences have encountered one show about Appalachian regional identity, audiences have encountered them all.

In addition to reinforcing negative generalizations about Appalachian regional identity, *Buckwild* also bolsters several longstanding hegemonic ideologies. On the surface, the show appears to empower marginalized viewpoints of native Appalachians. However, upon closer examination, the program does the complete opposite; rather than expanding discourse on acceptable social practices and standards of living, *Buckwild* argues in favor of maintaining the status quo. MTV's appreciation of traditional gender hierarchies and support of the American Dream are two of the most obvious instances of hegemonic ideologies within the series. In showcasing the inequality associated with normative gender expectations via uncivilized behavior and Appalachian relationship dynamics, MTV suggests there is nothing inherently wrong with male superiority or the misogynistic objectification of women. Thus, by appreciating the men in *Buckwild* more than the women, the program advocates for traditional gender hierarchies to remain unchanged moving forward. Moreover, MTV's support of the American Dream throughout the series reinforces the hegemonic ideology of continual evolution. By highlighting the negative outcomes associated with the Appalachian's refusal to participate in the American Dream (e.g. stupidity, bodily injury, poverty, etc.), the show asserts that as long as a person devotes themselves to an unending cycle of self-improvement, they will avoid succumbing to the shortcomings of Appalachian regional identity. Put differently, in making

Buckwild's cast the poster children of how not to become a valuable member of society, MTV urges the broader American public to remain committed to their upward journey on the invisible ladder of success.

As demonstrated above, my analysis of *Buckwild* produced various major conclusions. However, these aforementioned statements are not just intrinsically significant; rather, they pose various lasting implications for the future of Appalachia, its people, and the expression of this particular identity.

Implications

This study has two major implications. First, the media's stereotypical generalizations could affect the future perceptions of, and thus attitudes toward, people from Appalachia with significant negative consequences for the well-being of Appalachian people. It has long been inferred that reality television acts as a mirror into the lives of ordinary people and "[plays] a central role in shaping public perceptions of American society and values" (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-699; Harkins 173; Wayne 994). Therefore, if audiences are only exposed to stereotypical generalizations about Appalachia, they have little choice but to believe what they see on screen as indisputable. At its core, MTV's presentation of Appalachia in *Buckwild* harkens back to age-old assumptions about rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash. By exposing audiences to the same stereotypes over and over again on screen (e.g. all Appalachians are dirty, poor, stupid, etc.), MTV further traps Appalachian regional identity in the "rigid boundaries" of oversimplified representation (Ferrence 120-121). Thus, because the show only adds to the pre-existing pool of stereotypical discourse, the ways in which audiences perceive Appalachia will likely remain the same for years to come. Put differently, as long as reality television shows like *Buckwild* continue to be produced, Appalachia and its people will continue to be marginalized.

The acceptance of stereotypical generalizations about Appalachia permits most policy initiatives to ignore the region's disparity, often leaving it to wallow in its own misfortune. For example, Buckwild's depiction of Appalachians delighting in their own poverty or lack of well-paying jobs could be the basis for widespread attitudes of indifference toward Appalachia, which in turn support the absence of meaningful public policies addressing the region's disparity. In a recent interview about the gap in helpful policy throughout Appalachia, author Sarah Jones said the elimination of coal industries confine most Appalachians to a life of "food stamps and welfare" (Jones). Following Jones' lead, celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain took a stance on the region's insufficient policy initiatives related to stable employment in 2018 stating, "It's so easy from afar to say that coal's time here has come and gone; that we should let the miners move, find some other work. What other work? [West Virginia's] biggest employer is now Walmart" (Morabito). Thus, our repeated dismissal of policies that would lessen the hardship in Appalachia is the direct result of accepting stereotypical generalizations and attitudes of indifference about the region that in no small part stem from reality television series like *Buckwild*.

Indeed, my analysis of *Buckwild* reveals an urgent need for more equitable public policy across the Appalachian region. Despite its lighthearted overtones, the series gives audiences a first-hand look into the immense disadvantage facing the area; from the dilapidated scenery, to the lack of stable employment options, and everything else in-between, Appalachia is crying out for our collective assistance in *Buckwild*. However, no one seems prepared to answer the call. In the future, if any substantial change is going to occur in the region, the American public needs to stop blaming Appalachians for their lot in life, and with that, to stop producing – and watching – shows like *Buckwild*. By watching the show, we are exposed to the many misfortunes (e.g. pothole filled roadways, water contaminated by power plant chemicals, etc.) in Appalachia

which require governmental attention, but we are not urged to do anything about it other than laugh. Instead of using reality television series like *Buckwild* as a simplistic form of comedic relief, we need to employ these popular culture artifacts as a means of advocating for meaningful change within one of America's most disadvantaged regions. If we fail to recognize the inequality in Appalachia now, we will fail to foster a more equitable existence for every American moving forward.

As exemplified above, my study has uncovered two lasting implications for the future of Appalachia and the broader American public. However, no proper academic research is designed without fault; even though my examination of *Buckwild* was useful in determining how MTV constructs a particular view of Appalachian regional identity on the small screen, it had a few limitations.

