

APPALACHIAN MODERNS:  
POETRY AND MUSIC,  
1936-1947

by

BOB CRAVEN

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Student: Bob Craven

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Dr. Stephanie LeMenager	Chair
Dr. Dianne Dugaw	Core Member
Dr. Mark Whalan	Core Member
Dr. Steven Beda	Institutional Representative

and

Dr. Krista Chronister	Vice Provost for Graduate Studies
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Division of Graduate Studies.

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Bob Craven

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Why has Appalachia been written out of the story of modernism? Current scholarship on American modernism's geography proposes a bipartite model: proximal modernism in the North, a movement based in New York and Chicago concerning life in an urban zone, and distal modernism in the South, as a dispersed movement concerning life in an agrarian zone. Yet participating in another regional stream of modernism are Appalachians, a third group, whose homeland was defined neither by urbanism nor agrarianism, but was developed along a third developmental path: extractivism. This developmental model restructured state governments and laws to enlarge the region's capacity to produce wood, minerals, coal, petroleum, and natural gas. Extractivism is thoroughly examined in works by Appalachians. This dissertation focuses on two such works, arguing that they reveal another, as yet overlooked, stream of modernism.

Written on frontlines of industrial resource extraction, *Gauley Mountain* (1939) by West Virginian poet Louise McNeill and *Folk Songs of the Hills* (1947) by Kentucky musician Merle Travis make modernist interventions in form and content yet have never been classed as modernist, mostly going unnoticed by literary scholars.

To better understand why this the case, I compare each of these two critically neglected figures with a historical contemporary who, at one point or another, *did* become established as a

canonical modernist: Travis, with the undisputed “master of modernism” Louis Armstrong (1901-1971), a New Orleans musician sixteen years older than Travis but facing a similar turning point in style with his *Town Hall Concert* (1947); McNeill, with New York City poet Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), writer of *The Book of the Dead* (1938), who has been venerated in recent decades as a significant twentieth-century American writer. Close readings of these works, and their critical fates, reveal the geographic and regional indexing of cultural value in modernist studies. Specifically, uneven economic development positioned Appalachia within the cultural spheres of thirties poetry and forties music in a certain way, as a source not only of natural resources, but of cultural resources as well. *Appalachian Moderns* therefore works to widen our appreciation of American modernism’s geographic and historical dynamics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A steady stream of energy and matter extracted from places near and far made this project possible. Where did the lumber come from which produced the paper I used? What about the petroleum in the ink and the dye chemicals in the wood pulp? Where did all the rubber, aluminum, and the graphite come from? Electricity powered my word processing laptop, itself a machine containing extracted metals and petroleum-based plastic. It powered the internet servers and telephone phone infrastructure which supported my communications. It powered the online servers where databases of e-books and electronic journals are stored. It heated and lit the Knight Library and the independent bookstore Tsunami Books in Eugene, Oregon, where I skimmed shelves. What about all the gasoline I burned when I drove through West Virginia in 2021 to visit Hawk's Nest, the Louise McNeill archival collection in Morgantown, and Buckeye (in an unsuccessful search for the 1769 McNeill farm)? This project has its own place on the "balance-sheet of energy" (*U.S. 1 56*) the poet Muriel Rukeyser traces in *The Book of the Dead*.

So many supporters, too, made this dissertation possible. I thank Anne Lyons Frank and Gibbs Kinderman for allowing me to interview them. For providing a model for staunch words and intellectual toughness, I thank Scott Landfield, community pillar for working-class readers of Eugene. I thank my committee members for the vigor and experience they brought to this project. Thanks are due to Dr. Steven Beda from the Department of History for volunteering for this project early on, and for ably serving as the Institutional Representative. Without the thoughtful and extensive feedback of Dr. Mark Whalan and Dr. Dianne Dugaw throughout the research and writing process, this would be a much poorer dissertation. Special thanks are due to Dr. Stephanie LeMenager, who first opened my eyes to the inquiry being done in the energy

humanities field nearly five years ago in a Fall 2017 graduate seminar, and who, as my academic advisor and committee chair, has helped me in ways that go far beyond this dissertation.

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On a personal note, *Appalachian Moderns* could never have been conceived, let alone written, without the love and support of my family and friends. To my family, living and dead, thank you for everything.

to my mother's father,  
Granville Sibert Lyons (1925-2008),  
who mined coal for scrip in Clay County, West Virginia,  
and taught me to play music



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION—

### RESOURCE EXTRACTION & APPALACHIAN MODERNISM

Why is it that Appalachia has been written out of the story of modernism? It is ironic, given the historical importance of Appalachian materials, energy, and labor to industrial modernization in the eastern United States, that Appalachia is perennially seen as premodern and that its art and thought have generally been downplayed in past and contemporary canons of both U.S. modernism and southern modernism. Of course ‘regionalism’ was an important (and critically contested) literary concept to modernists themselves—few terms were more divisive than ‘regional’ was for critics of the Thirties<sup>1</sup>—yet the idea of “Appalachia” did not figure into those debates. In modernist scholarship, increasing efforts have been made to study the territories of modernism.<sup>2</sup> Regional criticisms have mapped such spaces as the Harlem Renaissance, the

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<sup>1</sup> A major work of scholarship by Howard Odum and Harry Moore, *American Regionalism*, appeared in 1938. P. R. Beath published an attack on regionalism with “Regionalism Pro and Con: Four Fallacies of Regionalism,” in *The Saturday Review* 15.5 (1936). But many others, including Tremaine McDowell, Joseph E. Baker, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate, vigorously defended the literary movement. For some of the defenses of regionalism in the 1930s, see Donald Davidson, “Regionalism and Nationalism in American Literature” in *The American Review* 5.48 (1935) and *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (1938); Allen Tate, “Regionalism and Sectionalism” in *The New Republic* 69.158-161 (1931); Tremaine McDowell, “Regionalism in American Literature” in *Minnesota History* 20.2 (1939); and Robert Penn Warren, “Dont’s [sic] for Literary Regionalists” *The American Review* 5.61 (1936).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the critical efforts in this millennium to territorialize modernism include: Roberto M. Dainotto, *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (2000); Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (2003); Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2003); Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (2006); Chris Green, *The Social Life of Poetry: Appalachia, Race, and Radical Modernism* (2009); Neal Alexander and James Moran (eds.), *Regional Modernisms* (2013); Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (2013); Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora* (2013); Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (2015); David Wright, “Modernism And Region: Illinois Poetry And The Modern” in *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal Of Contemporary Thought* 39.2 (2014); Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (2015); Jim Cocola, *Places in the Making: A Cultural Geography of American Poetry* (2016); Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Writing and the Environment* (2016); David A. Davis, *World War I and Southern Modernism* (2018); Ilka Brasch and Ruth Mayer (eds.), *Modernities and Modernization in North America* (2018); and Jesse Matz, *Modernist Time Ecology* (2019).

Gothic South, and the Black Atlantic, and studied cities such as New York and Paris. In the American scene, the recent work of scholars like Leigh Anne Duck and David A. Davis has highlighted Southern modernism as a regional movement distinct from the ‘high’ modernism associated with Transatlantic cosmopolitan writers. This work helps to account for the different ways writers from cultural regions related to the opposing forces of tradition and progress. Yet in doing so it also enforces a bipartite view of American modernism (premised on the basic contrast between two parts: the urban, international modernism of northern cities on one hand, and the characteristically regionalist output of southerners on the other) that does not go far enough in acknowledging the plurality of American regional modernisms. While an important corrective to ungeographic conceptions of modernism, this bicameral model still ignores local variation and specificity by overemphasizing the Mason-Dixon line as *the* defining cultural boundary. But what about cultural boundaries shaped by older and less mutable bioregional features, such as altitude, waterways, and resource deposits? The South after all is comprised of culturally and topographically distinct zones including the Piedmont, the Gulf coast, the Ozarks, the mid-Atlantic, and southern Appalachia. Any singular concept of the South, in whatever form, is liable to ignore the important differences between these subregions.

In this bicameral model, there is a sense of the North’s modernism as a movement based in New York and Chicago and concerning life in an urban zone, and southern modernism as a geographically dispersed movement and concerning life in an (urbanizing) agrarian zone. Yet participating in another regional stream of modernism are Appalachian modernists, a third group, whose homeland was defined neither by urbanism nor agrarianism, but was developed along a third developmental path: extractivism. This extractive developmental model restructured state

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governments and laws regarding property ownership in order to directed investments and infrastructure in Appalachia toward a primary goal: to enlarge the region's capacity to produce wood, minerals, coal, petroleum, and natural gas.<sup>3</sup> Extractivism is thoroughly examined in works by Appalachians. This dissertation will focus on two of those works, arguing that they reveal another, as yet overlooked, stream of modernism in the 1930s and 1940s.

*Appalachian Moderns* is therefore a work of critical recovery. It aims to recover works which represent this Appalachian stream of modernism. Four modernist case studies will enable me to explain and counteract Appalachia's exclusion from the story of modernism and modernity. Two of these case studies center on works written by Appalachians on the frontlines of industrial resource extraction: *Gauley Mountain*, a 1939 poetry volume by the West Virginia poet Louise McNeill (1911-1993), and *Folk Songs of the Hills*, a 1947 country and western album by the Kentucky guitarist and folksinger Merle Travis (1917-1983). Although the retrospective and rural attitudes conveyed by these works might not initially suggest a modernist practice, *Gauley Mountain* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* pose significant questions about the

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<sup>3</sup> The history of extractivism in Appalachia is richly documented and is the subject of numerous scholarly works. See Wilma A Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (1996); Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (2008); William C. Blizzard, *When Miners March* (2010); Priscilla Long, *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal Industry* (1989); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *St. Clair: A Nineteenth-Century Coal Town's Experience with a Disaster-Prone Industry* (1981); Michael Shnayerson, *Coal River* (2008); Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (1962) and *My Land is Dying* (1971); J. Todd Nesbitt and Daniel Weiner, "Conflicting Environmental Imaginaries and the Politics of Nature in Central Appalachia" in *Geoforum* 32 (2001): 333-349. Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (1986); Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith (eds.), *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia* (2012); Michele Morrone and Geoffrey L. Buckley, *Mountains of Injustice: Social and Environmental Justice in Appalachia* (2011); Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia: 1880-1920* (1998); David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia* (1994); James C. Cobb and William Stueck (eds.), *Globalization and the American South* (2005); Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (1982) and *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (2013); Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (2001); Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (1994). For the best and most evocative books on extractivism in Appalachia, see Steven Stoll's regional history *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (2017) and Marilou Awiakta's book of Native Appalachian spiritualism, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* (1993).

nature of modernization and force audiences to confront the extent to which extractive processes underwrite modernity.

McNeill's poetry and Travis' songs suggest the existence of a mostly unacknowledged strain of modernism, emanating from Appalachia in the years immediately following the industrial 'scramble for Appalachia' (Stoll 129-32), a regionally distinct of modernist aesthetics which foregrounds attachment to local setting, modifies traditional poem or song forms, and fosters a critical regional consciousness by responding to the reckless extraction of resources. McNeill had grown up in the ruthlessly timbered Allegheny highlands, and she watched as a new industrial order displaced local lifeways. Travis, born six years later on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains, had grown up in coal camps but rejected the life of mining his father and brothers had chosen, to instead sing about coal mining to national audiences. Each of these figures, who witnessed a staggering degree of historical change, is committed to conventional forms in his or her respective genres, yet they also each modernize Appalachian traditions in ways consistent with contemporary scholarly models of "distal modernism," a movement of rural and regional writers (as opposed to proximal "modernism," a movement of urban and cosmopolitan writers) (Davis *World* 3-18). Despite this, McNeill and Travis—Appalachian artists who made modernist interventions into the form and content of poetry and music—have never been classed as modernists. Indeed, for the most part, *Gauley Mountain* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* have gone unnoticed by literary scholars.

To better understand why this is the case, I compare these two critically neglected figures with historical contemporaries who, at one point or another, *did* become established as canonically modernist figures. Travis I compare with the undisputed "master of modernism"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase is drawn from the title of Thomas David Brothers' biography, *Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism* (2014).

Louis Armstrong (1901-1971), a New Orleans musician sixteen years older than Travis but facing a similar turning point in the style of his performances. McNeill I compare with New York City poet Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), a lifelong traveler venerated in recent decades as a significant twentieth-century American writer. Referring to some of the institutions and standards of cultural interpretation these cultural producers came up against—such as literary histories and theories, anthologies, literary and musical criticism, reviews, and sales figures—this dissertation seeks to understand how region accounted in the processes by which cultural creators were canonized, remembered, and forgotten. Tracking these processes, *Appalachian Moderns* describes the geographic and regional indexing of cultural value in modernist studies. As I will show, uneven economic development positioned Appalachia within the cultural spheres of thirties poetry and forties music as a source not only of natural resources but of cultural resources as well.

These case study comparisons give the project its title and time frame—*Appalachian Moderns: Poetry and Music, 1936-1947*. In the spring of 1936 Rukeyser visits Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, to investigate the cause of silicosis there; in 1938 she publishes *U.S.I.*, containing the long poem sequence *The Book of the Dead*. In 1939, McNeill publishes *Gauley Mountain*. And in 1947, both Armstrong and Travis see the release of their back-to-their-roots commercial records. With three chapters devoted to each of these two lengthy comparisons, this dissertation takes its time in showing how subregions of the United States have played a quiet role in cultural interpretation. How and why do regional signifiers give meaning to texts? Though literary history tends to flatten geographic space, this project will seek to examine how cultural geography changes how texts are understood and evaluated. The following pages offer slices of cultural history which are not familiar in writings about modernism. The stories I will tell of

these four cultural producers, based in historical and critical research of varied sources, foreground their roles as geographic agents whose aesthetic and social ideas develop within a specific spatial history. My effort is to produce readings of these case studies which are alert to the circuits of energy and matter which connect people across geographic (and other) divides. As a result, the basic rhetorical motif of this project is the unexpected comparison. Bringing together these two poets and these two musicians, *Appalachian Moderns* compares historical figures never before brought together in published discussion—certainly not extensively. I nonetheless aim to highlight curious consistencies in their works. I trouble received ideas about the canonical figures Armstrong and Rukeyser, latching onto the surprising parallels of art and history, while recovering the significance of the lesser-known figures, Travis and McNeill. Such work reveals how valuable these ‘minor’ regional artists are.

While McNeill and Travis are the primary subjects of this critical recovery, Rukeyser and Armstrong are not treated as static objects, nor the interpretation of their work treated as settled matters. Taking a more dynamic approach, this project attempts to revise our received concepts of Rukeyser’s and Armstrong’s artistic projects (not in general, but during key points in their lives). Generally approached as international cosmopolitans, these two canonical figures are often celebrated within some abstract, ideal space of cultural achievement, as if they have broken free from geographic context to attain total aesthetic autonomy. Criticism too often flattens geographic space, and this tendency seems to be intensified when dealing with big, influential personalities such as Armstrong or Rukeyser. Furthermore, urban and international cultural products like theirs have appeared to be exempt from being classified or studied as localized phenomena. But there is significant room to recast these two figures as regionalists themselves. By providing geographic and energy-focused interpretations of Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*

(1938) and Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* (1947), the six chapters which follow reveal Rukeyser and Armstrong as proponents of regional tendencies, respectively, of New Orleans and New York City. Though Rukeyser bases *The Book of the Dead* in West Virginian events and sources, her project reflects rhetorical and compositional strategies developing in interwar New York. And though recognized as a significant musician of the Harlem Renaissance and a global exponent of Jazz Age America, Armstrong was leveraging a New Orleans style. In the end, these six chapters will work together to demonstrate that 'regional' and 'modernist' are not exclusive terms: the Appalachian artists turn out to be modernist, and the urban artists turn out to be regional.

The artists at the heart of this study, West Virginia poet Louise McNeill and Kentucky musician Merle Travis, are allied not only as central Appalachians, linked by the geographic and historical proximity of their births, but also are allied in their aesthetic commitments. They were both twenty-somethings who in the turbulent years of Depression and world war, entered cultural domains very different from their rural upbringings. Curiously, they modernize the regional folk practices they gleaned during their childhoods, and sometimes in decidedly explicit ways. Yet at the same time they indelibly imprint elements of these traditions into modernist culture, preserving them. They share too in offering a profoundly intimate critique of extractive modernity.

Therefore, though I aim in these pages to propose Louise McNeill and Merle Travis' status as modernist figures of historical note, I do not intend to suggest that this is the limit of their significance. On the contrary, locally oriented artists have something to offer those from other places, especially those whose connections to their own place are murky or absent. Implicit in this study of Appalachian regionalism has been the belief that, with their emphasis on roots,



the poems of *Gauley Mountain* and the songs of *Folk Songs of the Hills* resonate with the rooted and the rootless alike. If we today are willing to concede that, despite what makes us human beings valuable and unique on this planet, our collective actions have (to the detriment of our own and other life forms) left poisoned and depleted a good deal of it—and I believe we ought to be willing to do that—then these regional figures of the past shine a signal light in our contemporary moment. They are worthy of further historical and critical recovery, not in addition to, but precisely *because* of their works’ contemporary presence.

Interest in environmental criticism since 2010 has been very strong, with numerous subfields emerging all the time. Studies of literature and the environment have been steadily moving from ‘nature poetry’ to more productive approaches oriented around place, indigeneity, environmental justice, energy politics, and material or elemental criticism.<sup>5</sup> Joining this larger movement, *Appalachian Moderns* begins with the proposition that transfers of energy and materials define the relationships between cultural regions. Workers at the site of extraction often suffer and strive in ways that are invisible at the site of consumption. But both sites are linked by the material conduits between them, making these conduits an important site where the

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the major works of environmental criticism, which illustrate the growth of these scholarly trends since 2010, include: John Parham, *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (2010); Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner (eds.), *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (2011); Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (2012); Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (2013); Hsinya Huang, “Toward Transpacific Ecopoetics: Three Indigenous Texts” in *Comparative Literature Studies* 50.1 (2013); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014); Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014); Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (2015); Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land: Narratives of Dispossession and Resurgence* (2015); Jim Cocola, *Places in the Making: A Cultural Geography of American Poetry* (2016); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (eds.), *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (2017); Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (2017); Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: a Critical Introduction* (2017); Sylvan Goldberg, “Anthropocene Frontiers: The Place of Environment in Western Studies” in *Western American Literature* 53.1 (2018); Linda Ray Pratt, *Great Plains Literature* (2018); Isabel Sobral Campos, et al, *Ecopoetics and the Global Landscape* (2018); Jesse Matz, *Modernist Time Ecology* (2019); and Roman Bartosch, *Literature, Pedagogy, and Climate Change: Text Models for a Transcultural Ecology* (2019).

interrelations between different social and regional spheres can be glimpsed. Taking extractivism as a critical locus for textual study, this dissertation acknowledges those material conduits as forces underlying the social production of art. Indeed it accepts energy and resource extraction as issues not only pertinent to the study of modernism, but as issues without which we cannot achieve a material understanding of modern society. *Appalachian Moderns* employs a method of cultural poetics that is grounded in local environmental histories and acknowledges energy and material transfers between regions.

Resource extraction has been the *modus operandi* of Appalachian development, has determined its role in the world capitalist economy, and colors its reputation as a cultural region. Standard Appalachian histories show how, through many overlapping extractive operations, commercial actors recomposed the region's demography, ecology, and topography during the period between the American Civil War and World War II. After the Civil War, Appalachia became "the new energy frontier" (Stoll 129) for a rapidly expanding extractive economy based on coal, charcoal, and iron ore. When the extent of the region's coal was discovered by geological surveyors and speculators, railroads and commercial coal mining and logging began to penetrate the difficult mountain terrain. Everything changed with "the arrival of corporations with designs on the mineral underlying fields of rye and glades of glistening spring ramps" (Stoll 131-32). Since that time, Appalachian resources have been indispensable to U.S. industrial production:

Coal from Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia powered the American Industrial Revolution. Almost everything manufactured on the Atlantic seaboard after 1850—all the steel forged in Pittsburgh, all the cotton milled in North Carolina, all the steam-powered ships carrying all the guns and clocks made in New Haven—required the burning of coal. (Stoll 34)

And it does not begin or end with coal. Though commonly associated in the national culture with subsurface coal mining, Appalachia has been occupied by many different extractive regimes and been recognized by indigenous and settler groups alike as a rich source of many resources. Take timber alone. It might be easy to imagine that in the industrial era American industry moved away from wood use. But indeed the opposite was the case: industrial machines actually created an *increase* in demand for wood and charcoal, resources which required mass quantities of tree felling. Throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century, freight trains in the United States ran on wood steam. During this period, an average blast furnace in America “accounted for the destruction of about 250 acres of woodland every year and the Hopewell furnace in Pennsylvania was using up as much as 750 acres a year” (Ponting 277). But beyond timber, Appalachia has historically been exploited for salt; furs; gold; stone; fresh water; zinc; feldspar; timber, ginseng, mushrooms, and other forest products; freshwater mussels; petroleum; silica; and more. In processes carried out by diverse groups ranging from Iroquois fur traders to U.S. zinc smelting corporations, ever-changing machinery and an ever-expanding purview of operations have historically led to larger and larger extracted yields—but we have rarely thought about these histories together.

Acknowledging older extractive operations, in the colonial and early industrial eras, emphasizes these changes while also indicating the roots of Appalachian modernism. (One of *Gauley Mountain*’s distinctive features is that it does exactly this.) The present study adds to this historical narrative of resource extraction in Appalachia by explaining how such operations, and the modernized life they enabled, altered the horizon of possibilities for Appalachia’s artists and thinkers. In that sense *Appalachian Moderns* attempts to expand our sense of the many kinds of assets removed from the mountains.

In basing energy-focused criticism in regionalist close readings, this paper builds upon the recent effort of Matthew S. Henry to theorize “extractive fictions” in contemporary Appalachian novels and visual art. Henry looks at two northern Appalachian art initiatives and reads two recent novels, by Ann Pancake and Jennifer Haigh, about northern Appalachia’s coal and gas fields, locating in these works “historically situated aesthetics” which “problematize extraction as a cultural practice” (402). Along with much of the energy humanities, Henry’s study follows a seminal 1992 essay in *The New Republic* by Amitav Ghosh in the early 1990s on “petrofiction,” which called for a more concerted critical search for novels of the oil age.<sup>6</sup> But Henry’s precise regional emphasis (for that study, northern Appalachia) points toward the sort of project undertaken here. *Appalachian Moderns* also takes a cue from Stephanie LeMenager’s “commodity regionalism” approach to American studies, which enables her in *Living Oil* to work against the scholarly grain and pursue localized studies of petroculture, a phenomenon which has often been analyzed in transnational, not local, contexts. Yet regional narratives and critical methods, nearer to “the human scale” of expression than those of a national or transnational scale, mark a useful starting point for energy critics. This is because of the contradiction that, as LeMenager points out, the transnational frame “obscures the regional impacts of oil,” while, on the other hand, the transnational petroculture “tends to be most visible in regional sites” (12-13). Regional perspectives offer a different sort of clarity on abstract problems such as pollution, extinction, and resource depletion. With these assumptions, I pursue an understanding of “commodity regionalism” in Appalachian culture. Additionally, in choosing to examine works of poetry and music, I also aim to widen the purview of “extractive fictions” to include versed, musical, rhythmic forms of storytelling.

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<sup>6</sup> See Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction” in *The New Republic* 206.9 (1992).

Thus, as a work of environmental criticism generally focused on energy and extraction, *Appalachian Moderns* brings together the new modernist studies with the energy humanities,<sup>7</sup> two fields of inquiry that are only just now beginning to collaborate. Bringing these two fields of study into what I hope is a productive union, I join with others who are taking up the energy criticism pioneered by Patricia Yeager, Jennifer Wenzel, Matt Huber, Timothy Mitchell, Frederick Buell, Stephanie LeMenager, and Imre Szeman, such as Yvonne Reddick, who studies Nigerian literature on oil extraction, and Alexandra Campbell, who studies “extractive poetics” in Scottish literature.<sup>8</sup> Like these other works of scholarship, this dissertation applies the theoretical concerns and priorities of the energy humanities to regional criticism of modernist culture.

The new modernist studies, in the past few decades, has decentered prior nationalist approaches to defining modernism by theorizing how transnational and planetary concerns, as

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘energy humanities’ is being used to designate an emerging research area in the multidisciplinary field of environmental criticism. In this exciting and still-unfolding field of inquiry, scholars are working to understand the relations between energy systems, the planet, and human cultures. Some of the representative texts of this research area, following Amitav Ghosh’s call to action (“Petrofiction” in *The New Republic* 206.9 [1992]); include: Barri J. Gold, *ThermoPoetics* (2012); Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, “Oil Imag(e)Inaries: Critical Realism and the Oil Sands” in *Imaginations* 3.2 (2012); Imre Szeman “Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries” in *Journal of American Studies* 46.2 (2012); Castree, Noel, “Energy: Humanities Frame the Aims” in *Nature* 513.7516 (2014); Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014); Imre Szeman “Conclusion: On Energopolitics” in *Anthropological Quarterly* 87.2 (2014); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014); Graham Huggan and Helen Huggan, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015); Jon Gordon, *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions* (2016); Matthew Heinz, “Fueling the Transdisciplinary Imagination” in *Topia* 38 (2017); Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, *Energy Humanities: an Anthology* (2017); Sheena Wilson, et al, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (2017); Heidi C. M. Scott, *Fuel* (2018); Peter Stupples, *Art and Future* (2018); Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti, *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond* (2019); Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (2019); Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi, *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere* (2021); and Kent Linthicum, et al, “Defining Energy in Nineteenth-Century Native American Literature” in *Environmental Humanities* 13.2 (2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Imre Szeman, “On the Politics of Extraction.” *Cultural Studies* 31.2-3 (2017); Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, “What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?” in *Textual Practice* 35.3 (2021); Alexandra Campbell, “Extractive Poetics: Marine Energies in Scottish Literature” in *Humanities* 8.1 (2019); Yvonne Reddick, “Palm Oil and Crude Oil: Environmental Damage, Resource Conflict, and Literary Strategies in the Niger Delta” in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 26.3 (2019);

well as more local matters of identity and geography and class, informed the movements collectively termed ‘modernism.’ This dissertation draws inspiration from the new modernist studies and similarly attempts local readings of modernist texts. Practicing a cultural criticism on the level of the county, I explore artists from Muhlenberg County, Kentucky and Pocahontas County, West Virginia. These locations represent the specific physical world they had inhabited and relied upon for their own personal accounts of being in history, during and after the Depression years. Too often, regional writers have been assigned marginal status within modernist canons and scholarship. A major task remaining for modernist scholars—one that has been in progress for decades—is to acknowledge a wider set of forgotten minor regional artists, people who were less prone to adopt a deterritorialized, autonomous aesthetic practice.

By revealing the importance of regional voices, energy-focused inquiry in the humanities can help with projects seeking to recover ‘minor’ figures. Therefore, although it is a relatively new critical development, the energy humanities field offers varied and enticing applications in modernist literary history and literary form, applications that are mainly unexplored. Entering this mostly unexplored critical territory, *Appalachian Moderns* investigates modern cultural responses (in poetry and music during the period between 1936 and 1947) to the extractive model of development imposed on the Appalachian region during the preceding fifty years.

Though this dissertation focuses in large part on Appalachia, it hopes to contribute to regional criticism writ large. And as *Appalachian Moderns* demonstrates, regional criticism should not limit itself to conventionally ‘regional’ artists—the Catheres, Chopins, Twains, Zitkala-Sas, and Harper Lees. Rather regional critics ought to reconsider artists and thinkers normally approached in terms of ideas, nations, and movements—the Armstrongs, Coleridges, Plaths, Derridas and LeGuins—as themselves products of local, sometimes multiple bioregions.

And this kind of regional literary excavation, I believe, has great potential in all the cultural regions of the world. Such excavations continue to reveal immense, complex geographies and histories of human experience. Modernity takes distinct forms across space. In connection, it follows that no single modernism prevails. Modernisms contend. The regional histories, and the locally particular visions of reality their artists compose, by exposing the distinct forms modernity took in distinct regions, belie simplistic, unitarian stories of the modern world and how it came to be.

Literary scholars and critics (especially those whose work engages with the environmental humanities) must recover more minor artists and thinkers who have drifted toward the dusty fringes of cultural history. Such figures often incite us to rethink basic assumptions about our own relationship to our bioregion, municipality, or some topographical feature (like mountain or river). I am thinking here of artists who chronicled local life in Appalachia as it modernized: Rebecca Harding Davis, who novelized the lives of displaced Appalachians who became factory workers in *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861); Effie Waller Smith, who wrote piercing lyrics about backcountry Kentucky; Elizabeth Madox Roberts, who captured Kentucky farm life in *The Time of Man* (1926); Richard Realf, who wrote heroic verse about Pittsburgh laborers; W. E. Blackhurst, who chronicled the logging industry in West Virginia's Greenbrier River watershed; Hubert Skidmore, who depicted the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster in socialist realism; Haniel Long, who conceived a documentary epic, *Pittsburgh Memoranda* (1935) about Pittsburgh economics and politics; Thomas Bell, who wrote *Out of this Furnace* (1941) about steel mill life in Braddock, Pennsylvania; and Harriette Arnow, whose *The Dollmaker* (1954) depicts a family's migration from rural Kentucky to Detroit. These Appalachian writers

recognized that they lived in a place and time of historic transformation, and they sought to render the region's story in literary art.

Appalachia produced many thinkers and writers who are not always seen as Appalachian, such as Booker T. Washington, John Peale Bishop, Rebecca Harding Davis, Jesse Stuart, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., John Knowles, and Pearl S. Buck. Two of the most important schools of twentieth-century American poetry, the Fugitives in Tennessee and the Black Mountain poets in North Carolina, have their Appalachian status downplayed. Appalachian moderns also contributed to environmental thought. They did so in underacknowledged ways, or had their status as Appalachians obscured. Rachel Carson (b. 1907), Appalachian environmental thinker of McNeill's own generation, whose writings have figured prominently in the environmentalist movements and in environmental criticism, is one these. Ecological consciousness figures prominently in the work of indigenous Appalachian poets such as Ralph Salisbury (b. 1926), Marilou Awiakta (b. 1936); and Paula Nelson (b. 1968), poets such as Emma Bell Miles (b. 1879) who descended from enslaved Appalachians, and poets such as Jesse Stuart (b. 1906), James Still (b. 1906), and Byron Herbert Reece (b. 1917) who descended from Appalachian settlers. Poets like these—and the different forms of regional and ecological commitment that they enact—are worthy of critical study not only on an individual basis, but as a group too.

But apart from the critical intervention of recovering McNeill and Travis and modernists of note, how does this project contribute to the energy humanities field? The answer lies in its effort to elaborate non-reciprocal or extractive relationships between cultural regions of the United States. Specifically, I use my case studies to theorize resource extraction as both a *subject theme* in modernist cultural products (i.e., the content of songs and poems) and as a *mode of* modernist cultural production (i.e., the context of songs and poems). As a theme of cultural



production, resource extraction appears in shellac records and paper books when artists represent and analyze things like mining, logging, and drilling. As a mode of cultural production, resource extraction appears when artists follow the geographic conduits established by those extractive industries to accumulate and refine cultural materials for sale on the broader market.

This second idea—of an extractive mode of cultural production—is the more complicated idea, and since it is one of this project’s critical interventions, it is also a central part of my argument and a major theme in the following pages. Cultural extraction can be defined as a mode of cultural production based on the inter-regional consumption of the reportedly authentic cultural resources of socially peripheral areas. I argue that the inter-regional extraction of cultural resources is not an illicit conspiracy on the margins of public life but a mainstay aesthetic tendency common to broad segments of U.S. culture before, during, and after the 1930s—such as including literary regionalism and travel writing, magazines, social photography, muckraking journalism, motion pictures, and folklore and craft. Following the cultural circuitry traversed by works of regional art and craft, this project examines poems and songs as they are produced, presented, marketed, and received, revealing their status as regional commodities.

The extraction of culture is especially evident in regional relations that are lopsided and nonreciprocal, where the cultural forms of the social peripheries are obtained as assets to be processed within the dominant society’s imagination. Appalachia’s position in this cultural economy mirrors its role as a base of physical resources: just as it supplies energy, cheap labor, and resources for the demands of outside business and capital, Appalachia also supplies quilts, tales, novels, songs, and poems. The scramble for Appalachian resources that occurred between 1880 and 1930s—that is, the penetration of the region by timber and mineral speculators and extractive operators—increased public awareness of the region’s *cultural* resource deposits and

opened up new inroads for outside scrutiny by financial interests in industries like tourism and entertainment. Increased inter-regional contact, as a direct result of intensive resource extraction, laid the groundwork (literally, laid the logging and mining roads and railways) which provided improved transit opportunities for ballad hunters, folklorists, sociologists, and artists to gain entry into the mountain zone.

As a result the people of the Appalachian mountains supplied a major source of material for local color, travel, and sentimental literature, as well as a major source of music for the nascent 1920s commercial recording industry. To many the Appalachian represented something real in era of mass-produced artifice. The age saw a growing hatred of cheapness and sameness, a hatred modernists such as Ezra Pound crossly conveyed both in prose—

[peaceful communication is] a recognition of differences, of the right of differences to exist, of interest in finding things different. Kultur is an abomination; philology is an abomination, all repressive uniforming education is an evil. (298)

—and in verse:

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,  
Made with no loss of time,

[ . . . ]

But a tawdry cheapness  
Shall outlast our days. (62)

Pound’s complaints (the former made in an essay on Henry James and the latter made in the poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”) suggest the modern thirst for pluralism and authenticity which lay behind cultural extraction. If the “cheap” and “tawdry” flows from cores of mass manufacturing, then the voices of the peripheries might provide the tonic of hinterland culture. Similar notions of escaping from modern civilization had already been popularized by the

wilderness writings of American settler thinkers Thoreau, Muir, Roosevelt, and Frederick Jackson Turner.

Appalachian artistry and craft can at times appear as raw materials in this cultural metabolism. However, this is not an argument that casts the regional artist from Appalachia, or anywhere, as a passive victim. While the critical readings of McNeill and Travis in this project do point to a national audience hungry for images of a primitive past, and seeking these glimpses in Appalachia, they also clarify our view of these artists as creative agents resisting their cultural subordination as primitives by manipulating this cultural atmosphere in sophisticated and empowering ways. Further, the inhabitants of extractive regions like Appalachia have much to share with the broader world about resilience and survival in zones of industrial resource extraction. An abundance of critical work remains to be done evaluating the symbolic narratives that Appalachians like McNeill and Travis provide in response, or as a solution, to pressing societal questions about the overuse of resources and the domination of the inhabitants of extractive zones.

The moral hazard posed by the exploitation of Appalachian cultural resources is explored in both units of this dissertation. It is raised by Louise McNeill when she autobiographically recounts the way Ms. Virginia, a travel writer from outside Appalachia, exploited McNeill's small rural community when she was a young girl. That episode is detailed in Chapter IV. It is a moral hazard raised explicitly by James Agee at the beginning of his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), as detailed in Chapter III. In *The Book of the Dead* Muriel Rukeyser raises this moral hazard, implying the possibility that traveling to Appalachia and writing about the suffering one finds there is a form of abuse. Taking her to task, Chapters II-IV focus on what most scholars of Rukeyser's poetry have tended to ignore: the poet's own close personal

proximity to resource extraction. Then, the second unit shows how the 1940s urban mainstream's desire to extract cultural resources from its peripheral subregions (in the form of race records, hillbilly records, folk crafts, and folk ballads) shapes the production, form, and reception of commercial sound recordings by Merle Travis and by Louis Armstrong's jazz band. Chapters V-VII demonstrate the extent to which Armstrong and Travis, in 1947, played up their regional backgrounds, transforming them into authorial assets, and leveraged what people saw as their cultural authenticity in considerable ways for their recording genres.

In its broad significance, then, *Appalachian Moderns* works to widen our appreciation of American modernism's historical dynamics and specific geographies. By highlighting Appalachia's contributions to modernity (as a source of physical resources and a source of environmental and social thinkers) and to modernism (as a creative cultural region), I am trying to do more than just foster appreciation for little-studied Appalachian artists. Going further, I suggest how Appalachian modernism, a regional movement symptomatic of the specific way Appalachia was modernized, actually works as a useful counterweight to the dislocated, cosmopolitan form of modernism we are already familiar with. Appalachian modernism has much to teach us in the twenty-first century about issues of ecology and society. Elaborating aesthetic responses to the dislocations caused by resource extraction, McNeill and Travis—only two of many Appalachian artists of the period—offer philosophical and aesthetic correctives to some of cosmopolitan modernism's limitations. The comparative study of poetry and of music can illustrate how different regional societies responded and adapted to modernity. Confining our concept of the modernist movement to transnational, urban, and cosmopolitan artists is a problem because, although such artists have been more legible as 'modernist' than rural, regional artists, the latter group *also* has something important say about modernization and modernity.

Appalachia, like other regions—Sudan, Brazil, Alberta, Iraq, and Papua New Guinea—continues to be changed by resource extraction operations. Such regions invite us to ask: should we sacrifice small places, and even the people in them, for the sake of global business endeavors? Community based art, of the sort Louise McNeill and Merle Travis create, is still needed in Appalachian counties facing the long-term effects of mountain-top removal mining and hydraulic fracture drilling operations. Locally grounded songs and poems, written today, can relay the particulars of time and place, and in so doing, make it possible that future generations will see what people were thinking, feeling, and doing in response to the extractive operations that, in all likelihood, will be launched or expanded in the coming decades.

### **Overview of Chapters**

The chapters in this dissertation work symmetrically, interlocking to form a schematic whole. Internally, however, the chapters are somewhat more free form, organized around the narratives of history and biography for each artist, or the particular contours of text and context for each artwork. A unit of three chapters is dedicated to each comparison. The first unit deals with poetry, comparing Louise McNeill and her *Gauley Mountain* with Muriel Rukeyser and her *The Book of the Dead*. The second deals with music, comparing Merle Travis and his *Folk Songs of the Hills* with Louis Armstrong and his *Town Hall Concert*. Each unit asks the same research question: why has Appalachia been written out of the story of modernism? In order to answer this question, each unit moves through the life story and specific context of two artists during the historical moment in question, considering their place in contemporary canons of modernism, before close reading the work they produced during that moment. By the end of each unit, the

reader will have an enriched view of American modernism's historical and geographic dynamics, and an appreciation for the place of Appalachian modernism within this story.

The first chapter of each unit (Chapter II and Chapter V) examines the problem of modernist canonization posed by comparing the biography and critical legacies of the poets or musicians in question. The second chapter of each unit (Chapter III and Chapter VI) shows the role that these works of regionally affiliated poetry and music played in their own contemporary moment, demonstrating how extractivism adheres to each text either as a subject theme or a mode of cultural production. The final chapter of each unit (Chapter IV and Chapter VII) approaches these texts from a twenty-first-century standpoint, first to compare how their technical and formal aspects constitute a regional form of modernism, and second to evaluate the imaginative value of regional thinking, including in Appalachian modernism, for readers today.

UNIT I:  
POETRY, 1936-1939

## CHAPTER II

### CASE STUDY: MCNEILL AND RUKEYSER—LEGACY

Located in southeast West Virginia, on the Virginia border, Pocahontas County lies within the sharply ridged Allegheny Highlands, a land of steep gorges and treed heights. The forested hollows and small towns of Pocahontas are geographically cut off from the Shenandoah and Potomac regions to the east and tower above the high Allegheny Plateau to the west. Among the more mountainous areas of Appalachia (Gauley Mountain—one of several so named in West Virginia—dominates a large portion of Pocahontas), it remains today the most sparsely populated of all the state’s counties. Swift mountain watersheds cross the area: the Greenbrier, Gauley, and Elk Rivers. The area’s cool alpine air has been prized since the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Caves, pure springs and falling waters, farms, rocky hills and hollows, and forests of soft and hard woods dapple the local terrain. This steep country contains no coal<sup>10</sup> but massive amounts of mineral and timber deposits. Growing and seeding on high slopes and promontories, this timber was mainly inaccessible until large-scale industrial tree cutting came to the region. When the logging companies arrived *en masse* in the 1880s, a brutal period of clear-cutting leveled the hills, leaving bare vast areas of the Allegheny Highlands including Pocahontas. Many

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<sup>9</sup> White Sulphur Springs, nearby to the south, the South’s “Queen of the Watering Places,” for centuries now has been a tourist destination for mid-Atlantic elites in the hot months.

<sup>10</sup> Note that West Virginia’s famous and extremely productive Pocahontas No. 3 coal seam is not in Pocahontas County, but is further to the southwest, occupying approximately nine-hundred square miles in Mercer, Wyoming, and McDowell counties. Those areas of West Virginia are steeply hilled as well, so it was not until March 1883—very late in the history of American railway development—that railroad locomotives could get the coal out of this expansive bituminous coal deposit. Pocahontas County, on the other hand, is non-coal land. The region once lay beneath a shallow sea. In McNeill’s words, Pocahontas is a land of “coral rock and white limestone rock [and] underground streams sucking in the dark”; splendidly layered, it was continuously formed and reformed by “oceans weaving and receiving as they laid the pink coral down” (McNeill, *Milk-Weed Ladies* 5). Giant deposits of bituminous coal do exist in central Appalachia, but they exist in lands covered not by ancient seas but by ancient swamps and forests.



of the highland and valley farms in this countryside were hard hit by the many changes brought by timber extraction.

Love for this regional landscape pervades all the writings of Louise McNeill Pease, known best by her penname Louise McNeill.<sup>11</sup> Born in the unincorporated town of Buckeye, West Virginia, on the farm her ancestors settled in 1769, McNeill lived a backcountry peasant's life based on agriculture and foraging until young adulthood. Makeshift subsistence rather than wage work ordered her daily life. As she writes in her memoir,

Until I was sixteen years old, until the roads came, the farm was about all I knew: our green meadows and hilly pastures, our storied old men, the great rolling seasons of moon and sunlight, our limestone cliffs and trickling springs. (*ML* 5)

As a young person in this sheer and beautiful land, McNeill drudged. For the most part, during her childhood, she and her family grew and foraged their own food and medicine along Swago Creek. While the young Muriel Rukeyser lived with servants and received a private education, McNeill lived without comforts like electric power, sewage, and running water. Yet she gained from this upbringing much of the knowledge that would later inform her life's work—awareness of local botany and plant usage; “the lore of the fields and woodlands” (*ML* 86); a vivid canon of family legend populated with “storied old men”; a panoply of regional history; and perhaps most importantly, a gift for storytelling.

Family legends rather than formal education shaped McNeill's early worldview.

Throughout her autobiography McNeill recalls “stories that became legends told up and down Swago Crick” as essential parts of her own self-identity:

It seems the Swago Farm has always been there for me, and fragments of the stories drifting across my mind. How the stories first came I cannot answer, for they came in bits and pieces. But I know that I was always there in my small place in the circle and always listening, the scraps and fragments sinking down into my child-mind. (*ML* 15; 9)

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<sup>11</sup> This project will refer to the author using her lifelong penname, Louise McNeill.

“Some of our tales were old and old,” McNeill writes (*ML* 6). Of these were many war stories<sup>12</sup>, yet many others concerned the changes her family had seen in the lands of Pocahontas County. As a girl McNeill heard of the great flocks of wild passenger pigeons “with their wings blotting out the sun,” since driven to extinction by hunting and deforestation (*ML* 13). Through constant talk, family elders preserved memories of their evolving farm. They chronicle changes in the land, how pastures had turned to brush, or how buildings and fences decayed. “[G]athering in from their cricks and hollows” for family reunions, they traded word of “crops and weather and what the dead had once said and done” (*ML* 55). They memorialized their extended family’s oak woodland, sold off during the late-nineteenth-century timber boom to save the farm. Although she had never seen it in person, and with her own eyes could only see “the bleeding skid roads, the tangles of dying slash” left behind by the loggers, McNeill’s family communicated the hurt of this woodland’s cutting (*ML* 14). Living a rural life relatively isolated from national culture, McNeill absorbed a storytelling ethic that permeated her familial and communal life. Storytelling—at times story-singing—was her family tradition.

In this her kin were skilled. During a phone interview, an acquaintance of the poet named Gibbs Kinderman told me that McNeill grew up in “a family of famous storytellers.” While held in a Union prison in Connecticut, her Confederate grandfather, a soldier and poet, had spent the long hours in imprisonment composing a long poem called “Virginia Land” in a small leather notebook.<sup>13</sup> Captain Jim carried the book back to the McNeill farm on foot when released from

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<sup>12</sup> In Dunmore’s War, McNeill’s Uncle Bill fought against the Ohio Shawnee under Cornstalk at Point Pleasant; in the American Revolution, her Grandpa Tom had fought under George Rogers Clark; her Uncle John fought in the War of 1812; in the American Civil War, her grandfather Captain Jim had fought for the Confederacy while his brother fought for the Union; her cousins fought in ‘the Great War’ (WWI).

<sup>13</sup> See Louise McNeill, *Milk-Weed Ladies* (11). I have been fortunate enough to handle and read this flaking leather notebook, with its wispy-handed poems, now held by West Virginia University in their extensive McNeill collection.

captivity in 1865, where he raised his son G.D. McNeill—Louise’s father—to know his letters “and speak orations” (*ML* 11). Though during his life he also farmed, taught school, worked as a timber lawyer, and served in the U.S. Navy, Captain Jim’s son became, as his father had wished, a man of letters. Leaving the family farm at sixteen years of age, G.D. bummed freight trains to Texas and the Oklahoma Indian Territory, where he made money as a traveling orator, self-styled as “The Boy Orator of the Allegheny.” Eventually he printed himself some handbills and for a time made a living circuiting these southwest territories “spouting orations and charging fifty cents a head” (*ML* 12). After his U.S. Navy service, G.D. went on another speaking tour, this time in West Virginia, printing new handbills and relating his travels with Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet around the world. G.D. instilled in his children the value of education, remarking that it was “the only thing ‘they’ couldn’t take away” (*ML* 39), and often bought new books. McNeill recalls how G.D. would busy himself writing short stories and his book on civics beneath the leaking dining room roof. With the rain pounding above, “[h]e would sit unperturbed, writing up an analysis of the Constitution, as the rain water came pouring down” into the room (*ML* 34). Eventually G.D. published a collection of historical short stories about the disappearing West Virginia wilderness titled *The Last Forest: Tales of the Allegheny Woods* (1940).

McNeill also writes evocatively of her Aunt Malindy, a formative figure of her childhood, and reserves a special respect for her as “our Seeress, the Priestess of the Swago.” A keeper of rural lore, tales, and superstitions, Malindy was a caretaker of the young children and a woman “full of signs and portents” (*ML* 81). Circulating folk tales and sayings among the family, she did little manual work but preserved rural knowledge: “lore of the fields and woodlands,” techniques of divination by reading snake movements, panther stories, taboos and

omens, health remedies, “old songs and ballads,” the changes of wildflowers and the seasons, and how to interpret the ways of comets, bees, rabbits, skunks, worms, and owls (*ML* 84-6).

Malindy was a special force in McNeill’s young life; “[s]he made the prophecies, the telling of daisies and the writhing of mystic serpents” (*ML* 81).

Thus McNeill was well-acquainted from a young age with the rituals and technologies of memory, both in the voice and on the page. Before she started school, young Louise was busily reading books from the family shelf. She read histories and best-sellers, encyclopedias and anthologies, novels and poetry. The Emerson and Kant volumes were no favorites, but McNeill writes fondly about reading the history of the Cumberland, the epics of Homer, the historical romance *Lorna Doone* by Blackmore, and works by Dickens, Hawthorne, Hugo, and Hardy. At rural school McNeill learned Greek myths, American history, and read the Bible and Longfellow. And each summer she looked forward to the annual Chautauqua, “when ‘culture’ came to rural America in a tent” (*ML* 33). Around 1927 McNeill wrote her first poem using a borrowed typewriter. She was sixteen and had started her first year of college. When she finished, “something happened” in her mind that convinced her to pursue poetry for a lifetime: “I had felt such joy,” she writes, “[ . . . ] in the rhythms of the lines” (*ML* 106). She memorized all of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* (translated by FitzGerald in 1858) and vowed to become a poet.

McNeill’s early life story reveals an agrarian poet not terribly invested in the critical and theoretical debates about literature in the twenties and thirties, yet one who had her own reading tastes and a clear sense of writerly direction. For instance, William Carlos Williams’ 1920s verse, especially *Spring & All*, showed convincingly that a viable twentieth-century poetic language could be built upon customary speech rhythms, but there is no evidence McNeill read Williams or took any influence from his writing. McNeill’s story strains against the boundaries

of the version of American literary modernism many have come to know. Notions of modernism as something occurring in the force or influence of remote geniuses, notions explored most famously by two critics, T. S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, fail to account for the type of expertise and inspiration conveyed by McNeill's collected works. Diverging from the received model of the 'modernist poet'—cosmopolitan, learned, autonomous, keen to the universal—McNeill on the contrary writes as one embedded within a small family-and-neighbor network in Pocahontas County. McNeill remains recognizable as a modernist author insofar as she became a witness to the modernization project which swept through Appalachia and committed the bulk of her writings to documenting the historical changes that project wrought in specific people and places.

During the early years of the Great Depression, a series of economic and ecological changes transformed McNeill's relationship to the Swago farm and the surrounding world. There was the American Chestnut Tree blight—a major topic of discussion amongst foresters of the early century ("The American Chestnut Tree" 957-60)—which brought "a gray quiet death" to the hills and devastated the chestnut orchard that was their community's "neighborhood nutting ground" (*ML* 103). As a result of the blight, the farm's dead chestnut orchard was sold away and logged. "All across the mountain," McNeill chronicles, "gray ghosts of the chestnut trees stood" dead (*ML* 104). Then McNeill watched the coming of hard roads and automobiles to the Greenbrier and Gauley districts. The backwoods schools and houses began to be abandoned. Because the family's used Model-T could not cross the muddy slopes of the old farm, the McNeills reluctantly left their old 1759 farmhouse and, like most of their upland neighbors, moved down near the new road. The very day they moved houses, Granny Fanny died. A profound sense of dislocation began to dominate the young woman's life, as she explains:

It was almost as though Granny Fanny had jerked her thorn broom handle out of the world's axis and the whole contraption began to rattle and whirl. We three older kids began going off to college, and I began to publish poems and went dancing with Louis Untermeyer. (*ML* 105).

Local stores were failing in the depressed Pocahontas County economy, and the unemployed walked town to town on the new roads. Anyone with a new job was likely to need to pack up and leave. "Back in the hills, the old houses and schoolhouses rotted down." (*ML* 104).

Industrialization had strangely blurred the core and the periphery. Interregional contact with people from outside the Allegheny Highlands, many part of the resource development industries, brought about further changes in McNeill's life.

In these precarious Depression years, writing provided both a solace and an income to McNeill. Concurrent with these disturbances in life, she began "to send poems out, copying them crookedly on G.D.'s typewriter" (*ML* 110). In 1930, while Rukeyser was enrolled at Columbia University, McNeill was on the family farm, writing in the farmhouse or the woodlands and publishing lyrics for a small cash income. She taught in brush country one-room rural schoolhouses that year, "just before the yellow school buses started running," she notes, walking three-and-a-half miles each way to work to pay for her own tuition (*ML* 106). When she won a poetry prize at *Kaleidoscope* magazine based in Dallas, Texas, she published one hundred copies of her juvenilia volume, *Mountain White* (1931). Her lyrics appeared in *Stardust*, the *Columbus Dispatch*, *Social Science*, and *Saturday Evening Post* sometimes for five dollars per line. Once "a check came from *Forum* magazine up in New York" and she was energized enough to keep sending poems to New York (*ML* 111). By 1936 she had graduated college and was publishing poems in *American Mercury*, a periodical edited by Louis Untermeyer.

McNeill taught and wrote and studied throughout the hard times of the thirties, living on the farm her ancestors, in McNeill's word, "took" (*ML* 10). She conceived an idea for a Master's

degree thesis: a cycle of historical poems integrating her local knowledge of the lore and geography of Pocahontas and telling of that land's transformations—most potently those of industrial logging during what historians call “the scramble for Appalachia.” Like the Nashville-based poets who during the previous decade were publishing in *The Fugitive*, McNeill struggled with the understanding that she stood outside mainstream American society. Yet where a learned, aesthetic classicism guided Tate, Davidson, Ransom, and Penn Warren, McNeill embarked on a rather different kind of literary project—a site-specific one.

In the chill autumn and winter of 1937, McNeill invented the verse history of a fictional land called Gauley while sitting in the un-electrified farmhouse her family had been built beside the new road. McNeill describes *Gauley Mountain's* composition process in a 1990 interview for West Virginia Public Radio:

I taught in the home school on Swago and wrote nights and weekends. At night I wrote by the light of an oil lamp in a cold room. I would carry wood in and start my fire in the early evening, but as the fire went out, the room became colder and colder. I lay in bed, wore my brother Jim's old bathrobe, and used as my desk a Sears-Roebuck's catalog on my knee. (McNeill & Groce)

So different from Rukeyser's upbringing—complete with chauffeurs and servants—here can be seen a process of composition amid rural poverty. Echoing this context, *Gauley Mountain* forwards careful attention to history's supposedly minor figures and social classes, the ordinary men and women—homemakers, farmers, warriors, preachers, free and enslaved workers, and healers—throughout West Virginia's history since the eighteenth century. *Gauley Mountain* never strays from its fictional version of the Allegheny Highlands. This sense of localism is the defining feature of *Gauley Mountain* itself. Like the titular mountain, overt and immovable, the book aims to linger in place as centuries pass.

McNeill, as this unit will argue, wrote as one who felt responsible for understanding the histories behind her home and habitation, as one engaged in a visionary task of narrative reconstruction. Whereas the more conventionally modernist Rukeyser traveled to and wrote about distant locales of interest to her (during these same years Rukeyser traveled to Alabama and Barcelona, Spain as a professional journalist covering the infamous Scottsboro case and the antifascist Olympics), McNeill's early work focused on and largely drew inspiration from her home region. Great depths appeared to her on the hilltop farm. All things resonated with the past. In McNeill's mind were "the dead who had once walked the path we walked ourselves back across the meadows [ . . . ] it seemed to me that I could feel their empty tracks beneath my own" (*ML* 56). McNeill's capacity for reading the past within landscapes, for feeling the "empty tracks beneath [one's] own," hints at her keen perception of processes of modernization and its spiritual and material side effects. Describing those modernizing processes using the rhetoric of rupture—that is, dramatizing social, economic, biophysical ruptures in verse, as will be shown—McNeill distinguishes herself as a regionally conscious thinker and an exponent of environmental consciousness.

As a practitioner of local knowledge and narrative, McNeill achieved brief national acclaim. In 1938 she won the *Atlantic* Monthly Poetry Prize (*ML* 113) and began to publish poetry regularly in *The Atlantic*. Following these successes, she traveled to New England and studied with Robert Frost at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. McNeill was granted a fellowship at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop that fall, where she met Archibald MacLeish, who took the *Gauley Mountain* manuscript to New York, where in 1939 it was published by Harcourt Brace. *Gauley Mountain* apparently possessed, according to initial reviewers, "straightforwardness," "vigor," and "a strength and ruggedness which must emanate



from Gauley Mountain itself and from [McNeill's] ancestors who settled there" (McNeill *HD* xvii). Literary critic Alfred Kreymborg praised *Gauley Mountain* as "a robust book, incisive and firmly modelled"; although written by "an unknown," he viewed the book as evidence of "the fighting spirit of poetry" in a world again facing global war (596). "[T]here is a new poet in the land," wrote Stephen Vincent Benet<sup>14</sup> in his foreword to *Gauley Mountain*'s first edition. Of her colorful characters, the poet and critic said "[t]hey are West Virginians and this is a West Virginia book. But it is their sort of legend that has made the American idea" (xiii). While conceding that "[t]here are darns here and there in her tapestry," whatever indeed that meant, Benet's enthusiasm for the book was full-bodied.

Yet over the years McNeill's was not the same sort of acclaim garnered by poets like Auden, de la Mare, and Yeats, beside whose poems her own were published in outlets such as *Poetry*, *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Commonweal*, and *American Mercury* (Stringer 4). Instead, McNeill achieved a more modest and short-lived response, a common experience for women writers. Some reviews praised her accomplishment while at the same time marginalizing her work as lively but niche curiosities. Kreymborg's review, while extolling *Gauley Mountain*'s

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Vincent Benet, the curious historical link between McNeill and Rukeyser, was a benefactor for both of these young poets, choosing Rukeyser's first volume *Theory of Flight* for the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1935 and writing a glowing preface to *Gauley Mountain* in 1939. Their relationship is suggestive of the sex hierarchy in literary culture of the 1930s, in which young women poets were at times reliant on these sort of established male patrons to sanction and promote their works. But their sharing Benet's blessing also points to the parallels between Rukeyser's and McNeill's works. As a devoted student of American history, Benet was most recognized for his short story fantasy of the nineteenth century "The Devil and Daniel Webster" (1936) and a pair of long narrative poems *John Brown's Body* (1928), an epic of the Civil War, and *Western Star* (1943), his unfinished long poem on the settling of the United States. The prominence of American public history as subject themes in the early writings of both Rukeyser and McNeill—in particular their interest in elaborating on the life and times of everyday people within history—remains a crucial overlap in the work of all three writers. With Rukeyser, Benet shared an affinity for travel and its discoveries (he wrote *John Brown's Body* while in Paris) and he unreservedly praised, on the other hand, McNeill's singular closeness to the land and the "romantic touch" with which she wrote about the lands around Gauley Mountain (Benet xiii). Finally, as a Pennsylvanian poet, Benet also serves as a sort of geographical meeting-point for the New York- and West Virginia-based regionalism this study pinpoints in Rukeyser's and McNeill's writings.

directness and strength of voice and perspective, minimized its originality by declaring it “Spoon River at home in West Virginia” (596). Other critics too believed they saw the shadow of Edgar Lee Masters’ 1915 bestseller looming over *Gauley Mountain*. A review in the Spring 1940 issue of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* deemed the book “a more lyrical, a less sharp and original ‘Spoon River Anthology’” (“A Briefer Comment” xx). Likely Masters’ free verse approach has connoted an aura of originality that McNeill’s lenient but overall faithful applications of rhyme and meter have not. Masters’ regional poems were likely more recognizable to midcentury critics as “modernist” achievements, with their textual experimentation in line length and verse form. Indeed, it would not be long until, McNeill would be castigated for writing “only a literary bucolic” (Rosenberger 691) with her *Time is Our House* (1942). On the other hand, *Gauley* takes a less ironic approach to literary form than *Spoon River Anthology*. Masters’ flirtation with epic in his fragment “Spooniad” is a playful, parodic exercise, while conversely the earnest commitment to traditional form in *Gauley Mountain*, in combination with its more pastoral imagery, has struck a comparatively ‘premodern’ chord.