Limitations

Like all other academic research, my study had a few limitations. My study's primary limitation stemmed from the time constraints of the College of Wooster's Senior Independent Study. Although I crafted a thoughtful analysis of three key themes I observed in *Buckwild* (i.e. perpetuating a gender double standard, ridiculing redneck ingenuity, and fetishizing poverty and backwardness), the time restrictions did not allow me to examine some of the other interesting components of the series in greater detail. If I were to conduct the same study for a longer period of time, I would have also analyzed how MTV's construction of Appalachian regional identity in *Buckwild* comments on topics such as race and sexuality. Including analyses of topics like race and sexuality in the MTV series would have generated a more thorough understanding of how Appalachia and its inhabitants are presented on the small screen.

Another limitation of my study is my artifact. Even though *Buckwild* provided me with a great item to examine for my Senior Independent Study, its limited on-air tenure does not offer researchers an extensive amount of material to sort through. The entire series is comprised of 12 twenty-minute episodes which were broadcast on MTV for just over two months. Thus, because the program was so brief, a comprehensive account of Appalachian regional identity and its presentation on reality television is unable to be determined by looking at this series alone.

The final limitation of my study is my reliance on a singular methodology. In performing an ideological criticism of *Buckwild*, I was able to discover three key themes MTV used to construct its idea of Appalachian regional identity to audiences. However, because I only utilized one methodological approach, my study is difficult to generalize. If I had conducted the exact same study using a different method, there is no guarantee I would have produced similar findings or even posed the same questions when analyzing the show. Therefore, if this project could be undertaken again, I would be interested in coupling my use of ideological criticism with another methodological approach such as content analysis or interviews with viewers of the show. In doing so, I would have not only corroborated my analytical findings but also garnered new observations about the program and its depiction of Appalachian regional identity.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research on the topic of Appalachian regional identity. To gain a better understanding of how real-life audiences react to *Buckwild* and its construction of Appalachian regional identity, future researchers could conduct a reception study. When conducting a reception study on *Buckwild*, I suggest that researchers gather a pool of participants who are unfamiliar with Appalachia. After gathering participants, the researcher would hold weekly screenings of the series. Following each screening, the participants would

then engage in a facilitated dialogue about the content they encountered and how they make sense of it on and off screen. If utilized, this method of study would afford researchers more generalizable results as well as greater insight into how effective MTV's construction of this particular identity was for audiences who were not familiar with Appalachia and its inhabitants.

Another avenue for future research could be found studying other popular culture artifacts showcasing Appalachian regional identity. In recent years, a great deal of media has been published about Appalachia (e.g. Netflix's adaption of J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, Todd Haynes' hit film *Dark Waters*, etc.). Putting more recent popular culture artifacts based on Appalachian regional identity in conversation with older reality television series like *Buckwild* would not only bolster our collective knowledge about this unique population group but also shed light on the stagnancy of representation Appalachia has faced for decades.

If undertaken in the future, the research projects described above would aid America's understanding of Appalachian regional identity tenfold. As much as I would love to delve into these research projects myself, my time with this Senior Independent Study at the College of Wooster is coming to a close. Therefore, I will now give my final thoughts on this study and its impact on my identity as an Appalachian woman.

Final Thoughts

As I arrive at the final section of the last chapter of my study, I cannot help but reflect on everything this process has taught about myself and the place I call home. When I first started this endeavor in the fall of my junior year, I thought my desire to study Appalachian reality television was a momentary fascination which would subside as quickly as it began. However, the deeper I dove into my topic, the harder it became for me to step away. As the months flew by and the page count grew longer, I found myself becoming one of those young academics

everyone else on campus warns you about; the kind of researcher who never passed up the opportunity to talk about their topic to anyone who was willing to listen. With each new source, episode, and section of analysis, my love for Appalachian places and people shifted from something I was interested in, to something I was passionate about

In completing this project, I have arrived at a few major realizations. For one, my examination of *Buckwild* gave me a newfound appreciation for the place I call home. Even though I have always had deep rooted connection to the "Mountain State," analyzing this series increased my West Virginian pride beyond measure. As I am writing this today, I embrace every aspect of the region's lifestyle and culture; from the close-knit communities to the handcrafted contraptions, and everything else in-between, I am so thankful to have grown up in the hollers of West Virginia. Without my many lived experiences alongside the rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash of Appalachia, this entire Senior Independent Study would not have been possible.

Finally, more than anything, this study helped me realize the importance of media representation and public perception. Prior to conducting this research, I – like most other fans of reality television – never thought to question what I saw on the small screen. Instead, I just assumed the many narratives playing out before me were accurate depictions of reality. However, I leave this study knowing my previous line of thinking could not have been farther from the truth. After finishing this project, I am more aware of how important it is to be critical of the media I consume. For me, everything I see on reality television will be taken with a grain of salt from now on. The Appalachia depicted in MTV's *Buckwild* is nothing like the region I experienced as a native West Virginian. At the end of the day, even though reality television acts as a mirror into the lives of ordinary people (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 697-699; Harkins 173; Wayne 994), the reflection it produces is not always crystal clear.

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