Yet two things McNeill’s contemporaries did not appear to notice, which differentiated *Gauley Mountain* from *Spoon River Anthology*, are its distinct environmental focus and sprawling historical undertaking. In this regard (unlike *Spoon River*) *Gauley* diverges from a standard feature of American literary regionalism: temporal stasis—a sense of occurring in a single point in time. While sharing *Spoon River*’s focus on localism, character, and anecdote, *Gauley* is a much more ambitious and visionary work. Like Masters’ personal histories, McNeill’s personal histories convey the reader through a menagerie of character portraits using a variety of narrators. But unlike Masters, McNeill writes in both first-person and third-person perspectives, and her history is larger, tending to be more public and less private. Because

McNeill peers into the nonhuman world, *Gauley Mountain* is a more ecologically conscious text than *Spoon River Anthology*, which is rather a psychologizing social drama. McNeill's ambition exceeds Masters'. Natural and cultural history spans the farmlands, rocky woods, deep caves, and towns as they evolve from the eighteenth century into a new, bewildering industrial society. This scale is striking, given the book's brevity. McNeill doggedly chronicles the roots of modern life in Appalachia by stitching pieces together in a continuous drama that stretches from the foundational struggles of settlement to the advent of the modern era, thereby surpassing in scope *Spoon River's* snapshot of rural Illinois life. These factors indicate that *Gauley* is not quite the derivative work that initial reviewers claimed it was.

But McNeill's own modernist project of fictionalizing West Virginia's environmental history has not appealed much to the values or expectations of the midcentury American literary establishment. In the initial reviews of *Gauley Mountain*, praise is ensconced at times in the primitivist discourses which were in vogue during the 'high' and even 'late' modernist periods. In the June 1940, *The English Journal* included this brief snippet among their book reviews:

*Gauley Mountain*. By Louise McNeill. Harcourt. \$2.00.

The young author's family has lived in West Virginia for generations. She writes in verse, with compelling sincerity, of these people whom she loves and understands. ("In Brief Review" 519)

Critical writeups fossilize the perceptions and habits of the professionals who inhabited literary institutions of the past, suggesting in the present-day what has mattered and has not mattered to previous literary intelligentsias. Copied here in its entirety, this book review emphasizes authenticity as *Gauley Mountain's* primary strength. *The English Journal's* basis for this positive critical judgment lies in the unspoken belief in a true bond between regionalism and authenticity. As this review's first sentence suggests, McNeill's deeply ingrained sense of localism was an operative factor in the minds of professional readers as they approached *Gauley Mountain*. But it

was not a localism that reviewers located specifically within the text. McNeill's localism is detected not as a quality of her art, but as a quality of her life. And, by this review's logic, if McNeill's poems exhibit a "compelling sincerity" that is free of pretense or artifice, it has everything to do with the author's generational attachment to her homeland. She "loves and understands" West Virginia.

Hence authenticity is critically attributed to the author's biography and background. Here the author's West Virginian localism becomes a literary asset, but one which carries a certain cost to her reputation: the minimization of McNeill's aesthetic accomplishment as a mere result of her honest transmitting of the people and place "she loves and understands." What does not figure into this evaluation are McNeill's musicality or visionary inventiveness. Interestingly, *The English Journal's* report (in the same issue) on another work of regionalism—

*Vermont Valley*. By Walter Hard. Harcourt. \$2.50.

In this companion volume to *A Mountain Township*, the episodes of village life are skillfully and shrewdly related in free verse.

—is free of these mildly primitivistic overtones.

As unlucky as it was to come of age, not only very poor, but very poor *within* a resource extraction zone during the Great Depression, McNeill had the good fortune of writing in a broader cultural moment during which regional American writers garnered commercial and critical success. Plights like the McNeill's as they faced the collapse of their rural livelihood were the subject of much serious discussion and art during the thirties. In the United States, with the institutional support provided by New Deal agencies like the Farm Security Administration and the Works Progress Administration, sociologists and artists embarked on diverse projects committed to chronicling the diverse social conditions Americans faced. As has been well documented, photography depicting local life in America was another cultural form through

which 1930s society essayed the nation's geographic plurality and enjoyed an aesthetic release from modern American standardization. In the South worked Marion Post Wolcott, Walker Evans, Carl Mydans, and Eudora Welty (who not only photographed but wrote fiction about southern life); in the West worked Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and Arthur Rothstein. Paintings in the Regional art tradition by Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stuart Curry appeal to the same environmental fears and social desires raised in photography and literature.

Meanwhile creative writers of the Thirties increasingly focused on underexamined subjects, seeking to represent an *authentic* view of the nation often by adopting proletarian and regional subjects. Suddenly writers everywhere seemed to be writing about subjects familiar to them. McNeill joined a broad literary cohort dedicated to chronicling local life everywhere, and in diverse forms (Stott; Rabinowitz). In the same years McNeill appeared as a poet, new literary regionalists as different as John Joseph Matthews (who chronicled Osage Oklahoma), Allen Tate (who railed for an aesthetically classical agrarian South), and Mary Hunter Austin (who for decades wrote about and photographed the indigenous American Southwest), gained in popularity. To varying degrees they, and others in the culture industry such as social writers and journalists, performed the kind of services once performed by nineteenth-century writers Sarah Orne Jewett, Hamlin Garland, and Charles Chesnutt. Simultaneously, earlier works of 1910s and 1920s regionalism by the likes of Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters gained renewed popularity among wider audiences in the interwar period. For a time, *they* were among the most prominent 'modern' writers of America.

Immersed in popular works of place literature, global readerships imaginatively inhabited many American locales: the Harlem of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Langston Hughes'

Depression-era work; the Mississippi of William Faulkner's post-1929 novels; the Oglala Lakota country of Robert Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932); the New York Lower East Side of Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934); the Oklahoma of John Joseph Matthews' *Sundown* (1934) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); the deep South of Zora Neale Hurston's *Of Mules and Men* (1935); the Georgia of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936); the collected cities and provinces of Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes* (1936); the New Hampshire of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938); the Chicago South Side of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)—not to mention places abroad, like the rural China of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), the Burma of George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), and the Paris of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), or invented places like the fantasy regions of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937).

Remarking on the cresting interest in geographical pluralism in American letters, Tremaine McDowell's 1939 article in *Minnesota History*, "Regionalism in American Literature," examined the regional movement's value as providing an important counterweight to the international tendencies of American literature as represented by Henry James, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, "and various tourists and expatriates" (107). McDowell complained that bicontinental literary elitism, represented by these tourist and expatriate writers and their cosmopolitan (felt as vaguely European) projects of modernism, placed too much value in pretentious art conceits and so ignored works written in smaller settings or with more particularly American concerns:

To study American society as a segment of world civilization is truly illuminating; but it is a task for which few authors have either the necessary endowments or the needed experience. Such a treatment, furthermore, leaves many elements of American character and experience untouched. (McDowell 107)

To McDowell, regionalists of the day were wisely and justly accepting "a more limited point of view" and in doing so were not only providing needed viewpoints but nobly resisting the tyranny

of what he referred to as “the Manhattan manner” (108, 110).<sup>15</sup> By the late 1930s, academic scholarship abounded on literary regionalism.<sup>16</sup> “[T]o know America,” in McDowell’s words, “we now turn to authors in all the states” (110).

Of course the heyday of regionalism soon passed. McNeill had arrived late to the party. A taste for armchair tourism among the reading public had flourished in the 1930s but dissipated within the nationalist atmosphere which waxed during and after the second world war. While artists like McNeill, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Gordon Parks maintained the regional tradition well into the 1940s, many popular regionalists disappeared from mainstream literary history. Regionalism was temporarily minimized in the academic study of literature, though it continued to thrive in wartime and postwar popular media, in escapist rural fantasies by Hollywood: *Lassie* films, Western films such as John Wayne’s *The Fighting Kentuckian* (1949), and films of the Old South such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Belle Starr* (1941), *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1944), and *Song of the South* (1946). By the 1950s New Criticism<sup>17</sup> was entrenched as the dominant mode of literary study and pedagogy, influencing students,

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<sup>15</sup>McDowell’s notion of “the Manhattan manner” in 1930s U.S. literature was levied in response to the twentieth century’s standardizing of American speech and custom, across the scene of art and mass media, in the mold of New York City. The concept referred to problems more onerous and grating than the mere fact of New York City’s cultural influence on U.S. letters. It referred to a publishing climate hostile to writers deemed ‘regional’ and, on the other hand, to the (ironically) unacknowledged fact that standardized modern American English was itself a regional tongue, i.e., that of Manhattan. To McDowell, independent regional expression that diverged from this urban, northeastern style existed in a constant state of censure. In the full quotation, he complains that the “continued subservience to this antiquated New York Idea by writers in the hinterland, and their resultant unwillingness to be themselves or to express their own region” is fundamentally connected to the penalties for any authors who “fail to write in the Manhattan manner” (110).

<sup>16</sup> See Footnote 1.

<sup>17</sup> While the name of this school of literary thought comes from John Crowe Ransom’s book, *The New Criticism* (New Directions, 1941), Ransom is not the sole or even leading New Critical thinker. Other the Fugitives (later Agrarians) Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren also informed New Criticism, but were no more important to the school than other critics including F. R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, I. A. Richards, and T. S. Eliot, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. New Criticism finally comes into fuller view as “the academic wing of a broader cultural movement, southern agrarianism” working in reaction to the ascendance of Marxist criticism in the 1930s, according to the work of Walter Kalaidjian, John Fekete, and others (Thurston 9).

teachers, and critics of poetry in ways that determined theories of value and changed the canon. As a whole, the midcentury literary establishment tended to be less enthusiastic about regionalism than the public. Supposed to be a minor and outmoded literary form dedicated to homespun tales and parochial folkways, it was, they reasoned, less worthy of serious study than avant-garde, cosmopolitan, and manifesto-laden ‘high’ modernism. New Critics worked to reposition literature as something which required expert interpretation—that is, which required graduate- and professionals employed in English departments. Terry Eagleton and John Guillory have described these critics’ valorization of difficulty.<sup>18</sup> As a result, more accessible works in the “popular” mold fell out of study as academic critics increasingly concentrated on “close readings of a limited number of texts by ‘major’ authors” (C. Nelson 35).

During the midcentury a new, limited modernist canon was retroactively formed around the disparate writings of an Anglo-American tradition including Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce, at the expense of popular and regional writers and like Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Zora Neale Hurston. The New Critical school had few regionalist admittees: Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, and some members of the Nashville-based Fugitive school of poets, itself only a narrow literary community, despite the Fugitives’ own aspirations to speak for the South. (The hegemony of New Criticism during this middle period also encouraged the passing over of Muriel Rukeyser, as will be shown, after a few more words on McNeill.)

After a healthy spate of contemporary reviews, *Gauley Mountain* faded into obscurity at the margins of literary discussion. A dearth of high-brow critical activity—no monographs or

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<sup>18</sup> In the Fifties and Sixties, New Critical professors and critics espoused linguistic difficulty as literature’s primary feature. According to John Guillory, a theorist of literary canon formation, this professional-intellectual movement toward difficulty (e.g. the prioritizing of stylistically, formally, or rhetorically challenging texts) helped justify the position of academic departments of literature: the New Critics “revalued literature as the cultural capital of the university” by redefining literature itself as “language distinct in its difficulty” (172).



articles in the major outlets or university presses—thereafter fell on the work, although McNeill maintained an active literary career, publishing, performing readings, teaching, and corresponding in literary circles until her death in 1993.<sup>19</sup> However, in the late 1980s and 1990s, fellow Appalachian poet Maggie Anderson led a small resurgence in interest with her critical recovery of McNeill’s oeuvre. Anderson conducted a recovery that was feminist and regionalist in orientation, emphasizing the importance of McNeill’s work as a working-class woman who wrote from an outsider rural position. For Anderson, McNeill wrote in ways that aesthetically rendered Appalachian speech and thought in enduring and inspiring ways. Anderson served as the literary agent and editor for McNeill’s 1988 autobiography. In 1991 Anderson edited *Hill Daughter* which brought back into print major poetic selections from McNeill’s career, and in 1996 wrote the introduction for a new edition of *Gauley Mountain*. A sense of respect and warm admiration characterizes the essays, prefacing the *Gauley Mountain*’s 1996 edition, which commend McNeill’s historical imagination and echo Archibald MacLeish’s earlier praises of McNeill’s authenticity.<sup>20</sup> With the backing of the University of Pittsburgh Press, Anderson’s attempt to re-establish this poet has made much material accessible for young readers. At the same time this recovery has not been as complete as the concurrent recovery of Emma Bell Miles, for example, another rural working-class Appalachian poet who has since been more frequently anthologized and studied in academic journals.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout her life McNeill corresponded in writing and in person with literary figures including Robert Frost, Stephen Vincent Benet, distinguished editor Louis Untermeyer, Archibald MacLeish, Jesse Stuart, Pearl S. Buck (known also as Sai Zhenzhu), and Maggie Anderson, as well as with high-profile politicians Jimmy Carter and John D. Rockefeller IV.

<sup>20</sup> See Ken Sullivan (xx, xxii); McKinney; Anderson; Groce.

<sup>21</sup> See Beth Harrison, “Women Writers, Ethnography, and Regionalism: A Case Study of Emma Bell Miles and Mildred Haun” in *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 5 (1993); Shannon Brooks, “Coming Home: Finding My Appalachian Mothers Through Emma Bell Miles” in *Feminist Formations* 11.3 (1999); Kay Baker Gaston, “‘After Reading Thoreau’: The Literary and Artistic Vision of Emma Bell Miles” in *Border States* 13

McNeill's reputation has steadily endured, however, in the area about which she wrote so extensively. As a notable Appalachian historian, and a gifted poet and teacher, McNeill has garnered a steadfast local fandom in Pocahontas County. Though few in the literary establishment appear to be reading her, and none are now publishing criticism of her work, McNeill is highly respected among West Virginian readers and historians for her intimate yet studious chronicling of the region from earliest settlement to modernization. Her small but dedicated following has grown in response to a lifelong literary commitment to one region, a commitment expressed in public history as well as lyric lore. McNeill befriended Pearl S. Buck, a poet born six miles from her own birthplace, and mentored later poets of West Virginia Maggie Anderson and Irene McKinney. Named West Virginia's Daughter of the Year in 1977, and the state's poet laureate from 1979 to 1993, McNeill was deemed "our region's finest poet" by the Governor John D. Rockefeller IV (McNeill *EF* xii) and she also earned the title of West Virginian of the Year in 1985.

Several of McNeill's books have been reprinted by West Virginia and Pittsburgh University presses, and *Gauley Mountain* was reprinted by the Pocahontas Communications Cooperative in 1996 as *Gauley Mountain: A History in Verse*. Especially in her corner of West Virginia, where the Cooperative continues to promote her work, McNeill's writings enjoy a continuing afterlife through public art projects in her home Pocahontas County. McNeill freely granted the rights to adapt her work. In 1991, singer-songwriter and *Mountain Stage* host Larry Groce produced a radio show adapting all of *Gauley Mountain* into a spoken-word and music

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(2001); Tanya Mitchell, "Beyond Regional Borders: The Emergence of a New Sense of Place, from Mary Murfree to Lee Smith" in *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 8.2 (2002); Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* (2003); Katerina Prajznerová, "Emma Bell Miles's Appalachia and Emily Carr's Cascadia: A Comparative Study in Literary Ecology" in *49th Parallel* vol. 20 (2006); Kristina L. Knotts, "'Back to Beginnings': Appalachian Women in Kathryn Stripling Byer's *Wildwood Flower* and Isabel Zuber's *Salt*" in *North Carolina Literary Review* 16 (2007); and Elizabeth Englehardt, "Riding Deep Waters: An Appalachian Meditation" in *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48.1 (Fall 2015).

format. The *Gauley* radio stage play project was later recovered by Gibbs Kinderman and released on compact disc still available at the time of this writing. In 2014 McNeill and T.S. Eliot were honored as inspired and inspiring poets at an “All-Terrain Poetry” reading that raised money for young poets of Pocahontas County. A stage production of *Gauley Mountain*, to be broadcast on West Virginia public television, is currently underway as part of the county’s bicentennial (1821-2021) celebrations. Apart from being a source of local pride, her efforts at preserving cultural history make her work attractive to Appalachian Studies and to people interested in local lore and historic cultural preservation.<sup>22</sup>

The decline of regionalism in American letters, in the long run, set the stage for the exclusion of Appalachians like McNeill from being accessed in postwar mass media or literary institutions. Site-specific literature based *anywhere*, indebted as it was to its contexts, fares poorly in a theoretical atmosphere typified by formalist close reading and textualist principles such as Eliot’s “objective correlative” and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “intentional fallacy.” As “popular modernism” was displaced by “high modernism” in the schools, a massive shift in priorities led poets Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay to be replaced in anthologies, curricula, and syllabi by a canon based around figures like Eliot, Pound, H.D., and Stevens. Distal modernists from the social peripheries such as the South received less and less scholarly attention. Like many place-affiliated artists of the Depression era, including many non-white, rural, and women writers who utilized the regional mode in empowering and innovative ways, McNeill gradually disappeared from mainstream literary history, relegated to

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<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive engagement with *Gauley Mountain* as hyper-local literature has yet to be undertaken. In an interview with me, Gibbs Kinderman suggested the need for a county-level concordance of the text linking *Gauley Mountain* to the specific family and site names in Pocahontas County history. An exciting form of public humanities, such a project would require extensive community engagement and collaboration and could establish a model for new, young poets today curious about the uses of poetry as a tool of public history and local memory.

the now-marginal status of ‘regional.’ Ironically, those same local affiliations that were positive literary assets in the twenties and thirties, in later years doomed to obscurity Appalachian authors including not only Louise McNeill but countless others, including W. E. Blackhurst, Emma Bell Miles, Don West, James Still, Mary Noialles Murfree, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Effie Waller Smith, Jesse Stuart, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Hubert Skidmore. Appalachia itself is little represented even in recent accounts of Southern modernism.<sup>23</sup> The point of recalling these names here is to gesture at the high potentiality for scholarly recovery in Appalachian regional literature, and to suggest how much there is to learn more generally about the “distal modernisms” of rural American regions. The recession of works like *Gauley Mountain* into the margins of the midcentury “high” modernist canon—on grounds of their general accessibility and lack of esoteric difficulty—are not less but in fact more worthy as objects of recovery for the new modernist studies.

Recovery is never a neutral or “innocent” process, as Cary Nelson has argued: “We recover what we are culturally and psychologically prepared to recover and what we ‘recover’ we necessarily rewrite, giving it a new discursive life in the present” (11). With her highly localized following, Louise McNeill presents an interesting case for literary historians. Phrases worming in from the pop domains of film and music, like ‘underground hit’ and ‘cult following’ help to characterize McNeill’s reputation as a minor poet. But her critical neglect hints at the work still to be done in excavating the “minor literature” of American regionalism. As long as McNeill remains a virtual unknown in current modernist scholarship (despite the high praises of some notable proponents in the poetry scene including Benet, MacLeish, Untermeyer, Buck,

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<sup>23</sup> While advancing one of the more theoretically sound and historically-contextualized analyses of American Southern modernism in recent years, David A. Davis’ *World War I and Southern Modernism* (2018) does not consider any Appalachians.

McKinney, Stuart, and Anderson), a high potentiality remains for scholarly recovery and new insights within her little-discussed body of letters. The next chapters will study *Gauley Mountain* in depth, to support the dissertation's larger goals of highlighting Appalachia's contributions to modernity and to modernism and of fostering appreciation for understudied Appalachian artists.

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If one were to draw a straight, imaginary line beginning on the private green of the Ethical Culture Fieldston School's campus (in the Bronx, where Muriel Rukeyser attended secondary school) and ending at the precise point in Buckeye, West Virginia where the Seneca Trail meets Swago Creek, that line would be only 380 miles long. Imagine this line's length as it bridges the adolescent domains of McNeill and Rukeyser. Although shearing through six mid-Atlantic states—West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York—the line would not appear to show any great distance to a contemporary observer. Drawn on a continental map of North America, the imaginary line would seem very short. Especially in our time of high-speed travel, such a line takes on the appearance of, say, a ninety-minute commercial flight. One might even perceive, in this two-dimensional field of view, a certain proximity between these writers as U.S. mid-Atlantic contemporaries.

On the other hand, a raised-relief map, giving better visual reference to the altitude gradations dividing Buckeye from the Bronx, would change our perception of that imaginary line. By showing the diverse topography bisected by this line, a raised, three-dimensional map would reveal that a much greater geographic divide separates the two poets. From a horizontal landscape viewpoint, our imaginary line would be seen to plunge from the McNeills' Swago farm, where the windy highlands rise up nearby in places over 4,000 feet above sea-level, hurtling over and down to Fieldston School, which stands upon a Bronx knoll at 190 feet above

sea-level. To say nothing of cultural differences, the two poets lived in different worlds. New York City's low, bustling tidewaters plummet some three- to four-thousand feet below the interior reaches of Pocahontas County, WV. This means that in youth, McNeill and Rukeyser lived with different seasons, different plant life, and different weather. Light and water did not mean the same thing to one poet as they did to the other. They breathed different air.

The poets compared in this unit are divided not only by distance but by cultural upbringing and socioeconomic class. Unlike McNeill, Rukeyser always found that she could afford to stay warm and fed. The hard times of the Great Depression did not threaten her wellbeing to the extent that they threatened McNeill's, though they seriously impeded her education when she was forced to withdraw from Vassar College due to her father's bankruptcy. Whereas McNeill's publishing of her first verses at five dollars per line represented something economically decisive to her mostly cashless, multigenerational household, Rukeyser could see poetry as a secondary pursuit to surviving, as a moral and intellectual pursuit over and above the provision of basic needs. A 'proximal modernist,' Rukeyser learned to write poetry in the stimulating intellectual environments of an upwardly mobile young New Yorker, benefiting from things like libraries, colleges, a bustling press, museums, academies, galleries. At home she had servants to care for her needs (Rich xii). Myriad public media forms, humming with news, debate, and discussion, circulated through these environments. Transatlantic public discourse and literary innovation cast shadows in Rukeyser's West Virginia poems that they do not in McNeill's West Virginia poems.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Historians and critics have pointed to Ezra Pound, for example, as a literary influence for the citational and historical poetics of *The Book of the Dead* and to the Popular Front, for example, as a political influence for Rukeyser's rhetorical politics in the mid-thirties, aimed at cohering a conscious international working class.

Muriel Rukeyser was born in New York City on December 15, 1913 to a secure middle-class Jewish family. Her parents, Lawrence and Myra Lyons Rukeyser, were upwardly mobile, “well-to-do” New Yorkers (Moore 9). Earlier, Lawrence had left Wisconsin, where his family had lived since 1848, to live and work in New York City as a construction engineer. Myra, a sometime bookkeeper from Yonkers, New York, met him and the two were married. As a business owner in the concrete business, Lawrence would find success at least throughout Muriel’s childhood and adolescence.

By all accounts, the Rukeyser family had committed themselves to assimilating into the American middle-class mainstream. They adopted its values of productivity, secularism, and consumerism. Muriel writes that, for meaning and purpose, her parents turned neither to religion, nor to literature and the arts, but rather to “the Yankee baseball team, the Republican party, and the men who build New York City” (qtd. Moore 9). Like many American Jews of the early twentieth century, her mother and father sought to secure a place in mainstream middle-class life in the United States by adopting modern American habits and attitudes. As New York City novels like Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) and Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep* (1934) dramatize, many saw the act of discarding Jewish culture itself as one part of that process.

A quiet tension resulting from this bourgeois flatness motivated Rukeyser’s fiery drive to write. Rukeyser’s childhood home was safe and secure, but also imaginatively sterile. Faith and spiritualism were absent, except for in later years, when her mother discovered her faith. A bookkeeper and a company owner, Myra and Lawrence were neither religious believers nor intellectuals. There was no talk of God, sex, or money. Intellection itself was largely absent, at least as a family activity. Instead a narrow focus on politeness, quietness, business, and work

prevailed. Rukeyser's childhood was bereft of song and storytelling, precisely where McNeill's was richly endowed.

A reasonable reaction to profound silence could be to find (or make) noise. Rukeyser, an independent spirit—Louise Kertesz notes that at one point father disowned her for her “disobedience” and political views (90)—read everything she could find. At home the only poetry was Shakespeare and the Bible, so Rukeyser found books and periodicals outside the home and “read like mad” (“Muriel Rukeyser”; Moore 9). She was reaching young adulthood during the hard early years of the Depression, and she was troubled by its turmoil and depravations. Attending the Fieldston School for Ethical Culture in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City, Rukeyser received a first-rate liberal education. A prodigious thinker, Rukeyser excelled there. Departing radically from the stifled apoliticism of her bourgeois upbringing, Rukeyser began studying revolutionary ideas with a kind of religious zeal. In response to her parents' refusal to claim Jewish heritage, a nearly religious sense of poetry's prophetic possibilities would come to underlie Rukeyser's humanistic championing of the murdered, downtrodden, and silenced victims of the modern world. “[T]he silence at home”—very much a spiritual silence for the young poet—eventually led Rukeyser, outside the home, to craft texts that were not merely stridently outspoken, but prophetic or oracular in nature (Rukeyser qtd. Schwartz).

The desire to research, read, and explore can be expressed as a desire to leave. Leaving in 1930 for Vassar College, a private institution in Poughkeepsie, New York, allowed Rukeyser to further advance her abilities in written reasoning. Then a women-only college, Vassar occupies a thousand-acre suburban campus about seventy-five miles north of New York City, in the scenic Hudson Valley. Mobility, like reading, became essential to the observations on which Rukeyser



based her poetry. In the thirties Rukeyser started to publish poetry which explored connections between personal and public subjects; even her earliest poems are concerned with “bringing the events of the world into poetry, and poetry into the world” (Herzog & Kaufman xv). This interfacing of the public and private spheres defines many of Rukeyser’s poems. As Michael True argues, her work is especially capable of conveying “private matters in a public voice” (93). A key quality of her work is the way it doubles the local particulars of politics into the broad universals of personhood. Because her poetry “makes concrete issues that young readers, particularly, may have regarded as ‘merely political’ or as somewhat distanced from their own experience,” it aims to intervene in the unfolding of social life by acting on the human heart (True 93). This dynamic works geographically, too. Rukeyser’s earliest published poetry addresses events and stories from around the world, making geography one of the matrices she tracks as a poet-journalist. The subjects evoked by her first volumes *Theory of Flight* (1935) and *U.S.I* (1938) themselves indicate a kind of *plural regionalism*: Sacco and Vanzetti, the Hawk’s Nest industrial disaster, the Scottsboro boys, the Spanish Civil War, John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, and air travel.

This means that local, particular sources (and the power to move between them) are crucial to her poetics. Elaborating the anti-assimilationist urges of her youth into an adult philosophy of democratic liberation and cultural pluralism, Rukeyser quickly became aware of the consequences of regional difference in human terms. Rukeyser’s work in campus journalism while at Vassar College included a 1932 visit to coal miners in Pennsylvania. After conducting interviews Rukeyser described their working and living conditions in a campus newspaper article “The Color of Coal is Black.” Rukeyser was not only interested in the Pennsylvanian coalfields to the west of New York City; she was also intrigued with cultural regions to the north. Also in

1932, Rukeyser founded a literary journal, *Housatonic*, along with three other editors, Elizabeth Bishop and the sisters Eleanor and Eunice Clark. The journal seems less an artifact of ‘proximal modernism’ than one of regionalism. Its stated mission was to “deal with the culture and traditions of New England in their changing social and economic backgrounds” (“Muriel Rukeyser”). As these early writing and editing projects suggest, Rukeyser’s grew increasingly interested in regionalism—a grappling not with a singular region but with varied *regions*.

This sort of plural regionalism requires many things, including resources and freedom of movement. Having these things enabled the young poet, as an investigator and political advocate, to visit Scottsboro, Alabama, Barcelona, Spain, and Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, sites of high-profile political controversy. Rukeyser herself presents *U.S.1* as a work of geography, writing in a note in the first edition that *The Book of the Dead*

is to be a summary poem of the life of the Atlantic coast of this country, nourished by the communications which run down it. Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems and workmen from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national. Local images have one kind of reality. U.S.1 will, I hope, have that kind [ . . . ] (Rukeyser *U.S.1* 146)

An important distinction arises, then, between the more insular regionalism exemplified by McNeill’s first two volumes *Mountain White* (1931) and *Gauley Mountain* (1939), deep-rooted in Pocahontas County lore, and the cosmopolitan inter-regionalism exemplified by Rukeyser’s first two volumes *Theory of Flight* (1935) and *U.S.1* (1938). *Gauley Mountain* centers on Gauley Mountain itself, a story in which *place* takes primacy and the poet, with all her human subjects through history, take only temporary, fleeting roles. Conversely *The Book of the Dead* finds the cosmopolitan reporter who has been traveling up and down the Atlantic coast—not a mountain, but a mind freed from the tethers of provincial tradition—acting as the crucial binding agent.

This is why (as this study will show) roads mean something very different in *The Book of the Dead* and *Gauley Mountain*.

Much has been written about how Rukeyser's adverse reaction to the silence in her home led her to seek this hyper-mobility I am describing. *The Book of the Dead* itself works against a profound, orchestrated silence concealing the brutalities committed by business actors during the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster (Moore). On the other hand, there are alternative reasons that might explain Rukeyser's interest in mining as a subject of her 1930s writings. A little-discussed fact in scholarly treatments of Rukeyser's life and writings is her proximity to resource extraction. Yet there is ample evidence to suggest that, before she visited mining communities in Pennsylvania in 1932, and West Virginia in 1936, Rukeyser was already familiar with mining and its material importance for modern life.

Long Island happens to contain the largest sandbank east of the Mississippi River. Located mainly on the western and eastern edges of the peninsula of Port Washington, this sandbank is not only massive in size but also, very importantly, is comprised of a particular type of sand, useful for the making of concrete.<sup>25</sup> Beginning in the 1860s and until 1989, Port Washington sandminers, truck drivers, and bargemen, mainly poor European immigrants and their American-born descendants, extracted sand from the coastal banks of Port Washington, to be taken mainly to the metropolitan New York City area.<sup>26</sup> This so-called 'Cow Bay sand' of Port Washington was taken out in the mid-1800s with shovels and wheelbarrows, then in the late-1800s with steam shovels, then after the 1940s with bulldozers, payloaders, and electric

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<sup>25</sup> Campiello explains that Port Washington sand contains coarse granules of diverse sizes that interlock well when packed under pressure. Sand containing seashells, for instance, cannot be used in the making of concrete.

<sup>26</sup> Today Port Washington's sand banks have been turned into a golf course. A Sandminers Monument also stands there, in public commemoration of the thousands of laborers who worked in the sand pits.

draglines (DeWan “Making a Living”). In addition to being superabundant and of high quality, Port Washington sand was easily accessible by barge, allowing cheap transport of its sand and gravel to nearby Manhattan. These factors made the Port Washington peninsula the locus of Long Island sand mining operations and a decisive resource zone for the historical development of New York City. It is now believed that nine-tenths of the concrete used to build the city’s infrastructure was made with this ‘Cow bay sand’ (Blumlein).

This sand-and-concrete complex expanded alongside mounting demand in New York for concrete after World War I. The quantities of sand extracted from Port Washington grew to staggering proportions by the time of Muriel Rukeyser’s childhood. To say that the construction of New York City’s skyscrapers required ‘vast amounts’ of sand, gravel, and rock to make concrete and provide other mineral uses is to risk understatement. In the 1920s, dozens of companies mined the edges of the Port Washington peninsula (DeWan “Long Island Sandmining Collection”). By 1930, 100 million cubic tons of sand had been extracted from its open pits.<sup>27</sup> Muriel Rukeyser came of age during transformative decades for New York City. The city was rapidly expanding in size and population. Its skyline grew taller, reflected in a plethora of surviving early-century photographs. Its bustle of construction work attracted people like her father, a Wisconsinite, into its orbit.

But Port Washington itself was also being transformed, as these sand and concrete companies installed worker housing, removed dunes and other coastal barriers, opened massive pits, dredged the shallow waters, and left behind eroded scarps of earth. Flood prone flats in Port Washington were left peppered with half-buried, abandoned mining equipment until later reclamation efforts removed them. Sand mining itself was grueling and dangerous work,

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<sup>27</sup> It is believed that some 140 million cubic yards of local Port Washington sand has been used, in total, in the building of New York City.

particularly given that the migrant laborers in the sand pits did not speak English and were prevented by companies from organizing in trade unions. Many sandminers were injured and killed while working for pittance wages (Blumlein; Campiello). The young Muriel Rukeyser may have collected Bolshevik stamps and read radical papers, and she may have become acutely sensitive to workers' rights issues in the 1930s, but she was directly financially supported by the exploitation of these sandbanks. The Rukeyser family business of resource extraction has mainly been 'out of sight, out of mind' for academic studies of Rukeyser's poetry. The basic facts of the Rukeyser family business in sand and concrete is as follows.

After gaining experience as an engineer planning and overseeing building projects, Lawrence Rukeyser, together with Italian-American entrepreneur and fascist Generoso Pope (1891-1950), founded in 1911 a sand and gravel extraction company called Colonial Sand & Stone. Perhaps Rukeyser and Pope understood that sand extraction would be fundamental to New York City's local economy in the coming decades. Their sandmining company thrived. During the long post-World War I building boom that spanned the 1920s, Colonial Sand & Stone became a major contender in New York City's construction industry. From the sand pits of Port Washington, Rukeyser and Pope's mining firm extracted this valuable 'Cow Bay sand,' a raw material needed to realize New York City's architectural plans. Colonial Sand & Stone extracted sand that was used to create airports, subways, sidewalks, and over the years, specific iconic buildings, including the Empire State Building, the original Yankee Stadium, Rockefeller Center, Radio City Music Hall, and the George Washington Bridge.

It was no exaggeration when Muriel remarked that, as a sand and gravel operator, her father participated in "the building of New York" (Schwartz). By the time the Wall Street stock market crashed in autumn 1929, Colonial had become a dominant firm in New York City sand

mining. Pope's acumen in exploiting the sandbanks had to do with his decade of mining in the pits as a laborer, his cultural literacy with the Italian-speaking sand miners he employed, and with the political influence he was able to exert over New York officials. Having emigrated to New York City from Italy as a pre-adolescent boy, Pope had been immediately shuffled into the sand pits. A titanic figure in New York City business by the 1930s, Pope, in addition to owning what was at one point the world's most productive and largest sand and gravel company, controlled all the major Italian newspapers in New York City, using them to promote his fiercely anticommunist ideas until his death in 1950.

Meanwhile, entitled to the modern comforts of the city, Muriel lived "a life of brownstones, boardwalks, and chauffeurs" (Moore 9). The Rukeyser family had an unusually intimate relationship with New York City's infrastructural environment. The city shapes around Muriel—the glass-and-concrete pinnacles above, the concrete tubes and chambers below—not only comprised the pattern and model of built modernity in the 1930s, but also were made out of the prized sand her father's business extracted. A sprawling urban sphere materialized out of Long Island's immense sandbanks. So too in a sense did Rukeyser's tuition materialize out of these sandbanks. The intellectual garden of a bourgeois upbringing, where her artistic vision turned and sprouted, was manured with the surplus monetary value accumulated by her father's sand extraction firm. Colonial Sand & Stone survived the initial shocks of the Depression but failed temporarily in 1932. Generoso Pope would continue to own and operate the firm, raising it from the dead, then eventually reaching a deal with his striking sand miner employees in 1938 and joining the AFL (Campiello). But Colonial's flop left Lawrence Rukeyser bankrupt and Muriel Rukeyser was forced to withdraw from Vassar College in 1932, cutting short her education there.

Rukeyser's decision to deal with extractivist culture in her writing roughly coincided with this crisis in Rukeyser family finances. The year 1932 saw both the end of her father's tenure as a sand mine owner as well as the publication of her investigations into Pennsylvania coal mining, "The Color of Coal is Black" in a Vassar student publication. Sand mining appears in the background of *Theory of Flight*, written before Rukeyser learned of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster. In the poem "Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures" a young girl tours her capitalist father's sandbanks and worker subdivisions. The poem tells a muted story of a day trip, but intergenerational strife boils beneath this story: "Father and I drove to the sand-quarry across the ruined marshlands [ . . . ] and his ugly villages he built and was showing me" (*CP* 15). When they reach "the pit's heart," the girl sadly realizes that "sand, and its yellow canyon and standing pools / and the wealth of the split country set us further apart." Like McNeill, Rukeyser associates resource extraction with alienation and the decline of relationships. "Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures" is not one of the explicitly political poems of *Theory of Flight*. (Those are in the final section of the book, containing fourteen lyrics). Still, though concerned mainly with "the poet's experience with the growing distance between generations" (Keteszi 89), the poem reveals insights that go beyond Rukeyser's wakening interest in mining as a poetic subject. Workers are not seen in the poem (cue phantom miners of Port Washington, absent here), but another form of exploitation does catch Rukeyser's critical eye. Revulsion against the degraded quarry land signals to the poet a dire moral hazard:

‘Look,’ he said, ‘this quarry means rows of little houses,  
Stucco and a new bracelet for you are buried there’;  
but I remembered the ruined patches, and I saw the land ruined,  
exploded, burned away, and the fiery marshes bare. (Rukeyser *CP* 15)

Connections might be drawn between these lines and "[t]he hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain" of *The Book of the Dead* (*U.S.* 166). As the tension between father and daughter reaches the

point of breaking, the poem crescendos. The final lines read like a confession: the girl's moral intuitions and the realities of her family's business collide, and the latter wins out. The girl objects to her father's sand mining, but ultimately accepts her role as a child living on 'sand money.' The character called Father boasts:

'We'll own the countryside, you'll see how soon I will,  
You'll have acres to play in': I saw the written name  
Painted on stone in the face of the steep hill:  
'That's your name, Father!' 'And yours!' he shouted, laughing.  
'No, Father, no!' He caught my hand as I cried,  
And smiling, entered the pit, ran laughing down its side. (Rukeyser *CP* 15)

Combined with Rukeyser's preceding image of a bracelet buried in the sand and ready to be dug up (a haunting and personal note is struck), the smiling, laughing run down into the pit suggests a poet personally reckoning with real-life circumstances as someone who lived on mining profits.

At the time, Rukeyser was unaware of the industrial catastrophe unfolding in West Virginia. It would not be until 1935 that knowledge of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster reached Rukeyser and New York City's reading public. The disastrous tunnel project was undertaken in 1930-31, meaning four years passed with these atrocities buried, a remarkable fact given the scale of the catastrophe. Witness testimonies, lawsuit settlements to (some) sick employees and their families, and congressional subcommittee hearings regarding over 700 industrial fatalities attributed to corporate decisions occurred but were not publicized in the immediate years after the tunnel's construction. What is now recognized as the worst industrial disaster in U.S. history was not recognized as such for half a decade. The outlines of the disaster are as follows:

Ground was broken on March 31, 1930 for a project headed by Union Carbide, a "big, sophisticated northern corporation" (Dayton 18). Union Carbide intended to build a new hydroelectric-metallurgical complex in Fayette County, West Virginia that would be completely under their control. The plan was to dig a tunnel to divert water from the New River, downhill



through three miles of sandstone mountain, to an electrical power plant in the town of Alloy (previously named Boncar). From the start, this was both a construction project and a resource extraction operation. That is, Union Carbide was beginning work on something that was both a tunnel and a mine. The energy provided by the diverted water would be converted to electricity and sent to a new metallurgical plant also owned by Union Carbide; meanwhile, because it was known to contain some amount of silica, an essential component in steel alloying, the solid sandstone rock excavated during tunneling would also be sent to the power plant. The power plant was under the control of a licensed public utility, New Kanawha Power, which was itself a legal shroud, not a real public utility, since its board was made up of Union Carbide's personnel and it could only ever sell power to Union Carbide.

Union Carbide contracted a small southern firm, Rhinehart and Dennis Company of Virginia, to complete this work, with penalties promised if the project took longer than two years to complete. This company spread word of ready jobs in Gauley Bridge throughout the job-scarce American Southeast, and several thousand mostly anonymous migrant workers came to Fayette County to work in the tunnel. The men began to bore through the solid rock. They drilled and blasted a tunnel whose diameter was thirty-two to thirty-six feet. They found more silica than anticipated. The silica was so valuable to Union Carbide's metallurgical plant that, when it was discovered to exist there in unexpected quantities, "the tunnel's diameter was expanded, in ways extraneous to the flow of water through it," so that more silica might be extracted (Dayton 16). Of the 2,982 men who worked in the tunnel, most were black, and most had no local ties whatsoever. Fewer than twenty percent of the tunnel workers were of local origin (Cherniak 1-23). As Dayton has suggested, this was intentional:

if Union Carbide had not anticipated some danger to its workforce, the question arises of why it was careful to recruit workers from outside the local community

as opposed to concentrating on local workers, many of whom were experienced coal miners. [. . .] By recruiting black laborers into mostly (80 percent) white Fayette County, the employers sought to ensure some distance between the tunnel workforce and the local population. This plan worked to a great extent. (19)

The imperatives of quickness and economy imposed by Union Carbide on the small contractor resulted in a series of decisions which forced an unknown number of workers to contract acute silicosis.

These decisions led to unsafe dry drilling practices, a failure to provide workers with protective respirators or ventilate the tunnel, and horrendous worker housing. Conditions were cramped in the white, dusty interior of the tunnel. Men and mules coerced to return into the tunnel breathed in fatal amounts of the deadly silica dust. One of the tunnel workers, a bench driller named George Robison, testified that beatings awaited any workers fleeing the tunnel.

Robison spoke of threats and beatings used by white foremen to coerce black workers back into the mountain after interval dynamite blasts. Reentering the bore within minutes of each shoot, teams of muckers and drillers could see only with difficulty through a haze of white silica. As work resumed at the head, accelerated rounds of dry drilling forced fresh jets of mineral straight back into the faces of workers. Pails of drinking water carried into the shaft looked like buckets of milk. (Kadlec 24)

Within only a few months, workers began dying. The duration of employment for tunnel workers “rarely lasted more than a year” since the dust “rendered many of the men unable to work” (“The Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster: Summersville, WV”). Some of the fallen had to be dragged out of the tunnel. Silicosis, a clogging of the lungs, cannot be cured. Blame for what some were calling ‘tunnelitis’ was placed on the living habits of the migrant black workers, rather than on their employers. For instance, the funeral home director H.C. White, in Rukeyser’s “The Cornfield,” leaves behind a paper that “tells about Negroes who got wet at work, / shot craps, drank and took cold, pneumonia, died” (*U.S.I* 42). Many sickened men were cast out of worker housing and job sites, were buried in unmarked paupers’ graves, or simply drifted homeward where they died.

Because of this it is impossible to determine the exact number of dead. Nevertheless, silicosis is conservatively estimated to have killed 764 workers within five years of the tunnel's construction.<sup>28</sup>

This nightmarish story was broken nationally early in 1935 by several articles in *New Masses*. Albert Maltz's "Man on a Road" (published January 8) captured widespread attention. Phillipa Allen's "Two Thousand Dying on a Job" (published under a pseudonym in two parts, on January 15 and January 22) responded to Maltz's shocking article about the disaster at Gauley Bridge. William Gropper's political cartoon "Murder in Gauley's [*sic*] Bridge" appeared in print on January 20 in the *Daily Worker*. A labor newspaper in Detroit, the *People's Press*, "followed the lead" and began pressuring politicians. By January and February of 1936, Congressional subcommittee hearings were held, receiving extensive coverage "on a near daily basis" by the *Daily Worker* (Dayton 20). Documents and reports continued to surface constantly, and new kinds of responses appeared. On June 2, 1936, the young writer Martha Millet published "Silicosis in Our Town" in the *Daily Worker*, a poem in quatrains based on the findings of these hearings. With Hawk's Nest becoming "a cause célèbre of the New York Left" (Moore 9), Rukeyser learned about the tragedy at the young age of twenty-three.

In March 1936, Rukeyser traveled to West Virginia with photographer friend Nancy Naumburg, with the goal of investigating the cause of these silicosis deaths. Rukeyser contacted the chairman of the Congressional subcommittee investigating the Hawk's Nest disaster, Indiana representative Glenn Griswold. He sent her copies of the *Congressional Record* for April 1, 1936, as well as the transcripts of the hearings, along with an encouraging note (Lobo 79). The trip, and these documents from Congress and the public press—but not Naumburg's

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<sup>28</sup> This figure of 764 deaths is drawn from Martin Cherniak's book *The Hawk's Nest Incident* (1986), the most thorough historical study of the disaster.

photographs, for unknown reasons (Moore 10)—formed the basis for *The Book of the Dead*. Striking out for the road, Rukeyser became one of “those makers of documentaries in the thirties who wanted to show America as it really was” (Kertesz 93). Her travels coincided with similar investigations by Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell for *You Have Seen Their Faces* and James Agee and Walker Evans for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

As a mobile researcher, Rukeyser sought to understand the hell on earth that had been created by resource extractive operations in Fayette County, West Virginia. Yet as I have also tried to show, her upbringing as part of a family invested in sandmining—as suggested by the semi-autobiographical “Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures”—informed “The Color of Coal is Black” and *The Book of the Dead*. Likely due to a combination of these factors, Rukeyser demonstrates a keen ability to draw salient themes from the subject of mining, with three major themes prevailing: the plight of miners who are not unionized or protected by the law; the processes of exchange that are exemplified by their work extracting of minerals and fuels from the earth; and the sublimity of these raw materials’ transformation into the forces and objects of modern life.

*U.S.I*, half-comprised by the sequence *The Book of the Dead*, itself received varied responses, positive and negative. Upon publication of *U.S.I* Rukeyser was a fairly high-profile young poet, “widely seen as one of the most promising of a generation of poets emerging amid the social tensions and dislocations of the Great Depression” (Dayton 13). Rukeyser’s reputation was one of a poet with a powerful and singular style. Alan Porter, Professor of English at Vassar College, had called her “strong and individual,” and this idea was reflected in reviews of her early work. In addition to being published as part of the prestigious Yale Younger Poets series, her first book *Theory of Flight* received overall positive reviews (Kertesz 97; Dayton 13).

Lecturing at colleges and universities in the eastern United States, Rukeyser was also publishing in *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *Daily Worker*, and *The New Republic*. Despite many appreciate reviews of *U.S.I*, Kertesz points out that Rukeyser's "vision of possibility" as elaborated in *The Book of the Dead* "was not seen in the thirties for what it was" (112). High-profile literary reviewers John Wheelwright, Willard Maas, and Edna Lou Walton, each penned critical or disparaging reviews of *U.S.I*. They tended to focus on the documentary mode of *The Book of the Dead*, and for varying reasons found the work politically or aesthetically stunted.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the fault lines appearing in this immediate critical response would prefigure Rukeyser's critical treatment during the midcentury. Virulent Louise Bogan, the poetry critic for *The New Yorker*, unleashed a vendetta against Rukeyser, penning comments whose personal bite prefigures the highly personalized attacks that would be levied against the poet throughout the postwar period. Most important is the criticism that Rukeyser is too obscure. While Randall Jarrell's harsh criticisms of Rukeyser's work along these lines in the postwar period are well known, Rukeyser was criticized as obscure even in the 1930s, an age relatively more welcoming of political poetry (Kertesz 94). Eunice Clark, friend of the poet, undercut her praise of Rukeyser's poems with a complaint about the poet's indirect, complex style. For Clark, Rukeyser's *Theory of Flight* was burdened with "aristocratic maladies of post-war poetry—snobbish erudition alternating with excursions into the incomprehensible sub-conscious"; meanwhile for Kerker Quinn, *U.S.I* could hardly be interpreted at all due to the poet's "omitting transitions between far-flung images and dissociated ideas" (qtd. Kertesz 96). By "combining the attitudes of social realism with the techniques of modernism" *The Book of the Dead* used form,

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<sup>29</sup> More assessment and overview of contemporary reviews of *The Book of the Dead* can be found in Louise Kertesz' *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (1980), Kate Daniel's "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics" in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers* (1996), and Tim Dayton's *Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead* (2003).

syntax, and mechanics in unusual, sometimes frustrating ways (Kertesz 124). This mixture of working-class goals with artsy methods invited many 1930s revolutionary critics, such as the poetry editor of the *New Masses*, Stanley Burnshaw, to attack Rukeyser's unusual poetics as generally unsuitable for proletarian needs. To Burnshaw, Rukeyser's experiments with language and poetry suggested an approach too "'bourgeois' and needful of being suppressed in favor of clarity, simplicity, and straightforwardness" (Daniels 251, 252). This critical trend in response to Rukeyser's writings reveals that, even among fellow partisans on the literary left, Rukeyser faced chastisement.<sup>30</sup>

During the Forties, Rukeyser's status as a promising poet, unquestioned in the thirties, came under greater scrutiny. Kate Daniels elucidates the process. Although Rukeyser's writing "had always had its detractors," back issues of literary magazines such as the *Partisan Review* and *The New Yorker* reveal that

the critical response to her work underwent a radical change in the 1940s, when she was subjected to a series of highly personal reviews that condemned her entire poetic endeavor and called into question her personal and poetic motives. [. . .] What is interesting about the way Rukeyser was treated is the *personal* venom that she and her work during the 1940s seemed to arouse in critics and the *permission* that some of them granted themselves to insult her personally under the pretense of reviewing her work. (Daniels 248)

In time the New Critical agenda, more than any personal resentments, did more to sideline Rukeyser's work. With its proposed opposition between political and literary writings<sup>31</sup> this agenda purged syllabi, anthologies, and reading lists of many socially conscious or explicitly political poets including Rukeyser. There was indeed a period during which Rukeyser was

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<sup>30</sup> *n.b.*, Louise Kertesz argues (and Daniels agrees) that in light of Rukeyser's own scientific theory of poetry, the "charge of obscurity" levied against the poet are ultimately "meaningless" (127).

<sup>31</sup> For a useful explanation of the consequences of this New Critical division between the categories of politics and literature for our own understanding of modern poetry, see Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*.

“excluded by some of America’s cultural gate-keepers” (Ostriker qtd. Herzog & Kaufman xiv). Of course, we cannot lay all the blame at the feet of the New Critics. As William L. Rukeyser, the poet’s only child, has written, “In her professional life she refused to play the office politics that are often necessary to get ahead in the literary and academic worlds” (299).

A survey of some of the most influential literary publications—especially anthologies—since World War II helps to underscore this arc of contention in Rukeyser’s literary reputation as it has waned (in the post-1940 period) and waxed (in the post-1960s period). One widely used teaching tool during the 1960s was Allen Tate and David Cecil’s compilation *Modern Verse in English: 1900-1950* (1958), which reflected the apolitical and introspective tendencies of New Criticism and its major exponents, John Crowe Ransom, F. R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. A quick survey of Tate and Cecil’s textual selections reveals their naked bias for male, bourgeois, and apolitical poets. Of the twenty-six American poets born after 1899 who were included in *Modern Verse in English*, only three are women: Barbara Howes, Jean Garrigue, and Elizabeth Bishop.

Rukeyser’s work received far less attention than it deserved during the 1950s and 1960s, a period during which she maintained the public visibility she had in the thirties and forties. She remained active writing, lecturing, and working in the film industry. But the institutions which had earlier supported her work—the International Labor Defense, the *Daily Worker*, for example—declined in influence or disappeared altogether, and a rising social conservatism and changing scholarly methods favored the suppression of her work in the academy.

Anticommunism and redbaiting of the 1950s, epitomized in Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, worked to downplay Rukeyser’s contributions in broader society. *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser’s 1949 work of literary criticism, had by this time fallen

out of print. Roy Harvey Pearce's magisterial, award-winning study of American poetic history, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), published by Princeton University Press, cemented the late modernist school of Williams and Stevens as some true and final outgrowth of an American national tradition sprung from Emerson, Poe, and Whitman. Pearce presents a narrow and biased history of American poetry as it existed by the 1960s. It is no surprise that, as a radical political poet, and indeed perhaps simply as a Jew and as a woman, Rukeyser is not mentioned there.

Rukeyser did not surrender her convictions despite immense political pressure. She remained strident and outspoken regarding issues such as women's rights, freedom of speech and artistic expression, and the Vietnam War. During this time, Rukeyser presided over the pro-free-speech nonprofit organization PEN American Center (now PEN America), advocating for feminist and anti-war causes. She pledged not to pay taxes in an act of civil disobedience, signing in 1968 the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge. She even unsuccessfully attempted to visit the Korean poet Kim Chi-Ha who was being imprisoned on death row in South Korea. Throughout this long middle-period of McCarthyism and New Criticism, Rukeyser remained both forthright and unconventional. Maybe most impressive about Rukeyser's biography and legacy is the sincerity of her commitments over such a long, productive life. Nothing seems to have ever blunted her "unyielding radicalism" ("Muriel Rukeyser").

This "unyielding radicalism" is more clearly seen when her poetic career is contrasted with W. H. Auden's, who in the 1930s was seen, like Rukeyser, as a political poet. Both writers composed works during the thirties which can be described as leftwing. They both rose rapidly in reputation during these years, and even appeared together in a panel discussion at Columbia University in 1939. During the later thirties Auden believed like Rukeyser that poets ought to do



the work of journalists, and sought in some of his poetry<sup>32</sup>—as Rukeyser sought in all of her poetry—to ‘matter’ or to ‘make something happen,’ to borrow phrases from poetic history and criticism by Dana Gioia and Michael Thurston.<sup>33</sup> However, predicting future trends in the arts toward introspection and apoliticism, Auden’s poetry soon evolved away from this kind of agenda. Social themes, such as justice and relationships, would remain important in Auden’s writing, but he would largely abandon overt political controversy in his post-1940 verse.<sup>34</sup> Auden’s turning away from political themes, in favor of religious and philosophical ones, underscores the longevity and durability of Rukeyser’s zeal. The socialist, feminist, and revolutionary commitments which define Rukeyser’s 1930s works—the restless, clarion quality of her voice with regard to social issues; her attraction to unrealized potentialities, to unreleased energies; the way her poems seem to enact “the process of searching itself” (Schwartz)—these things define even Rukeyser’s final published volumes, *Mazes* (1970), *29 Poems* (1972), and *The Gates* (1976).

Accordingly, Rukeyser’s star sank while Auden’s rose. Although Rukeyser enjoyed “a lifetime of recognition” (Herzog & Kaufman xvi)—winning the Yale Younger Poets Award for her first book of poems, *Theory of Flight* (1935); the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award (1941); a

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<sup>32</sup> Current events and political commentary characterize works by Auden such as *The Dance of Death* (1933), *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), and *Look, Stranger!* (1936) which was republished in the United States as *On This Island* (1937), sometimes even occupying the foreground of these writings. Traveling Europe and China as a social observer, Auden published a political pamphlet in verse dealing with the Spanish Civil War, *Spain* (1937), as well as two hybrid prose-poetry travel books, *Letters from Iceland* (1937) and *Journey to a War* (1939). These poems are aimed to some extent at raising social consciousness and exploring cultural regions that, at the time, were undergoing rapid change.

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars* (2001) and Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (1992).

<sup>34</sup> In his middle and later periods, Auden was increasingly drawn to writing poetry that was not politically strident, but rather philosophical and religious. Wide-ranging and general matters of civic and spiritual life (e.g., nature, morality, love, history, myth, language, art, science), and not specific, contemporary political struggles, are the focus of his best-known later works, such as *Nones*, “Bucolics,” *The Shield of Achilles*, and *Homage to Clio*.

Guggenheim fellowship (1943); the Levinson Prize (1947); election to the “National Institutes of Arts and Letters” (1967); the American Academy of Poets’ Copernicus Prize (1977); the Shelley Prize (1977); and numerous grants not listed here—her reputation suffered (as the dates in this list show) in the middle of the century. She had to wait to be better appreciated. This trend toward critical obscurity deepened until the last decade of Rukeyser’s life, the 1970s. Even a late-1970s anthology like Nancy Sullivan’s tome, *The Treasury of American Poetry* (1978), which advances its agenda of demonstrating demographic and cultural pluralism in the U.S., did not find room for her poems. The point of this *Treasury* was to gather up “a wealth of poems by a variety of American poets both male and female, both black and white,” poems which themselves define “a country characterized by diversity, power, stability, and strife,” and which together comprise “unique and haphazard” verse tradition (Sullivan xxv; xxi). Ironically, Rukeyser’s work seems almost perfectly matched to this anthology, aimed at including the “political and cultural, personal and regional, sexual and racial” poetry of a complex, roiling U.S. nation (Sullivan xxv).

Yet late in Rukeyser’s life, when her critical legacy was at its nadir, fortunes began to change. Rukeyser’s distinctive poetics found a sympathetic audience in the last three decades of the twentieth century, especially when she arose as a feminist icon of the 1970s, when Anne Sexton famously named her “the mother of everyone.” The Seventies saw a thoroughgoing reappraisal of Rukeyser’s work, as if the dust were being blown off a lifetime of writing. It is certain that Rukeyser’s return to the public eye during the Vietnam War contributed to the rediscovery of her work. But several specific publications likely popularized this rediscovery. Florence Howe’s landmark anthology *No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets* (1973) marked a turning point for Rukeyser in the publishing sphere by

including her and even taking its title from one of her poems.<sup>35</sup> Six years later, the year before the poet's death, the publication of *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (1979) restored in print decades of poems to reading public. The *New York Times* book review of her *Collected Poems* remarks that

Even those who have followed Muriel Rukeyser's career from those early volumes "Theory of Flight" and "U.S. 1" must be surprised at the bulk of the work, the sustained career. We have taken her a little too much for granted, perhaps because she has appeared in so many public forums in other guises: on the side of the underdog, the unjustly condemned, the defenseless, those whom life outmaneuvered. (Lask)

Thomas Lask, the reviewer, probably summarized the feelings of many poetry readers and radical dissidents of the late seventies when he concluded: "We have forgotten that we have in our midst a considerable poet." At the same time, Louise Kertesz was putting together the first scholarly monograph on Rukeyser's life of writing, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (1980), which would help to open a floodgate of critical attention.

In the years following Rukeyser's 1980 death, as her national obituaries and *Collected Poems* have circulated, the response to her work grew ever more appreciative. Rukeyser's lifelong refusal to abandon her moral convictions, even through the era of McCarthyism, when she was spied upon by the FBI for decades (until her death), in addition to her intellectual and personal challenges to the social stigma of single motherhood, helped to fuel widespread interest in Rukeyser. This has marked a significant reversal after a period during which Rukeyser had found herself outside the dominant movements in arts and letters. Just as important, as time went on, activist commitments and postmodern sensibilities, like hers, became more prominent and

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<sup>35</sup> Despite some very hostile contemporary responses, the now-celebrated *No More Masks!* (1973) performed a valuable service by returning to the reading public a generation of women writers (including Muriel Rukeyser, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lore, Ruth Stone, and Sonia Sanchez) and accordingly remains a significant act of poetic recovery.

influential in literary institutions. High-profile readers of Rukeyser, such as Adrienne Rich, built on the perceptions of earlier readers like Anne Sexton and Erica Jong, who themselves had dismissed the earlier dismissal of Rukeyser's work as excessively political and therefore unliterary.

By the 1990s, Rukeyser was being discovered by a new generation of politically active readers. This change is reflected in Rukeyser's inclusion in Carolyn Forché's selection of political poetry *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), as well as in the much wider-ranging anthology *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry* (1995), edited by Jay Parini. In 1996 Paris Press reissued *The Life of Poetry* which had fallen out of print since its 1949 first printing. Rukeyser's ascendant legacy since the Seventies was elaborated and reinforced intellectually by the new modernist studies, which has seen since the late nineties a cadre of literary scholars including Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Cary Nelson, and Douglas Mao, broaden the narrow conceptions of modernism represented, for instance, by Tate and Cecil's 1958 anthology. Signaling the changing tide of Rukeyser's reappraisal, the Library of America (a fairly traditionalist publishing force that has since 1979 worked to conserve a canon of American classics by reprinting, according to the homepage at *loa.org*, "great writers and timeless works") included "The Book of the Dead" among other of Rukeyser's poems in their landmark anthology *American Poetry* (2000), edited by Hass, Hollander, Kizer, Mackey, and Perloff.

The philosophical and artistic richness of Rukeyser's body of verse enabled perceptive scholars of modernism to position Rukeyser as an outstanding political modernist poet on textual, contextual, and theoretical grounds.<sup>36</sup> Critics have championed *The Book of the Dead* as

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<sup>36</sup> The most widely cited post-1990 critical writings on Rukeyser include pieces by Walter Kalaidjian, Alan Filreis, Cary Nelson, Catherine Gander, Suzanne Gardinier, Anne Herzog, Louise Kertesz, Meg Schoerke, Alan Wald, and Tim Dayton.

an outstanding work of modernist poetry. Walter Kalaidjian in 1993 deemed *The Book of the Dead* nothing less than “a modern tour de force” laudable for its experimentation in fusing poetic and nonpoetic language. For Kalaidjian this experiment is momentous in its “displacement of literature itself as a bounded, disciplinary field” (162). However it is worth remembering that, despite the high tenor of these critical appraisals, these scholars worked against the grain and interrupted a general academic dismissal of Rukeyser’s poetry, a dismissal all too easy in light of the various challenges posed by Rukeyser’s dissident viewpoint and interpretive difficulties. As measured in anthologies, scholarship, and reprints, the critical recovery of Rukeyser’s works has been sure, but only gradual.<sup>37</sup>

The mainstreaming of Rukeyser’s recovery is therefore well-advanced but still very much in-progress. These interpretive horizons continue to widen. Critical activity on Rukeyser is currently very strong; *The Book of the Dead* itself is a favorite text of scholars of modern literature in the past decade.<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that many of the scholars working with

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<sup>37</sup> For example, the popular revised edition of the bestselling textbook anthology *Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*, published in 1989, was intended to expand and diversify the selections of its first edition, “with more careful attention paid to ethnic poetry and poetry by women” (Ellman and O’Clair). Yet that second edition maintains the first edition’s omission of Rukeyser, despite her status as an acclaimed Jewish woman poet with more than four decades of prolific publishing. As late as 1996, Kate Daniels was able to write, with some truth, that Rukeyser’s body of work had still “not occasioned a prominent body of critical comment” (247). Dover’s *Great Poems by American Women* (1998), edited by Susan Rattiner a decade later, also curiously omits Rukeyser. The New York poet Rukeyser does not appear among its seventy-four featured American women poets, even while the anthology displays a marked regional bias in favor of Northeastern writers. Most surprising, the undergraduate workhorse *Norton Anthology of American Literature* excluded Rukeyser from its first seven editions (through 2007). These examples indicate the contested place she continues to hold into the current century, with regard to the place of her work in literary history.

<sup>38</sup> A flurry of criticism on Rukeyser since 2012 includes, but is not limited to: Catherine Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (2013); an entire special issue of *Journal of Narrative Theory* dedicated to Rukeyser’s work in Fall 2013, including Eric Keenaghan’s “‘Biocracy: Reading Poetic Politics through the Traces of Muriel Rukeyser’s Life-Writing,’” Stefania Heim’s “Another Form of Life: Muriel Rukeyser, Willard Gibbs, and Analogy,” Craig Morehead’s “‘Negative Entropy and the Energy of Utopian Potential in Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead,’” and other articles; Avery Slater, “American Afterlife: Benjaminian Messianism and Technological Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*” in *American Literature* 86.4 (2014); Ben Hickman, “Atlantis Buried Outside: Muriel Rukeyser, Myth, and the Crises of War” in *Criticism* 57.4 (2015); Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After* (2015); Dara Barnat, “Women and Poets See the Truth Arrive” in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 34.1 (2015); Mark

Rukeyser since 2010 represent some of the freshest developments in literary criticism: environmental justice criticism; energy humanities; multimedia criticism; new materialist feminism. Rukeyser is a staple for the contemporary editor, appearing as a prominent figure in anthologies like Jeffrey Lamar Coleman's *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom* (2012), ed; Carole McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim's *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (2013), Anne W. Fisher-Wirth and Laura Gray Street's *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013), Lawrence Rosenwald's *War No More* (2016), and Carl Phillips' *Firsts: 100 Years of Yale Younger Poets* (2019). *The Book of the Dead*, a common selection for anthologizing, continues to enjoy an ascendant legacy. For decades teachers, critics, and editors have succeeded in bringing *The Book of the Dead* increased visibility and, in effect, wider recognition. Of course, there are many who are unfamiliar with her life and work, and as Michael True states with personal conviction, there are many more who could still benefit from exploring her poem.

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Steven, *Red Modernism: American Poetry and the Spirit of Communism* (2017); Bryn Tales, "Salvaging the Symbol in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*" in *Comparative Critical Studies* 14.2-3 (2017); Eric Keenaghan, "There Is No Glass Woman: Muriel Rukeyser's Lost Feminist Essay 'Many Keys'" in *Feminist Modernist Studies* 1.1-2 (2018); an entire special issue of *Textual Practice* dedicated to Rukeyser's work in 2018 including Elisabeth Dacumer's "Wanting More from Mr. Eliot': Muriel Rukeyser, T. S. Eliot, and the Uses of Poetry," Catherine Gander's "Poetry as Embodied Experience: the Pragmatist Aesthetics of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*," Cecily Parks' "The Anticipation of Ecopoetics in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*," Stefania Heim's "Muriel Rukeyser's Experimental Feminine Poetics of War," Anne E. Fernald's "Resisting a Culture of War: Rukeyser and Woolf," Julian Murphet's "Astonied: the Mineral Poetics of Robinson Jeffers, Hugh MacDiarmid, Francis Ponge and Muriel Rukeyser," and Eric Keenaghan's "The Life of Politics: the Compositional History of *The Life of Poetry* and Muriel Rukeyser's Changing Appraisal of Emotion and Belief," among other articles; Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, "So Easy to See: Muriel Rukeyser and Berenice Abboott's Unfinished Collaboration" in *Literature and History* 28.1 (2019); Eleanor Careless, "Muriel Rukeyser and the Security of the Imagination: Poetry and Propaganda in 1940s America" in *Modernist Cultures* 14.4 (2019); Lukas Moe, "Elegy's Generation: Muriel Rukeyser, M. L. Rosenthal, and Poetry after the Left" in *Modern Language Quarterly* 80.2 (2019); Sam Huber, "Muriel Rukeyser 'among Wars': Feminist Internationalism in the Second Wave" in *American Literature* 93.4 (2021); Justin Parks, "Toward a Resource Poetics in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* and Mark Nowak's Coal Mountain Elementary" in *Textual Practice* 35.3 (2021); Trudi Witonsky, "'Something like Bringing the Entire Life': Muriel Rukeyser's Personal, Poetic and Social Development in the 1930s" in *Women's Studies*, 50.4 (2021); Alan Filreis, *1960: When Art and Literature Confronted the Memory of World War II and Remade the Modern* (2021); Aaron Rovin, "The Mother as Social Activist in Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead' and Maxo Vanka's *Murals*" in *Mosaic* 54.1 (2021).

The energies of readers and critics have secured Rukeyser's re-emergence as one of the indispensable visionaries of twentieth-century American literary history. Today, Rukeyser continues to wax as a prominent figure in American twentieth-century letters. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman's observation in 1999 still rings true: "to read her collected works is to track American history of the twentieth century, and to question with her the particular nature of the American imagination" (xv). She is a shimmering star especially in studies of political literature, a radical poet whose literary experiments reflect liberatory political ideas. Rukeyser is approached by contemporary readers as a radical working-class artist, or ethnic Jewish American poet, as a single parent writer, or as a feminist, or as an environmentally provocative thinker. A number of the provocative readings of *The Book of the Dead* forwarded in recent years—most prominently Catherine Venable Moore's introduction to West Virginia University Press' 2018 reprint of *The Book of the Dead*—view Rukeyser as a geographic agent, exploring the Gauley Bridge environs in an effort to uncover a concealed recent history. In readings like Moore's *The Book of the Dead* seems to demand a close engagement with Gauley Bridge.

But *The Book of the Dead* has not typically been studied within the regional context of the poet's home geography—that is, as the writing of a New York Cityite. Therefore, as it works to 'provincialize' Rukeyser, the rest of this unit will argue that *The Book of the Dead* is legible as a kind of regionalist work. On one hand, geographic space and particular places are doubtlessly important sources of meaning for Rukeyser's explorations throughout *U.S.I.* After all she describes the book itself, in the first edition's notes, as "a summary poem of the life of the Atlantic coast of this country" (*U.S.I.* 146). Yet going further I argue that the poem cycle also distinguishes itself as a New York City writer's text, that it participates in a distinctively northeastern tradition, one of 'outsider regionalism' which involves traveling to Appalachia and

engaging in social crusades there. Rukeyser's social exposé *The Book of the Dead* with its strong moral urgency and political dimensions, I will argue, comports with literary and journalistic trends that had sprung out of the complex social milieu of modern New York City.



## CHAPTER III

### CASE STUDY: MCNEILL AND RUKYSER—EXTRACTIVISM

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of “honest journalism” (whatever that may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money [ . . . ]; and that these people could be capable of meditating this prospect without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an “honest” piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval. (23)

-James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (“Preamble,” Book Two)

The epigraph above, written very early in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), finds Appalachia-born author and journalist James Agee condemning the most basic facts of his present project. The project was commissioned by *Fortune* magazine (with Evans commissioned by the federal government), who enlisted Agee and photographer Walker Evans to document U.S. cotton tenantry by looking at the daily lives of sharecropper families on Hobe’s Hill, seven miles from Cookstown, Alabama. An intense, often angry book resulted, with Evans’ photographs snapping cold, precise portraits and Agee’s reportage prose emitting a near-Biblical heat. Agee’s “obscene and thoroughly terrifying” (23) confession is like a knife held to the throat of documentary reportage itself.

The underlying assumption behind *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, common to documentary writing and art in the 1930s, was that by shining a light on American poverty, one

might eventually make things better. It was a conventional precept of the New Deal period that “[s]ocial documentary encourages social improvement” (Stott 21). Yet Agee ponders a grimmer possibility. Sent to record “the unpleasant situation down South,” Agee wonders: What really is the value of media based on representing real-life poverty (29)? Attesting to the “extreme corruptness and difficulty of the circumstances, and the unlikelihood of achieving in any untainted form” his goals (23-4), Agee wonders whether he is not just a kind of parasite on the sharecropping families about whom he writes. Moral reservations did not ultimately prevent Agee from completing (and publishing) his book. Nevertheless, they did lead him to write a concise and powerful statement of skepticism toward media based on “poverty viewed at a distance” (29), one which still feels relevant after eighty years.

Agee’s statement of moral skepticism, excerpted above, is relevant here because it grasps at an *illicit extractive cultural mode* that locates, extracts, and hawks local cultural resources. As Agee understands here, doing work in this extractive cultural mode is “to pry intimately” (23) into places one does not quite belong in a way that publicly subordinates certain cultural regions. It is not only that he occupies a higher social rank than his subject that disturbs Agee, but that as the uniquely mobile researcher he is free to come and go. Motoring to the South, Agee (and even his readers) have rudely entered a foreign region as intruders. Agee pictures “the wide wild opening of the tragic land” (24) and frets about entering there. “[I]nnocent of such twistings,” the Alabama tenant families

were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of still others more alien; and that they are now being looked into by still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book [ . . . ]. (Agee 27-8)

Agee’s thinking is deeply geographic in this Preamble. Spatial relations, between himself, his employer, his research subjects, and his audience, are what primarily define this moral calculus.

The final sum is terrifying for him. As a Tennessean transplanted to Maine, and now professionally employed to spend time on the clay plateau of Hobe's Hill in Alabama, Agee's feelings about his regional outsider status are bleak (in a robust sense of the word) as he condemns Evans' and his research, in the grand scale, as very possibly nothing more than

the virulent, insolent, deceitful, pitying, infinitesimal and frenzied running and searching, on this colossal peasant map, of two angry, futile and bottomless, botched and overcomplicated youthful intelligences [ . . . ] in the frightening vanity of their would-be purity [ . . . ] (Agee 24-5)

While defending his extremely poor writing subjects, and belittling himself, Agee shows a decisively regional sensibility. The South is a "colossal peasant map," a "six-thousand-mile parade," a "tragic land," and a "garden of faces" (23-24). It is a place for travelers to go see. By theorizing an illicit extractive mode of cultural production, and by envisioning this mode of cultural production as something defining the relationships between geographic regions, Agee sets the stage for this study of Louise McNeill's and Muriel Rukeyser's poetic visions of West Virginia.

It could be argued that modernity has meant, for Appalachia, total commodification. Things like rail transportation, electrification, and paved roads, came late. When they did arrive, they followed extractive industrial projects when they came for the trees, minerals, fuels, and other materials that were found in Appalachia's stony, treed highlands. This occurred most intensively during a period between the 1870s and the 1930s. But these are not the only things for which outsiders came to the region during that period.

Folklorists, ethnographers, musicologists, and journalists traveled the mountains for imagery, characters, lore, and song. Between 1934 and 1943, Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographic unit sent ten photographers to the coalfields of West

Virginia.<sup>39</sup> Ballad hunters especially found that the high narrow valleys of West Virginia and Kentucky were especially rich with potential materials. The explosion of commercial country music which followed on the heels of the twenties boom in hillbilly record production—Appalachians played a prominent role—can be viewed as yet another analogue within this trend of collecting and marketing American folkways for the culture industry.

Each song, ballad, and tale recorded in scholarly and popular works can be understood both positively, as an instance of textual archiving of ethnic folkways in libraries, and negatively, as an instance of cultural commodification.<sup>40</sup> When viewed through the lens of history alongside timber and fuel extraction, these many different projects compiling knowledge of Appalachia appear, as an appendage of a single extractive assemblage which modified so much of the region's ecologies and societies.

While Agee does not explicitly discuss the ways his book project parallels extractive industry in the mountain south, he does not flinch from describing it as a non-reciprocal and vaguely predatory endeavor. One of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s merits is its frank assessment, with the first person "I," of the real moral peril that attends the documenting of hardship, and the putting of it on display for those more comfortable. And as Agee's moral quandary suggests, the regional insider collaborates in this society-wide program of extractivism. Appalachians are not passive victims but are often participants in extraction, industrial or cultural, either as workers or planners for extractive operations, or in resistance efforts against

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<sup>39</sup> The ten photographers sent by the Farm Security Administration to photograph life in the West Virginia coalfields were John Collier, Jr., Walker Evans, Edwin Locke, Carl Mydans, Elmer "Ted" Johnson, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, Arthur Siegel, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott. West Virginia University Press released a collection of 150 of their black and white photographs in the 2012 book *New Deal Photographs of West Virginia, 1934-1943*, edited by Betty Rivard.

<sup>40</sup> Writing itself can be described as a commodification and technologization of the spoken word (Ong 131, 173).

those operations. McNeill's family had gotten into the extraction business, selling off timber rights and, in G.D.'s case, working as a bookkeeper for logging companies. All the same they were deeply hurt by the ecological catastrophe of clear cutting, as seen in nearly all of McNeill's writing, but especially in the story of "over Bonnie" in McNeill's autobiography.

In this historical context *Gauley Mountain* is legible as an extracted cultural commodity. We cannot pretend that McNeill wrote exclusively to Appalachians. Taking McNeill's *Gauley Mountain* manuscript to New York, Archibald MacLeish follows the extractive conduit, moving northward on rail out of the Allegheny mountains through Pennsylvanian foothills, generally taken by the lumber, ore, and fuel as it made its way to the forges and mills of northern and midwestern cities.

However briefly, the national poetry printing market took notice of *Gauley Mountain*, and McNeill established a reputation, however minor, within it. Made up of ballad tales drawn from a remote West Virginian town, the manuscript's status as authentic ethnic literature, with all the particularity and charisma that implied, indicated an opportunity for wider consumption and ideally, for the New York publishing firm, some profit. American desires and anxieties, not only about modernization, but also about notions of ethnicity and race, provide a salient context for *Gauley Mountain*. This context casts the book as participant, to some degree, in a mode of cultural extraction.

*The Book of the Dead*, growing out of Muriel Rukeyser's 1936 personal investigations of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, is comparably an easier target for James Agee's criticism. As the work of a regional outsider depicting life on the ground in a poor rural village, *The Book of the Dead* more overtly employs an extractive mode of cultural production. While my project does not psychoanalyze its authors, a symbolic resemblance between Rukeyser's poetic research

methods and her father's sandmining business is difficult to resist. Condemning callous extractivism, Rukeyser's early poetry (especially in *Theory of Flight's* "Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures," "The Tunnel," and "The Structure of the Plane"; all of *The Book of the Dead*) raises the issue of this symbolic resemblance. For example, the poetic speaker's feeble rejection of her father's sandmining business in "Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures"—she becomes outraged when she realizes her own last name is inscribed in the company foundation stone—is recommenced in *The Book of the Dead* and taken to new lengths. The degraded contours of Alloy, West Virginia, which Rukeyser observed in 1936, a town with a "vicious" and "commercial" landscape—

Crystalline hill: a blinded field of white  
murdering snow, seamed by convergent tracks;  
the travelling cranes reach for the silica. (*U.S. I* 47)

—are not totally unlike those degraded contours in Port Washington, where Rukeyser had seen "the blasted scene" of its "ruined marshlands" and gaping sandpits (*CP* 15). Therefore, Rukeyser's critique of Union Carbide's operations in Gauley Bridge (as conveyed by the poems "The River," "Power," and "The Dam", which show us a site of energy extraction, and by the poems "Alloy," "George Robinson: Blues," and "The Disease: After-Effects," which show us a site of silica extraction) not only accord with biographical understandings of 1930s Rukeyser as a rebellious, centripetal force for creative dissent. They also hint at a poet who conscientiously objected to Colonial Sand & Stone's operations in Port Washington, or at least to her own personal implication in those operations. Because she was so disposed toward viewing the relationship between different elements, Rukeyser's harrowing experience visiting silicotic Gauley Bridge in 1936 could have recalled memories of her own personal implication in the

business of resource extraction, an experience she did not keep secret but had already recounted in *Theory of Flight*.

A simplistic view of *The Book of the Dead* as *only* a veiled attack on sand mining is obviously reductive, however. While Rukeyser family tensions do offer a worthwhile context for approaching the long poem, the basic fact of the poet's biographical proximity to extractive operations too can enrich our sense of its achievement without the need to ascribe any particular psychological motives to her. One factor worth considering in a historicist reading of *The Book of the Dead* might be the effect on a young person of imaginatively associating Lower Manhattan's monumental skyline with Port Washington's sand quarries. Picture Rukeyser as a young student and writer in 1920s and 1930s New York City, a person familiar to a peculiar extent (thanks to her proximity to the sand and gravel industry) with both the city's downtown skyscrapers and Port Washington's sandpits and worker subdivisions. How could it be that the city's vaulted structures of concrete and glass could be fashioned out of the innumerable grains of sand quarried by her father's employees? How could such structures be engineered to endure? When the sand pits can no longer be widened or deepened, can the city continue to pile itself higher? Understanding the material excess of the skyscraper meant understanding the absence of the sand pit. It makes *The Book of the Dead* all the more interesting to consider what most readings have ignored—that is, Rukeyser's own personal proximity to the business of resource extraction.

My highlighting of this aspect of Rukeyser's life suggests no moral or social equivalence between the poet's and Colonial Sand & Stone's operations. It instead argues that Rukeyser's documentary poem *The Book of the Dead* exhibits a culturally extractive approach, a designation one might apply to a range of documentary poetics: Charles Reznikoff's reworking of court

testimonial transcripts in *Testimony* (1934-1978); James Agee's observations as a "spy" in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941); Ernesto Cardenal's reworking of Latin American history in *The Narrow Strait* (1995); Natasha Trethewey's historical documentary poems in *Native Guard* (2006); and Mark Nowak's collection of "appropriated texts" (Shea 4), *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2008). Perhaps what is most intriguing about this biographical reading of *The Book of the Dead* is the distinct possibility that Rukeyser knows full well what she is doing, that she knows she is doing what men like her father do: finding resources, extracting them, and refining them into usefulness. But she is doing things differently. She works toward her own ends.

Approaching *The Book of the Dead* as metapoetry in this vein recasts *The Book of the Dead* as not only an exposé of Union Carbide's horrific corporate criminality but also a conscious redirection of extractivist impulses inherent in the Rukeyser family trade in sand. Congressional records, personal statements, photographs, maps, and first-hand observations: Rukeyser engineers a conceptual structure out of these diverse materials. Where Lawrence had built skyscrapers, Muriel would build her own designs in her own trade. As an extractor not of gravel and sand but of materials surrounding the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster, the poet would construct between 1936 and 1938 a kind of textual monument to the Hawk's Nest dead. *The Book of the Dead* is a monument like Crane's long poem *The Bridge* (1930) is a monument. It looms large, a sprawling piece with pronounced style, marking the literary landscape to all who pass by. (The state of West Virginia, on the other hand, in a continuing failure to honor the victims of Hawk's Nest, would not erect a public memorial to these workers until 2012).<sup>41</sup>

Processes involving the synthesis of disparate parts into some well-engineered whole, or into some functioning machine, has been an important motive for literary modernists. From an

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<sup>41</sup> See Wendy Holdren, "Hawk's Nest Workers Finally Memorialized" in *The Fayette Tribune* (September 12, 2012).



ecological standpoint, new ways of refining and manipulating materials and elements can be said to have transformed life in the modern period as much as anything else. Concrete, steel, and glass production, combined with electrification infrastructure transformed the living environments of advanced nations.<sup>42</sup> Chemical researchers concocted and isolated new compounds which extended human life.<sup>43</sup> Modern writers adopted the jargon of chemistry and industry to understand matters of art, such as the writing of poetry. T. S. Eliot in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” wrote (suggestively for the present study) that

[t]he poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. (45)

Eliot’s theory likens the poet to the chemist or the engineer, figures of increasing power in modern society. Accordingly the factory, workshop, and laboratory provide Eliot with useful metaphors for the work done by poets, and even poetry. Poetic ideas for Eliot exist only “in suspension in the poet’s mind until the proposed combination arrives for it to add itself to” (45). Indeed the “medium” of poetry itself represents for Eliot a kind of vat “in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (47). While Eliot’s formulation suggests a sense not of poetry’s power but of its *lack* of power in a society dominated by scientific research and Henry Ford’s new production techniques, it also hints that a modern way of thinking has already taken hold in poetry. Scientific, rational, and industrious, the poet can extract and combine useful ingredients from the chaotic physical world.

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<sup>42</sup> In the interwar years, newly discovered metal alloys and breakthroughs in the science of production led to new commodities like aerosol cans, loudspeakers, Band-Aids, sunglasses, televisions, radios, electric stoves, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators which changed home life. The liquid-fueled rockets of the twenties and the passenger airplanes of the thirties radically expanded the potential for human mobility.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, in 1922 a working insulin for humans was created by researchers in Ontario; in 1922, Vitamin E was discovered in leafy plants by researchers in California; in 1928 a Scottish researcher discovered penicillin.

Undertaking a project of cultural extraction, Rukeyser demonstrates Eliot's principle by "storing up" data and observations and assembling an artistic whole out of them. *The Book of the Dead*, one scholar has pointed out, "echoes [the] fervor for the modern and 'perfected'" even while it shows "how modernization can imperil the body" (S. Hartman 218). Rukeyser's lifelong interests in matters of scientific theory and the philosophy of science, and her special absorption in pondering the unseen relations between things, help to lend credibility to this analogy between the documentary and concrete construction and design. A number of Rukeyser's readers conclude that her poems are driven by an urge to unite the small fragments of modern life into some larger whole. As Kertesz argues, Rukeyser's hopeful attempts to overcome in her poetry the fragmentation of twentieth-century life set her firmly apart from other modernist poets including T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, and Robinson Jeffers who, on the other hand, "see no hope in the modernity of the modern world" (94). Synthesis of extracted materials is the general process underlying both Rukeyser's lyricism, which aims to engineer a "mythic structure" which stands for something approximating human justice and potential (Kertesz 86)—again the critical language of architecture, of rhetorical monuments—and the sand and concrete firm in which Lawrence Rukeyser was for some time a partner.

In "Vivian Jones: The Face of the Dam," a characteristically complex lyric poem in *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser suggests her close-up awareness of extractive thinking. Vivian, local locomotive engineer, observes the water at the mouth of the tunnel, and reflects on the tunnel project.

On the quarter he remembers how they enlarged  
the tunnel and the crews, finding the silica,  
how the men came riding freights, got jobs here  
and went into the tunnel mouth to stay. (*U.S.I* 18)

But the man's sense of energy—both energy captured and energy wasted—in Rukeyser's next stanza delivers an incisive and haunting concept of extractivism:

Never to be used, he thinks, never to spread its power,  
jinx on the rock, curse on the power-plant,  
hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass  
(O the gay wind the clouds the many men). (*U.S.I* 18)

As Stephanie Hartman argues compellingly, *The Book of the Dead* masterfully conveys a critical awareness of energy and the real impacts of energy technologies and systems on human beings and their relations (216). Here, Rukeyser takes readers into the extractive viewpoint and reveals the sort of logic that led to these hundreds of laborer deaths. Vivian Jones sees beauty in the resource's capacity to "spread its power." There is both cruelty and precision in the engineer's sense of lost energy and lost profits as silica dust that could have been put to use in Union Carbide's electrometallurgical plant, filled and hardened in the lungs of tunneling crews. Not only the silica compound but the New river itself, churning against the Hawk's Nest Dam, is visible in this poem as a mystic source of untapped energy. Taking the reader up the gorge of Hawk's Nest to look "over the dam," Vivian sees the power waiting to be collected:

On the half-hour he's at Hawk's Nest over the dam,  
snow springs up as he reaches the great wall-face,  
immense and pouring power, the mist of snow,  
the fallen mist, the slope of water, glass.

O the gay snow the white dropped water, down,  
all day the water rushes down its river,  
unused, has done its death-work in the country,  
proud gorge and festive water. (*U.S.I* 19)

As if the hydroelectric energy of the river is itself calling for exploitation, it appears here in an "unused" condition. For Vivian this loss of energy, represented by the river's flowing force, is a tragedy. Bringing this uncomfortable perspective to the page, Rukeyser's poem thus pursues the problem of extractivism not only materially but as an ideology. By using diction that is

inappropriate for the grave situation at Hawk's Nest ("gay arches of water"; "gay snow"; "proud gorge and festive water") these lines clash with the elegiac tone of *The Book of the Dead* and they ring hollow. The poem functions as an ironic antithesis to the pro-worker, anti-capitalist arguments which are the rhetorical heart of *The Book of the Dead*.

Rukeyser's depiction of this extractivist notion of free power, there to take, is so effective that it leads Kertesz to the bold statement that the power in nature is "the central fact" (100) in West Virginia as represented in *The Book of the Dead*. McNeill was already charting the extractivist, industrialist way of thinking in *Theory of Flight's* compelling portrait of a coal mining community, "The Tunnel." In that poem, one stanza seems to photographically frame an unemployed coal miner in front of a mountain. The stanza in question underscores the miner's dire straits, being out of work—the miner is eager to get back to mining—by again highlighting the 'unused' condition of the coal which remains underground:

Behind his shoulder stands the black mountain  
of unbought coal, green-topped with grass growing  
rank in the shag, as if coal were native earth  
and the top a green snowing (Rukeyser CP 31-2)

Again here there is a sort of tragedy in the resource being left in an unexploited state. A precursor to "Vivian Jones: The Dam," this poem points out how the "unbought" or unexploited condition of a resource is itself constructed as a problem in the human mind. It is not hard to imagine how growing up with her father, the extractive industrialist, might have exposed Rukeyser to a similar ethos from a young age. There is a celebration here of the readiness of the earth to provide fuels and materials, and a sense of the basic availability of nature's energy.

These deliberations on the availability of earthly energy are complicated for both poets compared here. Later, McNeill would write a poem about the Monongahela River which noted how the waterway "works without hire":

This north-flowing river so heavy with freight  
Toils slowly to Pittsburgh, and carries its weight  
Of all the humped barges, coal-heavy and black  
That ride by the millions of tons on its back.

[ . . . ]

The steel-weight, the coal-weight, the flames for the fire,  
And it toils through the mountains,

And works without hire. (*EF* 127)

McNeill's phrasing, typically more direct than Rukeyser's, is suggestive for this investigation of extractive culture. It is important to remember that what McNeill sees in the freighted Monongahela River, and what Rukeyser sees in the dammed New River, are precisely what Union Carbide saw: a free source of energy waiting to be extracted and put to use. The designers of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel succeeded in making the New River work 'without hire.' The materials Rukeyser finds, the likenesses and personas of real people involved in the tunnel tragedy, also work without hire; testimonies of tunnelers, committee members, doctors, etc., also all work without hire. Copying and interpreting the testimonies of those available—including those of the dead—Rukeyser as an investigator in West Virginia could look upon the Hawk's Nest document cache as similarly ready for exploitation. Rukeyser is adept at turning the banal testimonies and reports into literary assets. *The Book of the Dead* demonstrates better than anything else Rukeyser wrote how capable the poet was in transforming nonliterary documents into poetic resources—the basic ingredients for a publishable long poem.

Interpreting the lives and deaths of workers, copying and interpreting the words of the dead, Rukeyser makes the most of 'unused' Gauley Bridge figures and materials. One even senses a recognition of the violence of investigation itself in the poem "Absalom." In that poem, Rukeyser quotes the haunting last words of boy dying from silicosis contracted in the tunnel:

The youngest boy did not get to go down there with me,  
he lay and said, "Mother, when I die,

I want you to have them open me up and  
see if that dust killed me.  
Try to get compensation. (*U.S.1* 28)

Depicting the investigative act using the brutally violent imagery of a boy's chest being cut open and his lungs removed by doctors, Rukeyser symbolically faces the pain that will be caused by embedding the tunnel tragedy within the spectacle of her creative writing project. What does it mean to make a literary asset out of the last words a dying boy? Do *The Book of the Dead's* informants "get compensation"? This is a difficult set of questions that Rukeyser's critics have not been eager to answer. But it will matter for Rukeyser scholars to ask, as Agee asks, whether it is conscionable

to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money [ . . . ]. (Agee 23)

With its repellent imagery, "Absalom" is, above all else, a clear condemnation of the unjust relief effort and criminal investigation into the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster. Yet on a secondary level, it begins to confront Agee's difficult questions, and the terrible possibility that, despite its critique of exploitative industry, *The Book of the Dead* still follows earlier models of exploiting Appalachia and Appalachians for their useful resources.

To situate McNeill within this same geography of cultural extraction requires a more extensive context. Like so many cultural producers of the 1930s and 1940s who were affiliated with region—magic-thumbed Merle Travis and jazz wonder Louis Armstrong were subject to similar pressures, as the second unit of this project illustrates—McNeill was published and read in a particular *Zeitgeist* that sought out authenticity and was busily discovering, or rather

constructing, “the folk.” McNeill was one of many singers from rural America whose 1930s publications gained some attention in the wider world as representative of that phenomenon, the American folk. This was the opinion of Louis Untermeyer, writing at the close of the decade (399-403). With more than a few of its poems appearing in national magazines prior to the book’s publication, and with reviews featured in *Poets and Poetry*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The English Journal*, *Gauley Mountain* indisputably reached urban society and the nation’s leisure class.

But what exactly lent a text like *Gauley Mountain* value? What makes any folk resource valuable? As Jane S. Becker has convincingly shown in *Selling Tradition*, middle-class Americans in the 1930s constructed notions of ‘the folk’ and ‘folk tradition’ in order to rationalize unfamiliar cultures, judge the quality of works of art and entertainment, and perhaps most importantly, “to understand the relationship between the present and what often seemed like a very disparate past” (38). At this time, mainstream U.S. culture reacted to the industrial order, imposed in the late 1800s and cemented in the early 1900s, by enshrining, in their public and private lives, the preindustrial artisan as an ideal and a touchstone (Becker 4). The realness of this artisan figure could be felt firsthand if you, as many Americans during the Depression did, sought an artisan out. And you could do this

on festival and theater stages, over the radio and in recordings, at county fairs and museum exhibitions, in popular magazines and published fiction, and through department stores and mail-order catalogues. (Becker 5)

It has become a commonplace to imagine 1930s writers, ballad hunters, social and political reformers, scholars, folksong collectors, craft revivalists, photographers, and journalists turning away from the glamour of the Roaring Twenties toward the dirt-encrusted life and customs of everyday, poor Americans, so we may exaggerate things in our minds. But there is some truth to

this commonplace. Although an all-embracing industrialism is a normal part of life for most of us today in the twenty-first century, the 1930s experienced a more visceral unease with the social and cultural results of extensive industrialization. They could have this experience, and as a result could favor certain kinds of art and entertainment, because some of the people alive then had memories of a much less industrialized way of life. Many Americans of purchasing age, voting age, and who were socially connected enough to influence opinions of the day, had the capacity to feel that feeling which made folk art so attractive: “nostalgia for a rapidly disappearing world” (Becker 19). It was a world that many rural and ex-rural Americans of the 1930s and 1940s knew, or at least felt that they knew. The modern person’s fascination with the primitive, Becker argues, is really nothing less than a reaction to what appeared to be a universal extinction of a once-solid social world. This world could be manifested in hand-made quilts and handed-down folklore. In other words, during the wide-ranging push toward U.S. national standardization that took place in those decades, a remembrance of the past, just as wide-ranging, simultaneously occurred. And as Regina Bendix has demonstrated, this remembrance influenced popular taste with its emphasis on authenticity.

But like any ideal, the notion of the folk artist that gained such currency in the thirties was an abstraction. Establishing their own American normativity, bourgeois America used the abstract paradigm of the rural Appalachian white as a convenient foil for what they deemed themselves to be: modernized, salaried, rational. Sometimes the point of making this distinction was to valorize Appalachians as robust, modern-day pioneers, sometimes to satirize the mountaineer’s shiftless and leisurely ways, sometimes to warn of the mountaineer’s interpersonal dangerousness, sometimes to reform Appalachian family, religion, and society, and sometimes it was to celebrate the mountaineer as enviably free from the stress of a material age. As Berea



College President William Goodell Frost's characterization of Appalachians in 1899 as "our contemporary ancestors in the southern mountains" clearly underscores, Appalachia appeared (often still appears to many) as being out of step with the rest of the nation. The cultural and geographic remoteness felt by middle-class and upper-class readers to, for instance, the poor West Virginian families they encountered in New Deal photojournalism, registered also as a temporal distance. Vernacular culture appeared to many—appears to many still—as an entry-point into the past itself.

Romance is that narrative mode that probably best suits that feeling of temporal distance. This factor may explain romance's vitality well into industrial period<sup>44</sup> and some of the appeal that McNeill's book possessed for its contemporary readers. It certainly appealed to Stephen Vincent Benet, whose Foreword to *Gauley Mountain*'s 1939 first edition praises McNeill as an inheritor of an American narrative romance tradition and builds a defensive bastion around this tradition. His message seems meant to provoke, as he states that the book has

a certain romantic touch here and there—some critics may not like it. But there is, unfortunately, a certain amount of romance involved in the settling of a new country. Men do do extraordinary and colorful things. Miss McNeill hasn't stinted the color—she also hasn't stinted the truth. (xiii)

Benet's promotion of McNeill's book suggests more than that Harcourt Brace felt confident in the existence of an audience for *Gauley Mountain*, making it a potentially profitable work. It tells us that, in Benet's view, storytelling techniques of romance adhere not only to beauty but to

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<sup>44</sup> Under the guise of 'speculative fiction,' Anglophone romance narrative proved lastingly significant for both British fiction (in works by Mary Shelley, William Morris, Lord Dunsany, H.G. Wells, Mervyn Peake, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Douglas Adams, and J. K. Rowling) and American fiction (in works by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jack London, H.P. Lovecraft, Madeline L'Engle, Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip José Farmer, Octavia E. Butler, and R. F. Kuang) well into the industrial and postindustrial periods.

truth. Because “[m]en do do extraordinary things,” he reasons, McNeill “hasn’t stinted the truth” when telling extraordinary stories.

The balance here is delicate. Benet is careful to distinguish *Gauley Mountain* from the period’s excessively sugary depictions of the American folk:

There is a sort of Ye Olde Colonial Tea Shoppe air to a good many self-styled ‘American poems’—there isn’t a trace of it in Miss McNeill. She has come to her work by birthright, not through a self-conscious attempt to follow a fashion in Americana and the work shows it. (*GM* xii)

Benet’s comments prove that the icons and tone colors of Americana—still a robust cultural formation today in the 2020s—were by the onset of World War II already grating on critical sensibilities. Untutored pioneer romances, on the other hand, composed in the rural pockets of the nation, were another matter. They might truly manifest Americana. Harmonizing color with truth in its depictions of the American past, untutored pioneer romances were preferable to, on one hand, the ‘high’ modernists’ self-conscious prioritization of style choices or “fashion,” and on the other hand, the touristy “Tea-Shoppe” kitsch mass-produced by the 1930s folk arts and crafts industry. What McNeill had and these others lacked was “birthright”—a natural set of skills, a subconscious talent.

As both a prolific member of the international Anglophone literati and the unabashed author of an epic verse romance of the American Civil War, Benet obviously had considerable stake in the critical legacy and future of American narrative romance. This likely explains in part his efforts to emphasize the genuineness of McNeill’s ballad romances, and their capacity to utter poetic and historic truths. In Benet’s judgment, McNeill’s poems are worthwhile because they are authentic works, despite the fantastic elements of that mode. He praises what he perceives as the poems’ lack of self-consciousness:

There is nothing pretentious about ‘Gauley.’ Miss McNeill’s rhythms and meters are simple, direct, and forceful. She sings as naturally as her people speak and there is both salt and melody in the tune. (*GM* xiii)

Benet’s commentary echoes wider social currents which stereotype the Appalachian as a gifted entertainer.

Though it may not come readily to mind for literary historians, I believe the marketing and reception of *Gauley Mountain* was inflected by the craze for hillbilly records that kindled in 1920s America, when recording equipment became portable enough to take into the homes of Appalachian musicians. Appalachia’s rising star in the commercial recording industry gave currency to the ready metaphor of the mountain fiddler on which Benet seizes. How do we know *Gauley Mountain* is “a genuine piece of work” (*GM* xiii)? Because in it, McNeill sings “simply and tunably to the high, shrill notes of the mountain fiddle” (*GM* xiii). And because of that undeniable Appalachian musicality, her poems imply “the veracity of folk music” (Benet xiii). To summarize Benet’s perspective, *Gauley Mountain* is authentic in the same way that West Virginia fiddle tunes are. In his view, they lack artifice and pretense, and so as a genuine expression of regional culture, they offer a glimpse of the ‘real’ America.

Benet’s value judgments here highlight how much Anglo-American society worried with ideas of purity and contamination, fearing that modern trends threatened to contaminate all that was once pure. “The pure” also carries a sense of ‘the real’ or ‘the true.’ Hence artifice (a kind of contaminant on literature and the arts) was viewed with such disdain. If modernization connotes a loss of romance, as Wayland Hand (qtd. Green *OAM* 16) asserted in a study of Appalachian industrial miner songs, and finally in the loss of traditional culture itself, as the famous English ballad hunter Cecil Sharp argued in his collection of Appalachian folk ballads (xvi), then modernization threatens what is “real” and “true” (in that sense which include the ‘truth’ value of

narrative romance). In the literary arts, trends in modernism were revolutionizing the way artists could apply style and artifice to achieve novel effects.

Traditional literary forms and techniques were discarded to an unprecedented degree, following the 1910s, suggesting the vulnerability of American letters to modernization. Similarly, the unremitting rate of modernization, not in the arts but in daily life, motivated some thinkers including Sharp to reflect on the vulnerability of culture more generally. Perceiving the assimilative effects of newly built rural schoolhouses on West Virginian children's speech, Sharp asserted the necessity of children actively learning lifeways at home rather than at school, writing that "culture is primarily a matter of inheritance and not of education" (xxxvi). Parents and grandparents, not teachers, critics, or writers, were the proper guardians of culture. In this context, McNeill's translation of Pocahontas County lore, which was a family inheritance, into verse romance could very much appear on aesthetic grounds as a cry of resistance against modernization—a flicker of the real in a literary landscape of fashion and pretense.

In certain regards playing the regionally marked writer was advantageous. McNeill likely benefited, in a commercial sense, from the fact that the American folk revival in music and in crafts during the thirties coincided with the moment at which the people of the southern Appalachian mountains were "popularly recognized as America's folk" (Becker 3). People were primed by popular media to accept, despite all we know about how education and literature influenced McNeill, that *Gauley Mountain* contained the untutored intuitions of a hillbilly sage. In the decades just before McNeill's birth—the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s—the Appalachian was used, as a stock character or as a research subject, to represent the American white in a primal condition. Based on this cultural logic of regional difference, how could an Appalachian be anything but a Country Mouse? For decades and decades before its publication, the same

American audiences who clamored for the minstrel show also jeered at stock Appalachian “hick” characters who, like minstrelsy’s contented slave “sambo” characters, aroused both a sense of superiority as well as a vicarious love for the noble savage. In part because mass audiences delighted in whatever they deemed primitive, stories of shiftless or violent mountaineers surged from the 1880s to the 1940s, a time when poor Appalachians migrated to cities and towns outside the region.

These stories of the shiftless or violent include popular myths such as that of the historical Hatfield and McCoy families, belligerents in an almost thirty-year feud throughout the late 1800s along the Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River in West Virginia and Kentucky, or that of the Kentucky clairvoyant Edgar Cayce (1877-1946), whose trance-visits in the otherworld have been proclaimed true prophetic vision. As reinforced by common descriptions of banjo playing and church singing that were written by travel writers such as Cecil Sharp, Appalachians were supposed to be uncorrupted by modern times, free from the pursuit of money, wilder, and less blunted by the civilizing world. This fascination did not subside as modernization increasingly brought Appalachia into step with the national mainstream. The ‘hick’ or ‘hillbilly’ of the nineteenth-century popular vaudeville stage, a threatening, murderous figure at times tragic and at times villainous, did not perish, but lived on in the twentieth century in radio and television media as a softer-edged Country Mouse represented by figures like *Hee-Haw*’s David “Stringbean” Akeman or *The Beverly Hillbillies*’ Clampett family. In popular culture the Appalachian had the kind of natural, in-born traits of irrationality that make for good entertainment; displays such as string band virtuosity, mystic prophecy, or gunsmoke blood-feuding proved it.

How do scholars explain this primitivist fascination? Recent scholarship posits a powerful racial element to the national interest in Appalachia during the modern period. Much has been written about the ideological construction of Appalachia, in the decades leading up to and including the 1930s, as a base of ethnic white cultural resources for a socially anxious and multicultural twentieth century. The most pressing concerns of the era, involving race, industrialism, and economic depression, are connected with, on one hand, an anti-black reaction to Reconstruction in the South, and on the other hand, a xenophobic reaction to waves of immigrants whose arrival in the country threatened to upend the racial order of the nation. The American social elite, a largely white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (commonly abbreviated as WASP) class, experienced “a deepening anxiety that the United States was rapidly losing its status as a preeminent Anglo-Saxon nation” (I. Hartman), and so responded to immigration panic by elaborating the science and mythology of white racial stock. Darlene Wilson writes about the “crises of identity and purpose” which grew out of new pressures on U.S. racial hierarchy and led whites to “legislative remedies” such as nativist anti-immigration laws, eugenics policies, and institutionalized racial segregation (100). “Homogeneity topped the agenda” in the first several decades of the American twentieth century (Wilson 100). Likewise, the education system undertook a rigorous project aiming to assimilate Native and immigrant groups into the U.S. settler nation.

Because of the significant presence of the Scots-Irish ethnic group in Appalachia, many in the early part of the century were convinced that the genetic future of Anglo-Saxonry in the United States was being stored within their “contemporary ancestors” in white communities of Appalachia. This idea has had lasting traction, buoyed by writings like Madison Grant’s Theodore Roosevelt’s four-volume race history *The Winning of the West*; William Goodell

Frost's "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" (in the March 1899 issue of *The Atlantic*); Edward A. Ross' *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order* (1901); *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* (1916); John C. Campbell's *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (1921); *Our Southern Highlanders* by Horace Kephart; *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (1965). Cultural historians have convincingly shown that the nation needed an exceptional region to work out these anxieties about race. Henry D. Shapiro, Allen Batteau, and others<sup>45</sup> have influentially argued at book length that Appalachia is an ideological construct, born during the half-century between 1870 and 1920 out of the intellectual need to reconcile basic assumptions about American civilization with the otherness of Appalachia as it was being defined by tourists, missionaries, and local color writers. Integrating critical theory more openly into this discussion, Ian Hartman has configured the mountain south as "the literary and discursive creation of the era's imperial anxieties as well as its racial and gender instabilities." Upland southern whiteness, deeply invested with meanings, became a canvas on which to plumb the American past and predict the American future.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The invention of Appalachia as a concept has been described in two influential book-length histories, *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978) by Henry D. Shapiro and *The Invention of Appalachia* (1990) by Allen W. Batteau.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed critical excavation of the writings of thinkers who interpreted Appalachian whiteness throughout U.S. history, see Ian C. Hartman's *In the Shadow of Boone and Crockett: Race, Culture, and the Politics of Representation in the Upland South* (2015). For a wide-ranging history of race in Appalachia, see *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation* (2001) edited by John C. Inscoe. A special strength of Inscoe's book is its attention to the ways industrial extractivism, and not just industrial plantation agriculture, shaped racial experience in Appalachia. As the writers in this anthology show, extractive industries participated in chattel slavery, contract and coercion labor, and created multiracial contact zones, as revealed by the historical study of places like the gold mines of northern Georgia during the 1829 gold rush, Buffalo Forge of Virginia, the Kanawha Salt Mines of West Virginia, and the expanding railroad complex of southwest Virginia. One of the most deeply researched and detailed histories of Appalachia and race is Inscoe's *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (2008), which deals with the remembering of interpreting of the Civil War from antebellum Appalachia to the Appalachia of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (1997).

Unsurprisingly, early 1900s social thinkers and race pseudoscientists had many conflicting theories about what exactly that future was. For some, the Appalachian white represented “a genetic reservoir and defense that could effectively thwart the permanent alteration of the United States” racial stock (I. Hartman). For example, Harvard paleontologist Nathaniel Southgate Shaler in his *Kentucky: A Pioneer Commonwealth* (1884) argued, in Hartman’s paraphrase, that “the manly acquisition of property and a deeply seated desire to engage in fierce and constant struggle were inherent” to the Kentucky pioneer. Statements and writings of the Progressive Era, made by a range of race thinkers including Shaler, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, and Indiana senator Albert Beveridge, suggest to Hartman that

The forbidding hills and treacherous hollows of the U.S. south were the decisive stages upon which the mythic trope of United States exceptionalism, embedded as it was with notions of frontier masculinity and western expansion, was first set. (I. Hartman)

For these very influential thinkers, themselves influenced by local color novels like John Fox, Jr.’s novel of the Cumberland Mountains, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908), the Appalachian way of living was based in pioneer strength and reflected the superiority and aggressive vigor of the Anglo-Saxon people. This ideology, which linked pure masculinity and femininity with the hardy life of the frontier, evinced the same race sentimentality that lay at the heart of Theodore Roosevelt’s “Teutonic thesis” and the writings of Stanford sociologist Edward Ross. Apparently free from the stifling dictates of Puritan culture, municipal police stations, and factory jobs, the white mountaineer of the upland south, imagined this way, was instrumentalized in the rhetoric of intellectuals bent on theorizing racial identity.

Yet poverty and social deviancy among white Appalachians confronted travelers to the region. This “troubling moral and behavioral decline” they saw shocked them nastily with “a calamitous case of racial failure” that threatened no less than to explode these myths of inherent



Anglo-Saxon superiority (Hartman). They wrote extensively about lax manners, moral deficiency, and feudal backwardness as staples of mountain life. Frequently, missionaries and academics who entered Appalachia sought evidence there of Anglo-Saxon virtue and strength, as well as the innate proneness to law and order. But

In fact, those who spent any significant time in the rural expanse of the southern hills reported an outright lack of law and order, a subversion of all that was allegedly innate to this so-called strong race. (Hartman)

Even Roosevelt himself, by the time he wrote the third volume of *The Winning of the West* (1889), revised his view of white Appalachia to include a sinister class of “poor whites” or “crackers,” who were

lank, sallow, ragged creatures living in poverty, ignorance, and dirt . . . With every chance to rise, these people remained squalid cumberers of the earth’s surface, a rank, up-country growth, containing within itself the seeds of vicious, idle pauperism and semi-criminality. (Roosevelt 98)

So begins a longstanding tradition in the United States of viewing the Appalachian Scots-Irish<sup>47</sup> as a paragon of white racial degeneration—white men and women who as a result of frontier life lived rather like the indigenous Appalachians they were displacing. It is true that, resistant to being absorbed into the larger nation, the Ulster Scot borderlanders of Appalachia adopted many

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<sup>47</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, many thousands of Ulster Scots people, whose ancestors had endured eight centuries of violent conflict on the war-torn border of England and Scotland, emigrated to colonial America and in doing so relocated their “clan-based warrior culture from the borderlands of the British Empire” to new borderlands on the western edge of the American colonies (Woodard 101). But first they found themselves on the crowded Atlantic seaboard of colonial America. English American Quaker society, from its elite social position, viewed these people as a problem when they arrived on in American ports. City newspapers in Philadelphia and New York ran sensational stories about throngs of Ulster brutes prowling their streets. They were glad to see these landless, vagrant communities take the Indian paths in increasing numbers through western Pennsylvania and into the lands of present-day West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky, in search of unclaimed land. The Scots Irish peoples’ honor culture based in violence, liberty, and self-reliance had enabled them to survive while trapped in a devastated homeland there in the north of England and the Scottish lowlands; it also made them unusual among British-American colonists in their capacity and willingness to live on the violent American frontier. They were land hungry—a key theme in *Gauley Mountain*—and their cultural traits enabled them to move west from places like Philadelphia and into Native American territories, where they would illegally stake out tracts higher and further into the Appalachian mountains. They usually moved as multi-generational families (or clans), setting out with one rifle and no cash to speak of.

indigenous practices of Native Appalachians: they adopted slash and burn agriculture; wore deerskin clothing; traveled indigenous paths and learned indigenous botany; fished and hunted; and sometimes lived a seasonal, semi-nomadic life as they exhausted patches of soil and grazed their livestock on unfenced lands (Woodard 104). They did not grow cash crops and instead established a woodland subsistence economy, within the vestiges of which McNeill lived out her early life, based on finding flowing water, cutting tree clearings on the valley slopes, and building crude cabins and big gardens in the cleared, sunlit area.

Roosevelt's tarring of "poor whites," echoing U.S. anti-Indian sentiments common to the colonial period and later, illustrates the historical pattern whereby resource extraction often entailed ejection and enclosure; like native peoples whom they were thought to resemble too much, the deedless mountaineer was seen as removable (Stoll). In 1840, Pennsylvania and New York were the seat of the American timber industry. By the 1880s, when Roosevelt writes, these timberlands and even those of the Midwest were exhausted, mulched. Something else was needed. It would be another few decades before full-scale logging reached the forests of Idaho and Oregon. Yet the 'island' of Appalachia contained high expanses of hardwoods. All eyes were on Appalachian timber as rail and tunnel technology opened up those rugged woodlands. The mostly deedless mountaineers living there had been hostile from the start to both the Native nations on whose lands they were trespassing, and to the modern United States developing out of English colonial America as represented by cash society, Quakerism, global commercial interests, and the official government. Their way of life allowed for considerable leisure time. Again, this was something which further divided them from the bustling cities and towns of the U.S. mainstream. Worse, it offered resource speculators and developers a legitimizing reason to impose on the region projects that could capitalize on the region's holdings more intensively.

The Appalachian “poor white” needed to be removed as control of mountain timber (and later coal) was concentrated into the hands of a few extractive industrialists.

This history is not remote from but deeply interwoven with the folk revival which buoyed regional culture producers including McNeill, Travis, and Armstrong. Appeals to the ethnic background of these regionalists in their performance, marketing, and compositions, gained traction to some degree because of a national obsession, during the modern industrial period, with racial difference and hierarchy across regional space.

Stories of colonial America which explored white racial composition, such as *Gauley Mountain*, spoke to significant pressures that were being felt in the public spheres of law, science, and the arts. 1930s Americans turned toward the frontier as a purifying fire not only in their historical fiction but in their otherworldly ‘sword and sorcery’ fiction. Small-town Texan Robert E. Howard, proud of his pioneer heritage and historicized later as a “New Deal heroic fantasist” (Rusty Burke), brought this frontier sensibility to his *Conan the Barbarian* stories, published mainly between 1932 and 1936, which according to Jared van Duinen exhibit clear borderlands traits. Imperial-toned works of different stripes, like Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian* stories, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* stories became entrenched in the mainstream American imagination during the interwar period. “America’s vision of her folk became entwined with her vision of her distant past,” leading to a collapse of meanings: “*folk* became synonymous with *colonial*” (Becker 4). It is not hard to imagine why readers in the U.S.—a ‘melting pot,’ as euphemized, but with strong anxieties about its own multiethnicity—might be engrossed by *Gauley*, a semi-fictional microcosm of colonial America.

*Gauley Mountain* offers visions of American racial formation by depicting a multiracial frontier. To an extent that most non-Native Americans (i.e., descendants of settlers and

immigrants) likely did not, McNeill was aware of the present reality of settler colonialism. “The Indian years were still close to us,” McNeill writes about her youth,

and the two Indian graves still lay quiet in our Tommy woodland. The old Seneca Trail, running south from the Iroquois Nation, wound its way across our pastures [. . .]. It was the same deep-sunken trail that had once been used as an Indian treaty line, one of the long train of broken treaties, so that in those years half of the farm had been white land, the other half red. (*ML* 9)

What might seem like backdrop events are rather in the foreground of McNeill’s textual territory.

Local histories of racial formation, like Virginia’s colonial wars against Shawnee and Mingo Indians, Appalachian chattel slavery, and recurring themes like racial miasma and racial antagonism, outline the shape of Gauley as a lyric world. One finds the haughty, slave owning English landlord Matthew Renick who, having established in West Virginia a petty backwoods kingdom, curses his guests whom he has employed to raise a barn—

It is not my intention to neighbor  
With the German and black Irish scum.  
I have coins for the hiring of labor  
But I did not request that they come (*GM* 14)

—and one also finds Black Lissa, enslaved by the Renick clan as one of their “chattels” (14), who commands a cycle of poems. Lissa changes the Renick future by performing secret magic on their infant daughter Jane. Amid “the frozen dark of the hills,” Lissa curses her tormentors, the Renicks, with a pain equal to that she endured in whippings. In a vivid scene the reader witnesses the conjuring of “[a] plat-eye tune for to lull [Jane] to rest”<sup>48</sup> and “a plague to drip in the Renick veins / From the bloody welts on a nigger’s shoulder” (McNeill 27). “Black Lissa’s Curse” is a challenging, concise poem with wide interpretive possibilities. Other racial epithets

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<sup>48</sup> In “Black Lissa’s Curse,” (27) McNeill incorporates the “plat-eye” which, in African American folklore, is a malevolent nocturnal spirit with glowing eyes that inhabits (and guards) a particular place. Alternately depicted as a ghost, a demon spirit, or a beast, the “plat-eye” first appears in writing in the nineteenth century in the American South. The term is most common historically among black South Carolinians but is believed to originate in the folklore of the West Indies.

and slurs identify other key Gauley players.<sup>49</sup> Not only ethnic conflict but ethnic intermarriage too surfaces as a theme.

Promotional verses composed by McNeill and included in *Gauley Mountain's* "Foreword" foreground two things—the ethnic contests and the physical environment of the Appalachian frontier:

Stranger, there on the bison track:  
Tyrone hussy and Shawnee chief,  
English Scotch and Dutchman whack,  
Circuit writer and timber thief,  
[ . . . ]  
Blood with blood in the Gauley's stream  
And tongue with tongue in my speeches sound. (xi-xii)

Here are the folk, verified. McNeill sees them passing by "on the bison track" and sees their blood staining the river. The comingling of "blood with blood" in the falls and churns of Gauley waters suggests a mysterious kind of multiethnic nationalism. This bonding of peoples within the frontier's crucible of violence could be the subject of future critical work on McNeill's writings. The bloody stage of "savage Gauley" (*GM* 98), where ethnic conflicts strut and fret their hour, is suggestive—in the way of primary works—of the American cultural ideal of "regeneration through violence" as posited by American frontier historian Richard Slotkin.

Because she was a Scots-Irish Appalachian writing about Appalachia, McNeill had a complex relationship to a larger white mainstream who simultaneously viewed her people as a) backwards primitives who needed to be civilized; b) the true 'American pioneer' ethnic group, and thus exemplars of freedom and self-sufficiency; and c) a valuable Anglo-Saxon genetic

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<sup>49</sup> In *Gauley Mountain* one encounters "feathered drummers" (42), "painted fiends" (16), and "Redskins! in the hills" (17); "white trash" (79) and "heathen blacks" (78); Italian- and Slavic-Americans (72); "Irish rascal[s]" (98) and "slum-born youth" (95). One finds a Scots-Irish shepherd, a band of self-congratulatory white slaveowners building a church, a black runaway who "climbed in the fragrant mow" (43) while successfully escaping bondage, a Dutch-American surveyor and engineer (39), Mexican-Appalachian coalminers (72), and more.

resource for the United States. McNeill's fictional history and genealogies of Gauley therefore take on especial importance. McNeill courts this perception.

Settler nations have colonization myths, not creation myths (Tuck & Yang 6). Violence abounds in such myths. Rich in nationalist mythologies, the United States produced a whole genre (the western novel) to address the quiet fears of a settler nation safeguarding against the return of native people. An emphasis on land is a key component of settler-colonial ideology. According to Patrick Wolfe, who famously identified the "logic of elimination" in settler colonial formation,

[w]hatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element. (Wolfe 388)

In this contemporary theoretical understanding of settler colonialism, "elimination" is based on controlling and transforming resource bases to ensure the production and imposition of a new state and culture onto indigenous land bases. This long-term work is what differentiates settler colonialism from other kinds of colonialism which are less permanent and total. Settler colonial ideologies and social relations are protracted. Control over lands must be routinely maintained as an ongoing project of minimizing the presence of indigenous empires, nations, and tribes:

Land is settler colonialism's irreducible essence in ways that go well beyond real estate. Its seizure is not merely a change of ownership but a genesis, the onset of a whole new way of being—for both parties. Settlers are not born. They are made in the dispossessing, a ceaseless obligation that has to be maintained across the generations if the Natives are not to come back. (1)

Settler colonialism, in this model, is thus a founding, or as Wolfe writes, a "genesis" (1) for a whole way of life and an ongoing project of territorial control.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Thus theorists of colonial history including Wolfe have located settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon distinct from, and yet related to, colonialism. Lorenzo Veracini recently theorized the objective of elimination as the fundamental difference between the concepts. In a microbiological illustration, Veracini depicts

In this long-term political context, “Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey” can be read as a settler genesis myth. A send-up of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” the poem depicts a crazed frontierswoman who rides through the hollows in the dark of night. One of *Gauley Mountain*’s numerous “brazen and unorthodox” women characters (*GM* xviii), is Mad Ann:

She swerves on the coiling Greenbrier trace,  
Crosses the blue Divide,  
And follows the narrow bison trail  
On the Gauley’s western side.  
[ . . . ]  
Mad Ann, from the streets of London town,  
Wakens the borderland,  
Rides with her powder horn slung low  
And a finger crooked on her trigger hand. (McNeill *GM* 15)

Set during a time of protracted border violence, the poem maps both the local lay of Gauley’s land and Mad Ann herself, who flames under the canopies of Gauley’s woods like a sort of war-goddess. She “[w]hoops through” and “[w]akens the borderland” during a Shawnee raid on Gauley Mountain. Rum-drunk and armed with a rifle, she calls to her sleeping neighbors. Mad Ann is truly “mad” with hatred for the Shawnee.

Like Longfellow, McNeill chooses a real person to depict in verse, though she makes a very different kind of selection. McNeill based her poem on the historical person Ann Hennis Trotter Bailey, a frontier messenger, scout, and Indian fighter of the Shenandoah Valley whose husband was among the Virginia militiamen killed at the Battle of Point Pleasant by united Shawnee and Mingo forces. Historical documents and legends described Bailey, who was born

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colonial forms as viruses, and settler colonialist forms as bacteria: while both forms involve an external invader colonizing their hosts, a key distinction arises in the distinction between subjugation and elimination. The virus-like colonist must maintain a continuing presence of exploitable ‘others’ on which to base the colonial relationship. The settler-colonist, meanwhile, spreads bacterially, occupying, out-reproducing, and replacing what it encounters: “settler colonial ideologies see the establishment of a new society in a different location in the context of a zero-sum bacterial logic” (Veracini 626).

in Liverpool, England in 1742, and is buried at Point Pleasant, West Virginia, as hot-tempered and bearing a tomahawk, rifle, and men's attire. She not only dressed but acted like a frontiersman. She swore, fought, killed, and drank alcohol. McNeill is true to the semi-legendary, colorful biography of the historical Bailey. In McNeill's poem, Mad Ann's "screams are cut with a cockney blur" (*GM* 16, 15), thus defamiliarizing Americanness and complicating the bland anti-Britishism of Longfellow's story. So very unlike the genteel, Boston-born silversmith Paul Revere, Mad Ann swears and curses "with oaths from an English slum." Unlike Longfellow's Revere, McNeill's Mad Ann rides not out of patriotism but because of a red-toothed desire for revenge against local Shawnee warriors. She has "scalps in her belt." She cries aloud in genocidal tones, "Death! Death! To the copper-skinned. . . / Plague on the Shawnee name!" (*GM* 15).

Hijacking Longfellow's popular ballad to rewrite an aspect of U.S. national mythology, "Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey" is, because of this intertextuality I am proposing,<sup>51</sup> the most obvious instance in which *Gauley Mountain* can appear to translate Gauley's lore into a kind of alternative national origin to the New England one.<sup>52</sup> Characteristically, McNeill emphasizes spatiality and the accumulation of history in one place. Longfellow, whose poem became household knowledge for many Americans including Louise McNeill, had influentially situated patriotism in revolutionary struggle against the British in colonial New England. McNeill turns the reader elsewhere, to a history which came before Paul Revere's ride and the American Revolution, and to the southwest. Her poems locate American origins not in the thirteen

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<sup>51</sup> As further evidence of my contention that "Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey" is a conscientious rewriting by Louise McNeill of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous poem "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," I direct the reader to the passage in *The Milk-Weed Ladies* in which McNeill recalls reciting, for her schoolteacher, three poems: Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.'s "Old Ironsides" and two Longfellow poems, *The Song of Hiawatha* and none other but "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" (McNeill *ML* 70-1).

<sup>52</sup> *Gauley Mountain*'s vaguely 'Lost Cause' portrait of Confederate horses is another example (*GM* 42).



colonies' formal military campaigns against the Kingdom of Great Britain (from 1775 to 1783), but in a more protracted and diffuse history: the on-the-ground encounter between colonists and Native America, including all the original inhabitants of the lands claimed by what is now the United States. Throughout *Gauley Mountain*, Gauley intentionally evokes a point of westward entry for Euro-American settlers: a specific geographic channel in the upland mid-Atlantic region, a gap both literal and symbolic, through which eighteenth-century whites crossed the barrier of the Allegheny mountains, to be followed by a great number of later settlers moving west. In other words, McNeill relocates the 'midnight ride' from Boston to the western frontiers of Pennsylvania, Ohio, the Virginias, and Kentucky during the eighteenth century.

"Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey" also represents a rough shift away from Longfellow's sanitized tone and diction. This is settler colonialism at its bloodiest and most vicious, perpetrated by would-be Americans who are the Celtic peasants of the British isles. During this period the above-named colonial governments used inhuman counterinsurgency and irregular warfare tactics to drive (violently resisting) Indian nations out of a key set of river valleys which were valued by colonists for settlement and trade. From the 1750s until the 1770s, this action occurred in the Greenbrier, upper New River, and upper Potomac valleys; from the 1770s to the 1780s, the Monongahela valley; from the 1780s to the 1790s, the Kanawha and middle Ohio valleys. Though certain conflicts took formal names, including French and Indian War (1754–63), Pontiac's Rebellion (1763), and Lord Dunmore's War (1774), and while significant battles occurred at Point Pleasant (1774) and Fort Henry (1777, 1782), such conflicts "were the exceptions rather than the rule in border warfare" (J. Williams).

A constant state of border warfare characterized these contested river valleys in central and northern Appalachia, lands which for decades and decades "exhibited the classic forms of

guerrilla war: raids, ambushes, sneak attacks, massacres, and atrocities on both sides” (J. Williams). “Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey” and its companion poem “Forting,” which depicts the ensuing flight of Mad Ann’s neighbors—Gauley’s settler community—to the nearby fort (*GM* 17)—reveal this history, less glorious and more menacing than the spectacular, pitched battles at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, which signaled the outbreak of armed conflict between the Britain and its American colonies. In this setting, the new Americans cannot readily position themselves as the colonized, as the New Englanders more successfully did in their writings. Throughout *Gauley Mountain* McNeill narrates a different genesis for the United States, situating readers among constant, informal, small-scale conflict between indigenous and settler colonial Appalachians. This applies generally to the book. In particular, by rewriting Longfellow’s noble, cleanly hero into the image of the guerilla riflewoman Mad Ann Bailey, McNeill probably tells a truer story of the settler nation’s founding than Longfellow’s schoolroom patriotism.

The racial history of Gauley matters in *Gauley Mountain*. McNeill depicts a fragmented set of European settler identities that may have seemed remote to many twentieth-century readers. These settler families as represented in *Gauley Mountain*—based on actual Pocahontas County families (Kinderman)—can be seen to gradually assimilate through the centuries as the forces of industrialism and consumerism “Americanize” them. The lives and deaths of generations of Renicks, O’Kanes, Verners, and MacElmains dramatize this process. For instance, the MacElmains, who to me strongly suggest the McNeills, become decreasingly ethnic (i.e., less Scots-Irish) and increasingly racial (i.e., more white) over the course of Gauley history. The “Donna MacElmain” poems, which negotiate indirectly the poet’s sense of the McNeill settler

legacy, especially are suggestive of the idea of “becoming white,” increasingly a commonplace trope in U.S. racial historiography.

In an essay about the historical construction of the *white* racial category, “On Being White . . . and Other Lies” (1984), James Baldwin popularized this idea. In the essay Baldwin proposes the existence of a process by which distinct European ethnic groups “became white.” Even if people are called *white*, in reality “there are no white people” (Baldwin 137). In Baldwin’s argument, *white* is a functional category in which to classify non-enslaved people in the *mundus novus* of the Americas; a white category is useful for maintaining a functioning black category in which to classify others, that is, enslaved African people or the Native American empires, nations, and tribes which were the political factions rivaling Europeans.<sup>53</sup> Norwegians, Germans, Scots, Spaniards, and myriad other Europeans, Baldwin explains, “became white” by leaving their country of origin and joining the violent master class of white men at the top America’s racial hierarchy (Baldwin 136-37). Because *white* lacks an actual ethnic meaning, Baldwin argues, this process of “becoming white” has meant a profound cultural loss for people of European descent. He explains that

There is, for example—at least, in principle—an Irish community: here, there, anywhere; or, more precisely, Belfast, Dublin, and Boston. There is a German community: both sides of Berlin, Bavaria, and Yorkville. There is Italian community: Rome, Naples, the Bank of the Holy Ghost, and Mulberry Street. And there is a Jewish community, stretching from Jerusalem to California to New York. There are English communities. There are French communities. There are Swiss consortiums. There are Poles [ . . . ] It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. That price was to become “white.” No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country. (Baldwin 135-36)

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<sup>53</sup> With the brusque venom for which his antiracist writings are known and read, Baldwin explains graphically that Europeans “became white . . . because of the necessity of denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation. . . . White men—from Norway, for example, where they were “Norwegians”—became white” by conquering North America (Baldwin 136).

If this is the historical arc of European-American civilization, and the circle around which white American identity turns in moments of self-reflection, then *Gauley Mountain*, a book which looks back upon the ethnic European identities (which in Baldwin's critical formation have been relinquished) becomes more apparent as a text with deep social salience. Do we witness the relinquishment of ethnicity for race when the pioneer Gabriel MacElmain crests the Gauley ridge, pauses in the high breeze to stare down the westward slope, and heading down the western slope "breaks a footpath for his race" (*GM* 8)?

*Gauley Mountain* can be understood as part of a society-wide extractive mode of cultural production, therefore, when we examine two related complexities: on one hand, how *Gauley Mountain*'s narrative world tries to answer pressing social questions the settler nation had about its racial positionality, and on the other, how McNeill is herself is treated a cultural resource. *Gauley Mountain* provided an alternative to civilized, vaguely European fashions of literary modernism, and provided something simpler, the unbroken rising rhythm of her iambs a gust a mountain air. For a nativist age, Gauley land was—in a positive sense—something rude, crude, and American. The modernist paradigm of 'the new' in poetry often entailed things like intellectual and aesthetic autonomy, textualism, eccentric experimentalism, changing fashions, and interpretive difficulty. Against these things, McNeill's poetic is proudly rooted in folklore, is deeply musical, being partly based in orality, and despite its local eccentricities delivers a very accessible dose, not of 'the new,' but of 'the old.' These were of the sort that large popular audiences desired.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Just a three years before *Gauley Mountain*'s publication, Paramount Pictures released, in patented "Technicolor" an action western film starring Henry Fonda, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. Based on the local color novel of the same name, which in 1908 had garnered widespread interest Appalachia, the romance adventure was set in the Eastern Kentucky Coalfield. Gun- and fist-driven stories made this film, and films with performances by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, some of the most popular public venues for rehearsing the trope of "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin).

So when McNeill’s publisher, supporters, and reviewers foreground her ancestry, these are comments that carry special significance. McNeill is a racialized author within *Gauley Mountain*’s 1930s marketing and reviewing materials. This a racialization that becomes very clear when we compare marketing statements about *Gauley Mountain* with such statements about Merle Travis’ *Folk Songs of the Hills* (1947) record. As Capitol Records states on the label of the record box set, Travis “returns to scenes of his boyhood in the Kentucky hills in presenting this album of authentic folk music,” and—here Capitol misleads—“sings the songs that have become traditional down in the coal mining country.”

Lyrics and music are quaint, earthy, extraordinary – reflecting both the joys and hardships of the hill folk and the philosophy that has evolved from their work and way of living. Most of the numbers – recorded for the first time – have been handed down for generations, and these the talented Travis interprets as only one born to the hills can . . . All songs comprise diverting, fascinating entertainment – and more, it is folk music that is as American as the Kentucky hills, themselves. (Capitol)

These materials present the regional folk-craftsperson almost as a special resource of the larger nation. McNeill’s book and Travis’ record set are joined together by a common through-line: a “white ethnic”<sup>55</sup> characterization presented as an authorial asset. Tags like “of the hills” do not just identify the performer; they also interpret the performer. Capitol Records and Harcourt, Brace, and Company use similar strategies to paint certain pictures of McNeill and Travis as white ethnic figures. An emphasis on their ethnic and geographic background—and not, say,

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<sup>55</sup> Especially before 1945, a strong divide existed among white America between the “Old Stock” (or WASP) Americans whose ancestors who largely came to America from England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the “white ethnic” Americans whose ancestors came to America later. This meant people with Irish, Ulster Scot, Iberian, Italian, Greek, and Slavic ethnicities, and non-Protestant religions, at that time were not racialized as “white” in the same sense that they tend to be in twenty-first century United States. While we might look at McNeill’s ancestors, who settled in modern-day West Virginia in the 1760s, as very much “old stock” relative to the history of immigration to North America, these Scots-Irish were at once seen as genetically desirable and socially undesirable. WASP paragon Andrew Dickson White, a reformer and historian who co-founded Cornell University, was not talking about literature but about electoral politics when he summed up the Anglo-Saxon elite’s mindset when it came to white ethnic Americans. To him, they were a scourge on the nation, “a crowd of illiterate peasants, freshly raked from Irish bogs, or Bohemian mines, or Italian robber nests” (qtd in Masket).

their various influences or their commercial shrewdness—make them legible as “the folk.” Reading these materials gives the winking impression that McNeill and Travis are “not us.” Ascribed to them is the same “exoticized and exceptional identity” which novelists, travel journalists, racial scientists, Christian missionaries, and academics generally ascribed to Appalachia when they first began defining it as a discrete geographic and cultural space (Hartman).

However, as with Travis, I resist a truly cynical view of *Gauley Mountain* or McNeill herself in this regard. Such a view ignores the very real cultural capital of subaltern voices in regional storytelling traditions, totally ignoring the verve with which McNeill integrates West Virginian dialect into a serious work of historical verse romance, and so forgets the potential of literature as a means to certify and honor cultural identity. Though some strains of regionalist marketing certainly have worked justify the cultural subordination of less economically developed regions such as Appalachia, other strains also “made the experience of the socially marginalized into a literary asset, and so made marginality itself a positive authorial advantage” (Brodhead 150). Clearly, Harcourt Brace’s marketing of *Gauley Mountain* (like Capitol Records’ marketing of *Folk Songs of the Hills*) as a regionally specific folk resource attempted to play up these works’ cultural marginality in an effort to cultivate this kind of “positive authorial advantage.”

As it was among the lucrative circuits of 1930s folk craft and music, cultural marginality itself was a commercial asset. For promoters of these works, *Folk Songs of the Hills* is authentic because Travis was “born to the hills” (Capitol) and *Gauley Mountain* is authentic McNeill “has come to her work by birthright (*GM* xii). The paradox here is that while they are presented as

odd hillpeople, with supposedly marginal or provincial sensibilities, Travis and McNeill also represent to these very same promoters the core qualities of the American people:

[McNeill's characters] are West Virginians and [*Gauley Mountain*] is a West Virginia book. But it is their sort of legend that has made the American idea. (*GM* xiii)

[*Folk Songs of the Hills*] is folk music that is as American as the Kentucky hills, themselves. (Capitol)

Paradoxically, what makes their work exotic also makes it familiar. This contradictory strategy lives on today. In the diverse chambers of pop Americana—still vibrating with the tension between two ruling but opposing ideals (a pluralism focused on regions, states, or cities vs. one big, happy American nationalism)—marginality remains seal of authentication for commodities on sale.

The important point is that the momentum of cultural signifiers likely favored a view of *Gauley Mountain* and its mountaintop author as wonderfully interesting, refreshingly simple, and just a little primitive. Appalachia itself, after all, seemed to be these things. Appalachia's 'discovery' (read: ideological construction) seemed to solve the problem posed by the utter social failure of the post-Civil War South. Transformed by post-1865 financialization, then transformed again by full-bore industrialism and the unprecedented inter-regional contact instigated by the First World War, the Old South perished. If anyone after 1918 applied a 'moonlight and magnolias' fantasy to the American southeast, they did so with some irony. This fantasy was being shattered with each visit made to Mississippi, Georgia, and the other sharecropping racial apartheid states. Pictures of a familiar, unchanging Appalachia provided much needed counterweight to the raked-over Old South. *Gauley Mountain*, emphasizing southern transformation itself, objectively does not depict Appalachia as familiar and unchanging. Yet reading McNeill along ethnological lines, hungry for the genuine, audiences

sought in *Gauley Mountain* the literature of a people who can speak, to use Benet's terminology, "naturally." To do so would be to find not only an authentic cultural wellspring in the heart of America but also a credible concept of the South that still performed the cultural work so many required of it. It would be like striking gold, or oil.

In summary, *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* demonstrate two very different ways in which cultural producers reinforce the relationship that exists between a resource extraction zone and a resource consumption zone. In her status as a regional outsider, Rukeyser's attempt to "extend the document" (*U.S.I* 146) involved a process of extracting historical and factual information from a West Virginia incident, for presentation to a broader audience outside of Appalachia. Embodying another different to regionalism, the regional insider McNeill also presents Appalachian cultural resources for broader consumption. McNeill, also a rational and sophisticated actor, leveraged what was by all accounts her considerable cultural authenticity in, for her time, empowering and innovative ways by extracting local Pocahontas County lore for a broader audience including those outside the region. Without condemning these writers, this project calls attention to the way regional specificity gives legibility and salience to the both *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* within 1930s American culture.

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Extractivism adheres to *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* not only as their mode of cultural production (as shown above) but also as their subject theme. Turning to a new set of energy-focused close readings in the following pages, the rest of this chapter demonstrates this point in detail.

McNeill's personal experience with the effects of extractive economic development positions her, notwithstanding audience desires and market pressures, to effectively critique this



form of industrial development by measuring the extent of its damages in West Virginia. Perhaps what most makes *Gauley Mountain* a valuable historical artifact is its distinctive way of dramatizing the reckless removal of Appalachia's natural resources during the period of modernization, and by extension, its social and environmental sensitivities. Taking, then, extractivism as her theme, McNeill fictionalizes local history to express an environmental and social critique of the extractive model of developmental progress. The way she does so, by telling stories of ruptures in history's continuum, situates her philosophy squarely within what Fredric Jameson identifies as modernism's main artery. In the opening prose preface to McNeill's history, in which McNeill directs the poetic gaze backward toward the explosive appearance of white settlers in the Allegheny Mountains, McNeill lays the groundwork for her thesis about the effect of extraction culture as a historical accelerant. McNeill introduces the land of Gauley:

Gauley is a mountain and a plain, a town and a river. The mountain lifts its humped back and its bare grey shoulders into the dull blue haze of the Appalachians [ . . . ] There in that gash on the mountain where the coal cars now tunnel through lies the old trail from the east. Buffalo came over that trail, and Shawnees, and squatters. See those first white settlers climb to the top of the ridge, shade their eyes, and look down the valley [ . . . ] they all came down that trail, raised their lean-to cabins, planted their flax and corn, and blazed claims in the pine with the white flash of a double-bitted axe. (*GM* 1)

Extractive operations create ruptures in physical space, piercing geological barriers, splitting rock, blasting seams, drilling tunnels, tearing up forest root systems, and opening up wells, quarries, and mines. Yet they also create historical ruptures. An abandoned mineshaft is an artifact immediately turning one's attention to the past, turning the hiker into an amateur archaeologist; such residues of past industry are familiar in places like Appalachia.

This "gash" in the earth is a relatively new feature of the landscape. It was created by the men, animals, and machines who extended the rail and coal complex across the steep Allegheny

wall in order to transport coal out of the region. But it serves the poet as an entry point into a journey into historical imagination.

Notice how, at the top of the passage, McNeill begins in the present (“Gauley is a mountain”) when defining her subject but takes a sudden veer into the past at the precise moment she addresses the coal tunnel which scars Gauley Mountain. Then, we are suddenly concerned with bison, Indians, and pioneers—and the earliest scenes of her verse tapestry. This startling temporal transitions suggests that mine “gash” is itself a portal into the past, a window revealing sedimentary layers beneath the contemporary order. Extraction becomes the occasion, even, for McNeill’s song. The old buffalo trail is still there, literally “in” the rail tunnel. Already, *Gauley Mountain* gestures at a theory of extraction as something contiguous with (i.e., sharing the same literal conduit or path of) the larger project of settler colonialism, with the two together transforming West Virginia.

Taking us in flight through that portal, McNeill begins. The reader sees energy transfers and energy frontiers as forces shaping history. These energy transfers, underlying the processes of modernization itself, appear as a series of trespasses that have displaced Native Appalachians (and later, the Appalachian settlers who aggressed them), stripped lands, toxified waters, and sacrificed workers. In what I call the ‘argument’ of the book’s final section, on West Virginia’s industrial period, which titled “1870 - ,” McNeill distills the period from 1870 to 1939 into a short prose paragraph:

The muskets went back on the walls. Down from the north swaggered lumber men like Sol Brady and Zeb Sage. They lifted up buzzing mills and tar-roofed shacks, brought in their logger bosses and axmen, dug the tunnel and laid the tracks to carry Gauley pine and make cities. An oil well blowed [*sic*] in the Verner field, and engineers came in with transit and slide rule to pipe out the oil, widen the road, and sink a shaft to the coal in the mountain. Then the boom crashed as suddenly as a pine cut by the axe of July lightning. The log chains rusted, the pumps dried out, and C.C.C. boys came in to set pines on the barren,

sliding slope of the mountain. In Gauley the rich played contract bridge and the poor stood around the relief office asking for grub stuff. (*GM* 49)

Here McNeill's lyrical creation takes us along energy circuits leading out of West Virginia toward cities of the North. She identifies Appalachia's raw materials and human power as momentous forces behind processes of American modernization raw materials: "Gauley pine . . . make[s] cities." By the final sentence of this paragraph, which gives a poignant description of social inequality on the extractive frontier using the euphemism of "contract bridge" (the managerial game of business-as-usual, a game with lives in the balance), the shortsighted and destructive pursuit of West Virginian resources appears as a shocking crime.

Accordingly, in the ensuing piece "Timber Boom," McNeill figures the timber companies in naturalistic terms as predator animals:

The Gauley fox can scent the maddened rattler  
And dodge the swift uncoiling of its sheath,  
But now an unknown dread is whirring, whirring . . .  
And green dust spurts before its jagged teeth. (*GM* 51)

This poem, set about seventy years before *Gauley Mountain*'s publication, nonetheless depicts events with lasting consequences. The lumber companies who exploited West Virginian forests with "remorseless cupidity" (Caudill qtd. Porter & Abbey 65) are revealed here with almost ceremonial seriousness.

These are evocative lines. With satanic implications, the loggers, depicted here as "whirring, whirring" their "jagged teeth," resemble a serpent with their sound and bite. Pentameter, vaguely heroic, seems proportionate to the drama conveyed by the poet's chosen subject. The "unknown dread" brought by logging operations to many thousands of acres in the Greater Appalachian Forest can now be thought of as a known dread. The Gauley pine, unlike the Gauley fox, cannot "dodge" predation. Indeed, while rabbits and deer flee, "[p]ine thinskings

flutter” and “groundhogs burrow downwards,” the immobile pines are defenseless. They crack with repeated hard *k* sounds as they “quake” and “crash” in a violent scene:

The white pines quake against the Gauley sunrise,  
And shudder till they crash down Gauley hills,  
The trout float belly-upward on the river  
With sawdust raking blood around their gills. (*GM* 51)

Ecological thinking pervades these lines. A series of poetic devices—rhyming “hills” with “gills,” rhythmic echoes, and the syntax itself—reinforces the reader’s understanding of the correlation between the health of the woodlands and that of the waterways. The different parts of Gauley’s fictional mountain ecosystem are fundamentally interconnected. This is why, although trout are not the loggers’ target, the loggers’ actions still extirpate the fish from Gauley’s waters. The pines must have been benefiting the trout all along. Here McNeill’s harsh metaphoric imagination finds footing in the image of “sawdust raking blood” and links mass aquatic death with the broader labor complex of the timber boom, a complex which includes manual rakers. Sawdust itself does not rake, of course, but the verb “raking” nonetheless evokes its violent, corrosive contact with the fishes’ respiratory organs. And the appearance of rakes, alongside rattlesnakes and sawblades, maintain the poem’s recurring visual motif of “jagged teeth.”

“Timber Boom” encourages awareness of the generational damage inflicted on the Gauley woods by those lumber companies coming “down from the north.” In the third stanza, McNeill continues to depict a sterilized landscape transformed by industry. In this wasteland the pines now lift infertile “coneless branches”—that is, branches which no longer distribute pine seeds—above the dead streams and below “the iron-fingered wind.” From a standpoint of environmental history, it is difficult not to analogize these “coneless branches” with McNeill’s own generation of dispossessed West Virginians. Then in the fourth and fifth stanzas, McNeill ends the poem idiosyncratically:

A Boom is rolling southward over Gauley  
And in its wake the hills lie starkly skinned,  
But it is not the pealing wrath of thunder. . . .  
And it is not the iron-fingered wind.

It rumbles from the hammers which are building  
Slum shanties under fog,  
(*Fifty a thousand and grub stake free at the cookshack  
For a white pine log.*) (GM 51)

McNeill's established pentameter rhythm has been deformed utterly by the end of the poem, suggesting a disruption not only to West Virginian ecology but to the poem's very telling.

Stating that the boom is "rolling southward" into Gauley from the industrial North, McNeill is careful to indicate not only the geographical source of this disruptive force but also the directionality of the extractive flow of timber. The poet's repeated phrasing tells the reader "it is not . . . thunder," and "it is not . . . wind" that is destroying the highland forests; rather, it is the work of humans, here represented by the "hammers" which erect thousands upon thousands of shacks.

As a result of this industrial invasion of the southern mountains, the Gauley hills are devastated. Here McNeill presents the timber boom as an echo of an earlier form of forest extraction in North America, the fur trade. Indeed with the arrival of the timber barons it is not only trees that the poem associated with prey animals—foxes, rabbits, deer, birds, fish—but the hills themselves too, which have been "skinned" as if for their pelts. Such chilling imagery, and the bluntness of its telling, leaves the reader in a very different aesthetic destination when compared with the poem's first quatrain. In an aesthetic pattern repeated elsewhere in her industrial-era Gauley poems, McNeill stages a fading from Romantic balladry, here predominant in the first stanza, by breaking down the syntax and ending the last stanza with the compressed, parenthetical, italicized line "*For a white pine log.*" The industrial wastelands of the book's

second half evoke a profound ecological decline from “that rich and stumpless land” seen earlier in the book (McNeill *GM* 36).

McNeill represents the ecological violence of timbering not only through direct narration but also through allegory. “Sol Brady,” one of the many persona poems in *Gauley Mountain*, adapts the familiar narrative form of the tall tale to depict a timber crew boss. McNeill’s tall tale centers on Brady who, like other figures of American industrial lore John Henry and Paul Bunyan, exceeds the normal human dimensions. Yet in a gradual process of disclosure, this folksy poem reveals a sadistic kind of hero. Starting with an innocent charm, the first quatrain ends with a shock:

He could squint his eye up a white pine trunk  
And guess its height to the sawmill foot.  
He could sleep straight up, he could pray when drunk,  
And brain a man with his calk-heeled boot. (*GM* 55)

McNeill departs from a tradition of tall tales which highlight the humane virtues of the legendary industrial worker: for instance, John Henry’s association with his family and his heroic resistance against mechanization; Paul Bunyan’s legendary rescuing of injured dogs and stranded lumberjacks, his resourceful invention of the grindstone and his building of the Rocky Mountains. In contrast to such sanguine industrial lore, Brady’s heroics include cruelty to people, places, and animals. Alongside more conventional legendary hyperbole,

Sol’s razor strap was a saw mill band  
And grab spikes grew from his knotty chin. (*GM* 55)

the poet includes severer characterizations:

He could pop the eyes from a balking horse  
And wipe his thumbs on its flying mane. (*GM* 55)

A mean streak runs through Brady, whose employees “lowered their jaws from his five foot reach” (*GM* 55). McNeill veers into a bizarre scene of Brady killing a panther:

One day Sol passed by an empty shack  
And saw the end of a panther's tail  
Stuck half way out of a rotten crack,  
He grabbed a holt and the cat was still.  
Then he reached inside with his other hand  
And choked the beast till its lungs caved in. (*GM 55*)

McNeill shares with Rukeyser a tendency to apply horror as a focalizing lens for witnessing environmental and social harms. Here Brady's treatment of animals and people combine with his machine-like body ("grab spikes grew from his knotty chin") to embody what McNeill construes as the inhumanity of industrial men. McNeill rearticulates industrial lore, and the tall tale formula, to condemn rather than celebrate the extractive industries and illustrate how resource extraction inflicts needless injuries. Moral pollution appears thus as a corollary to environmental pollution. Zeb Sage, the other timber boss represented in *Gauley Mountain*—a man who "stole O'Kane's last tract of curly birch, / And eyed poor Joan Hardin's silverware" (*GM 54*)—is a politer, less brutal version of Sol Brady.

Agents of extraction play a forceful role in *Gauley Mountain* as earthly embodiments of human vice, and at their worst, abusers of mountain life. "Starkly skinned," *Gauley Mountain* itself becomes a monument to extractive modernity, and evidence of criminal land use. Dotting the barren slopes are slash piles. Abandoned lumber stacks rot where they were discarded. This landscape of post-extractive desolation is one McNeill saw in her own day and heard about in family legends. McNeill presents it in simple lyricism as consequences of a specific regional history:

No longer do the Brady loggers harry  
The folk of Swago town.  
Along the tracks on this deserted siding  
The lumber piles rot down.

No longer do the hills of Gauley tremble.  
The boom has gone its way.

And left Sol Brady's lumber stacks to darken  
In open-tombed decay.

The skidders have unhooked their chains and grab points,  
Hung up their harness lines.  
No calk-heeled boots molest this quiet siding,  
This bone yard of the pines. (McNeill *GM* 66)

Exhibit: the 'progress' of extraction. The environmental history of deforestation thus ends with a sorrowful scene. *Gauley Mountain* features qualities of epic, lyric, and drama, but it is the elegy which predominates here. The lumber pile, as a depiction of the casual waste common to early industrial logging, stands as an anti-extractive icon.

Yet the themes elaborated here are not only those of resource extraction. "Deserted Lumber Pile" comports with other significant themes in of environmental advocacy, like that of the "sacrifice zone." *Gauley Mountain* draws attention to the extractive tendency underlying modernity as experienced by those who carry on in sacrifice zones. Throughout, the book depicts the linear movement of modernity's requisite materials (e.g., timber, coal, and oil) from Gauley to distant unnamed cities. Meanwhile the reader observes a trend of ecological decline as elements of that physical space are removed and conducted toward forges, factories, and sawmills. "Deserted Lumber Pile" is one of the poems which iconizes, in domestic or ecological domains, the baffling and catastrophic consequences of modernization in West Virginia, casting doubt on the extractive model of development.

*Gauley Mountain* demonstrates a keen historical awareness of how uneven economic development positioned Appalachia as politically subordinate—as a sacrifice zone. Drawing on her viewpoint as a rural West Virginian, McNeill dramatizes how the local particulars of Gauley life must bend to the abstract system of values global business-capital imposes upon them. In "First Train—1895" McNeill outlines an economic ritual in which industrial firms celebrate their



opening of the resource base for development with lavish spreads. The first train to enter Gauley emerges from a tunnel, as the locals stare. It blasts onto the quiet scene, “grinds the rails” and “splits the wind / With filing from her iron scream.” Here to provide a mechanical conduit for the dismantling of Gauley’s ecological base, this indeed is the machine intended “*to carry Gauley pine and make cities.*” Meanwhile, “Hill folk from twenty mile around / Are crowded on the depot square” in wide-eyed wonder at the feast,

For there the oxen barbecue,  
And there are stacks of bakery bread,  
And kegs of foaming Lager brew. (*GM 53*)

A memorable scene in the 2007 period drama film *There Will Be Blood* (directed by Paul Thomas Anderson) closely parallels this poetic episode. In the scene, the protagonist “oil man” Daniel Plainview, who has just begun drilling operations in a poor rural community in Southern California, hosts a picnic where he makes sweeping promises about the improvements (e.g., schools, irrigation, bread, quality of life) his newly launched oil well business will bring to the locals. The film soon makes clear, however, that this land and people are merely a means for Plainview to succeed in his callous pursuit of wealth, and that these shows of generosity are little more than a calculated, one-time expense.

Indeed the poem exposes this cornucopia as ephemeral, that a cold insincerity underlies this feast. McNeill’s winking ellipsis in this quatrain, as in an Emily Dickinson lyric, suggests a knowing pause:

So while the grub comes easy, eat.  
And drink, while spikkets flow with beer . . . .  
*To the biggety bugs of the N. & W.*  
*Who sent regrets they can’t be here.* (*GM 53*)

McNeill ends the poem with her ironic tribute to the Norfolk and Western Railway’s executives, here designated “*the biggety bugs of the N. & W.*” in a bitter deflation of their titanic social status

to the level of insects. In doing so she jeers the faux-politeness of these corporate actors here to dispossess Gauley. Surely the railroad executives and investors might have ridden the train to Gauley for this momentous event. However they simply have no need to venture out to the mountains: their goal is simply to extract the area's resources. Therefore the poem leaves the reader, like the Gauley folk themselves, at a distant remove<sup>56</sup> from these absent operators.

In the closing lines of "First Train—1895" cited above, the poet's form and irony condemn the deceit inherent in this celebration. It does so both by revealing the train as an intrusion sent by absent powers, and by satirically dedicating the text to the railway company. Here, and only here, the poem suspends its alternating end rhymes. The penultimate line *ought* to end with a sound rhyming with "eat," to maintain the poem's established rhyme scheme. However it instead ends with the sonically jarring "N. & W." thus reinforcing the poem's sense of the train's arrival as a disturbance of mountain stillness. As was seen when the timber company disrupted the pentameter rhythm of "Timber Boom," considered above, here the rail company disrupts not only the fictional setting but even the poem's ballad song format.

Therefore, although McNeill rejects the free-verse formal approach poets such as Marianne Moore, H.D., Gertrude Stein, or Muriel Rukeyser, she nevertheless indicates that stories of industrial resource extraction are incompatible with the unbroken, uncontaminated ballad meters of Longfellow. McNeill may not write *verse libre*, but she takes the occasional verse liberty. *Gauley Mountain's* subtle deviations in form reveal a poet that was never an unreflexive adherent to traditional literary forms.

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<sup>56</sup> What *Gauley* readers *can* see quite clearly are roughened, on-the-ground timbermen sweeping, like the boom itself, over the land. A follow-up poem, "Saturday Night" (*GM* 56), depicts yet another extractive ritual—this time the drunken forays of workmen in the sleepy Gauley town. "Cash in their jeans and their saw-bent fingers," the drunken workers swarm the streets and "scatter humans / As soon as dust" (*GM* 5, 11-12).

Shifting to another extractive stage, the discovery of oil in Gauley, McNeill maintains traditional literary forms in marred yet resistant condition. In a dry year, the farmer Fredrick Verner confronts the possible death of his livestock and, in a crucial moment, decides to blast into the earth to reveal a new spring he suspects behind rock. Asserting Appalachian dialect as an appropriate for the conventional sonnet form, McNeill narrates this discovery in a shattered sonnet titled “Oil”:

The drouth air quivered over late July,  
His spring and cow pond trickled nearly dry,  
The thirsty cattle bellowed half the night,  
When morning came he took some dynamite  
And went to try for water where that seep  
Came from the clift. He dug to blast it deep,  
Lighted the fuse, then ran.

When he came back  
To throw the rocks aside his hands got black  
And greasy, sort of; then a dirty smell  
Crept from the mountain. Had he blowed through hell  
Or what in all tarnation had he burst?  
He wiped his fingers on his pants and cursed,  
Then palsy shook him and he had to stand  
While darkness oozing from familiar land  
Gathered its slimy force and coiled to pass  
Down through his uncut field of shrinking grass. (*GM 58*)

A testament to McNeill’s sophisticated awareness of regional history, “Oil” represents the way extractive industries capitalize on accidents.<sup>57</sup> Rukeyser chooses to depict the similar incident, at Gauley Bridge, when after a tunnel blast, “precious in the rock the glass showed” (*U.S. I 18*). In McNeill’s folk history, it is environmental exhaustion in the freshly deforested Gauley land that leads to Verner’s accidental discovery of local oil deposits. The petroleum age comes to Gauley by dint of pure chance when oil burbles out of the dusty hole a thirsty farmer blasted. Yet this

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<sup>57</sup> Throughout Appalachia, the age of industrial modernization began in earnest with the coming of the timber companies to the high woodlands. The lumber roads and railways made possible the large-scale removal of other resources, enabling later prolonged extractive industries of coal, oil, and gas.

accidentally discovery of oil turns out to be nothing less than a new turning point in Gauley history—a new boom, momentous enough to break a line in two, splitting the sonnet into two fragments. The dynamite blasts the poem in half.

Then, something strange happens. In a dramatic symbol of Verner’s incapacitation at this transformative moment, the freed oil moves snakelike across the land just as paralysis grips Verner to hold him in place. This poem marks a further decline from Gauley’s heroic age, as McNeill abandons pentameter for a clipped trimeter ballad form in the next poem, “Oil Field.” By now, Verner ceases to be a narrative agent whatsoever:

A crawling, black transgressor  
Old Verner never feared  
Has undermined the meadow  
Which he surveyed and cleared.  
A pipe of soldered metal  
That runs with yellow oil  
Glides down a hidden furrow  
Beneath his fallow soil.  
And round that lengthened sky line  
The steel-ribbed derricks stand  
Like windmill ghosts arisen  
To haunt Old Verner’s land. (*GM* 59)

The Verner farm, now retooled as an oil field, appears in uncanny form. Something relaxes in the music of the poetry, as the exact end rhymes of “Oil” are replaced by a troop of dubious partial rhymes in “Oil Field.” This lubrication in the language conveys the oil’s liberation from the earth as it “[g]lides” through the pipeline. McNeill’s three-stress lines compress time into a faster rhythm, as if echoing the quickening pace of technological history. Meanwhile Verner’s absence from this poem, contrasting with his central position in the preceding poem “Oil” marks the social disempowerment of the man and a loss of environmental sovereignty. The oil, the pipeline, and the derricks operate outside Verner’s control. He now must accommodate them and their reordering of his farm.

The pipeline in “Oil Field” seems awake, in a grotesque way. It is a “transgressor,” an assailant even. McNeill is not demonizing the oil but the oil drilling infrastructure, which is the intrusive force. Most interesting in this *retroscape*<sup>58</sup> is McNeill’s evocation of multiple, incongruous meanings simultaneously existing within landscapes in transition. Note how the cultural landscapes of the past, evoked by oil derricks’ resemblance of “windmill ghosts,” are still visible as they fade away. “Oil Field” conveys the spectral presence of past agrarianism that can be felt on dormant farms that have become sites of extraction. As a subject of historical fiction, oil infrastructure lends itself well to gothic and grotesque representation; such tropes are more fully elaborated by twentieth-century Native American authors John Joseph Matthews and Linda Hogan in their literary fictionalizations of the 1920s Osage oil murders, *Sundown* (1934) and *Mean Spirit* (1990).

The next poem in *Gauley Mountain*’s oil cycle returns to the persona of Fredrick Verner, the man who amassed Gauley land and then found oil there. McNeill brings his narrative to a close in the second “Fredrick Verner” poem. In this poem the reader finds the aged farmer-turned-tract owner tapping his cane in a state of moping impotence. In defeat, he recognizes how he degraded the lands he amassed. A period of inactivity follows the bluster of the oil lease, and the lands go to thicket. Having now polluted and sold off his family holdings, the old man now “dozes on the porch of his town house” and in free moments “strolls the formal garden of the park” (*GM* 60). Yet he is acutely aware of the farmlands he has lost, and his hours of recreation are filled with regretful contemplation. Though Verner can rest his body and wander the meticulous grounds of the upper-class part of town, McNeill reminds us that the timbered and drilled Verner tract, now abandoned by the Verner clan, has been degraded as “briers have

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<sup>58</sup> *Retroscape* is my neologism. It is elaborated in the next chapter, Chapter IV.

claimed / His cornfield and his hill” and “hazel brush has choked / The spring he cleared away” (GM 60).

In this way the cycle of ‘Oil’ and ‘Oil Field’ and ‘Fredrick Verner [ii]’ (60) dramatizes the transformation of places by their changing economies. That is, it suggests how the discovery of a resource reconfigures one’s relationship to land and people. But it does not end there. “Lydia Verner,” a later poem in the book, shows this decline continue long afterward. Lydia makes no reference to the woods and fields so important to characters earlier in the book, inhabiting instead in the world of money. She asks,

What shall I do with the Verner money?  
Finance a show?  
Or trade it in with my youth’s wild honey  
For a gigolo?

How shall I cover the Verner body  
Of a peasant frau?  
With silk or velvet or cotton shoddy?  
No one cares how.

How shall I surfeit the Verner craving  
For land and more,  
When the silver blade of the road is shaving  
The grass at my door? (GM 94)

What happens to the value of extracted resources? Where does it go? Nowhere we can be sure of, it seems. Lydia’s grim questions point toward the slow drift of West Virginia rural communities into apathy, toward the loss of conventional social meaning. A monied American “peasant frau,” she lives in a world of contradictions. What attire is appropriate to her rank: “silk or velvet or cotton shoddy?” What are the meanings behind material desires, behind spending choices? When she laments that “the silver blade of the road is shaving / The grass at my door,” Lydia tells readers that even families like the Verners, who cashed in on the extractive booms, were

profoundly affected by the encroachments of the industrial resource circuits they had some hand in opening.

Again: *where does the extracted value go?* This question drives McNeill, who had observed the increasing contact between the Allegheny Highlands and New York in her young life, finding purchase especially in those scenes of *Gauley Mountain* which chart the flow of commodities and resources. *Gauley Mountain* reveals extractive conduits as sites both of ecological transformation and of social stratification. These revelations thereby identify regional interchange as a driver of class polarities. In “The Road,” for instance, McNeill depicts the transitional space of the paved motorcar road as a site of interchange between different strata of society:

Old trucks haul moonshine into town.  
New trucks haul crates of ten point Schlitz.  
Smug limousines make haste between  
White Sulphur and the New York Ritz. (*GM 73*)

The trade in alcohol is one intersection of the illegal economy of Gauley’s rural underclass, who distilled corn spirits as an informal currency, and the legal economy of an affluent leisure class, who according to their mood, frequented both the splendid ballrooms of New York and the bracing sulfur springs of Greenbrier County, WV. (Interestingly, “The Road” collapses McNeill’s fictional Gauley location with nonfictional locations New York and White Sulphur Springs.) Another intersection can be found in Gauley town’s poor quarters. With the booms in timber and fossil fuel extraction in its surrounding environs, new economic disparities come to Gauley:

Three streets of homes, Old English;  
Fred Verner’s Swiss chalet,  
A Rustic Inne for tourists,  
A blue plate lunch café,

A public garden planted  
With box and Norway pine,  
And out in northwest corner  
Brown shanties and the mine.

The park is for the miners;  
The bohunk, tallie, mex,  
In Swagoville the upper-tens  
Play bridge and Chinese chex. (*GM 72*)

So the answer McNeill provides to the question of the extracted value's location, is that the value goes into a few hands. Even as relatively well-off lease-holders, the Verner clan occupies a middle position between the "tourists" and "upper-tens," a fashionable elite, and the landless proletariat represented by the "bohunk, tallie, mex" (read: Hungarian, Italian, Mexican) coalminers. Along with the roads have come hotel cafes and shanty towns. McNeill shows a clear understanding that, by bringing together laborers from different places and backgrounds, the northern companies that logged the highlands of Pocahontas, like the coal companies operating mines in other parts of Appalachia, created intercultural and interregional contact zones with a steep social ladder. While nowhere near as exacting or on-the-nose as, say, Rukeyser's transcribing of Union Carbide internal corporate documents in *The Book of the Dead*, the bridge and Chinese checkers games played here by *Gauley Mountain's* "upper-tens" points to the very same social crisis: the abuse of the working classes by resource extraction firms.

I believe one of the things that makes *Gauley Mountain* worthwhile for readers today is McNeill's decision to go beyond simply depicting her home region's subordination to the needs to industry, and to pursue a phenomenology of a conceptual binary that, today, we would call environmental privilege and environmental injustice. For McNeill, sites of conspicuous leisure and sites of conspicuous deprivation are two sides of the same coin. In a shared time period, the Gauley hills are stripped bare of their ancient forests, waterways are polluted, and Gauley town



develops its first slums. Though great luxuries have appeared in Gauley, so too have new poverties. Several key poems in *Gauley Mountain* suggest a similar dialectical understanding of the co-dependence of the environmental violence with environmental privilege (“The River”; “Indian Pipes”; “Swagoville”; “Timber Boom”; “Oil Field”; and “Fredrick Verner”].

Rukeyser, like McNeill, recognized that a steady supply stream conveying millions of tons of wood, minerals, and fuels, had produced and was continuing to reproduce this new world of modern conveniences and inventions. *The Book of the Dead* and *Gauley Mountain* share together a reasoned perspective which links the related phenomena of environmental privilege and environmental injustice. But *The Book of the Dead* is more thematically focused on this specific problem. For Rukeyser the linkage between environmental privilege and injustice is unbreakable. It is arguably the thesis Rukeyser presents her readers. This linkage is expressed as a scientific law: “All power is saved, having no end” (*U.S.I* 54).

In her long poem Rukeyser points out the signs of the hidden suffering evident in energy infrastructure and energy itself. This includes the ghostly presence of workers within their monumental works as they stand through the ages:

They poured the concrete and the columns stood,  
laid bare the bedrock, set the cells of steel,  
a dam for monument was what they hammered home.  
Blasted, and stocks went up;  
insured the base,  
and limousines  
wrote their own graphs upon  
roadbed and lifeline. (*U.S.I* 56)

Because Rukeyser’s syntax is unclear—who is the grammatical subject of the last four lines, the “stocks” or the workers (“they”)—there is a slippage in keeping the actors here discrete. The dam, and its owners whose “stocks went up” with the completion of the tunnel project, are

themselves ‘written’ by the workers’ actions blasting and drilling and building. But it does not stop here.

Turning our attention to the electrical cabling branching out and away from the Union Carbide electrical power plant, *The Book of the Dead* forces the issue: “Who runs through electric wires? / Who speaks down every road?” The answer points us back to the industrial worker: “Their hands touched mastery; now they / demand an answer” (*U.S.1* 23). Readers of *The Book of the Dead*, including art critic Robert Hughes and literary scholars Stephanie Hartman and Justin Parks, have shown how Rukeyser develops commodities and infrastructure as symbols and signs of modernity. Rukeyser’s extended metaphorism suggests how much resource extraction, and extracted commodities, profoundly shape individual and class experiences. Appalachian resources, Rukeyser recognized, were key to northern steel and glass production. Essential to *The Book of the Dead* is the awareness that the enormous powers granted by extractive industry come at a terrible cost to human life at the site of extraction (Kertesz 106). As seen in “Praise of the Committee,” energy and energy infrastructure works in *The Book of the Dead* as a motif, similar to glass, which implicates Rukeyser’s audience. What readers must ultimately confront is “the balance-sheet of energy that flows / passing along its infinite barrier” (*U.S.1* 56). Demanding some response, this energy cannot be resisted:

It breaks the hills, cracking the riches wide,  
runs through electric wires;  
it comes, warning the night,  
running among these rigid hills,  
a single force to waken our eyes. (*U.S.1* 56)

While the goal here “to waken our eyes” points to the debt owed to people and places sacrificed in the name of resources, elegizing the mostly black tunnellers who died of silicosis when they dug out a tunnel beneath Gauley Mountain, it also scrutinizes the reader. In this poem, “our

eyes” are invited to turn inward. Because we are tied together by electrical wiring, we are united in Rukeyser’s strange spirituality. There is no separating the energy consumed, say, illuminating the pages of *U.S.I* in a dark room, and the source of its production. Hence Rukeyser demonstrates “the centrality to modern American identity” of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster (S. Hartman 212).

Both McNeill and Rukeyser refuse readers an idyllic vision of West Virginia, and instead give us frontier warfare, rotting timber yards eroding deforested hills, lifeless rivers and streams, and a class of migrant workers and their places of living, working, and playing. Both *The Book of the Dead* and *Gauley Mountain* gives us the exclusive domains of the ruling class, like the chalets, hot springs, hotels, and inns. While this theme has been attributed to *The Book of the Dead*, no studies have yet explored *Gauley Mountain* as a textual representation of environmental privilege and injustice. As the regional insider, McNeill invokes West Virginia as a space of economic conflict since the very beginning of her history; in the era of extractive industry this conflict takes on more totalizing proportions, as the social system morphs and the stakes of ecological degradation heighten. In a rhetorical move prefiguring current environmental justice criticism—think of ‘superfund site’ photography or exposés of industrial facilities—McNeill iconizes, in poems like “Deserted Lumber Yard” (*GM* 66), the accumulation of extracted value and plundered empty spaces as fundamental artifacts of the *status quo*. The historical value of McNeill’s viewpoint may interest environmental justice scholars, who have paid increasing attention to the ways in which environmental and social harms in one place produce benefits for the more privileged elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The concept of the “domination of social space” is, as Park and Pellow argue, an environmental problem that is “part and parcel of the larger problem of social privilege” (120). I am thinking, for example, about how the dumping of hazardous waste on indigenous reservations spares other communities from such pollution; how pesticide poisoning of farm workers bolsters surplus value for agricultural corporations; how deforestation in Brazil

With another retroscape, “The River,” McNeill brings *Gauley Mountain* to an end by summarizing the profound changes wrought in Gauley by the industries of resource extraction:

Now they have bridged the canyon of the Gauley  
And built a lock above the Swago shoal  
To float the barges past the lazy shallow  
With loads of river sand and mountain coal.

Along the shore where passing Mingo warriors  
Built drift-wood fires to parch Ohio maize  
Cook ovens glare red-eyed upon the darkness  
And belch their cinders at the fevered days. (McNeill *GM* 98)

This scene depicts a scene of completed modernization. And modernization here manifests as resource extraction infrastructure (including a dam, locks, cook ovens, and a bridge) and the ecological scars of unchecked industry.<sup>60</sup> With these visually stunning changes now built into the landscape, McNeill reflects on the wide sweep of Gauley history, especially the rapid rate at which control of the territories of Pocahontas County were transferred from Mingo warriors to white settlers to timber extraction industry to sand and coal extraction industry.

Drawing a direct line of comparison between the violence of frontier colonialism with the violence of extractive industry, McNeill intertwines these two themes in “The River.” Though the poem suggests that everything has changed in Gauley, including a “vanishing native” phenomenon, there are poetic parallels here suggesting an unbroken history of human trade and work that defines survival in Gauley—for example, the lines’ loose rhyming of indigenous and

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creates paper goods and building goods and plentiful beef for markets in the Global North; or how dangerous underground mining producing energy which adds comfort to the lives of people already living more comfortable lives. As Park and Pellow summarize, “[e]nvironmental privilege exists whenever environmental injustice occurs (3).”

<sup>60</sup> As part of its ambiguous tone of resilience amid loss, “The River” depicts significant ecological losses. The trout have not returned to the river. Now the pun in “Swagoville”—“play bridge”—is revealed as a phrase with a double meaning when read alongside “The River.” This passage literalizes the pun in “Swagoville” on “bridge” which *denotes* the Swagoville elite’s penchant for the card game during their spare social hours, but *connotes* the many bridge and dam projects initiated in small West Virginia communities by New Deal agencies, regional planners, and resource developers.

settler lifeways in the Ohio River Valley by echoing the river-based indigenous trade in “Ohio maize” with the industrial period’s river-based trade in Gauley coal and sand. Spatial domination is what is dramatized in *Gauley Mountain*. Spatial domination structures each major stage of Gauley history: the colonial settlement of indigenous territory; the timber boom felt as a great wave of domination rolling over Gauley Mountain and its foothills; oozing oil spreading spatially over the cursed Verner farm; oil derricks, mines, and timber camps spreading spatially through Gauley’s lush settings; the economic and ethnic segregation of residents in Swagoville; the control of space dramatized in figures of roads and railroads; et cetera. As epitomized in poems like “Deserted Lumber Yard,” “Oil Field,” “Swagoville,” and “The River,” *Gauley Mountain* details the processes by extractive business demarcates spaces.

A complicated sense of history emerges here, a sense of history which implicates the McNeills themselves (as will later-life works by Louise McNeill). After, all the McNeill clan came to Pocahontas in 1769 to stake out an imposingly beautiful hilltop tract of their own. Embodying formally the poem’s theme of transformation, “The River” ends not with more quatrains, but with a sudden eight-line stanza rich in visual symbolism:

But in the broken rushes of the inlet  
Where herons rose with beaten-winged alarm  
That autumn evening when an Irish rascal  
Knelt by the stream to bathe his wounded arm,  
. . . White herons sleep, their folded wings unstained  
By all that blood the savage Gauley drained  
From pale-faced men whose kindred now possess  
The last dark current of the wilderness. (McNeill *GM* 98)

So ends *Gauley Mountain*. As this finale underscores, the trespasses and thefts which form the thematic core of Gauley history have much to do with demarcating and controlling space. The passage is tonally ambiguous. It finds mixed guilt and pride in reflecting on her pioneer ancestors. McNeill, who has benefited from the self-entitlement felt by her frontiersmen

forefathers to occupy unceded Shawnee territories, again wants us to see the aggression and struggle inherent in West Virginia's history. Baldwin's notion of European men "becoming white" on the bloody American frontier is conjured again; by virtue of her own writing, McNeill is not above the fray, and herself too can be judged as among the "pale-faced men[']s] kindred" who "now possess" the new West Virginia that has been wrought.

The book's final lines comment on what her family enjoyed, and many others could not enjoy: land. McNeill uses visionary history to dwell on her gifts in life. On one level there are the forested hills of Gauley themselves, beautiful though inhumanly "savage," which McNeill was free to roam as a girl. On another level there are the benefits of modernization and liberalization in the rural South. Having depicted the gruesome faces of frontier wars, military prison life, chattel slavery, frontier mothers mourning for infants, and the slow death of starvation, McNeill is clear-eyed enough to appreciate modernity's interruption of some of these situations. Born in 1911, she was able to safely take in 'Gauley.' Accordingly, in "The River" McNeill calms the Gauley river herons, distant avian ancestors in the first poem of *Gauley Mountain* fled noisily from the plunge of murderous "Black-tongued" Dan O'Kane (*GM* 3).

Calming the birds, McNeill can symbolically contrast the suffering of life in 1759 compared with the relative comforts of life in 1939. In conjunction especially with the "Reforestation" poem, "The River" almost finds hope, thanks to these birds, in the surprising resilience of natural ecosystems. The poem hopes that despite crimes of dispossession documented again and again in *Gauley Mountain*, there is—as in the heron's "folded wings unstained"—potential for purification and recovery in spiritual and biological terms. The poem sees the landscape, finally, as a total fusion of nature and culture. Every acre of Gauley resounds with human meaning.

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In summary, an examination of extraction as a subject theme and a cultural mode in these two texts indicates extensive overlap between these different works of poetry. *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* enact their critiques of industrial resource extraction through divergent compositional techniques. Yet they share an important commonality: both are works based not on pure invention but on appropriated materials. Out of these materials, each poet crafts a visionary reformulation of existing history. A work of history begins with primary sources: for Rukeyser, public archival documents; for McNeill, local and family lore.

Furthermore, beautiful symmetries emerge when these distinct poetic cycles stand in comparison. Namely, the fact that Rukeyser's poem sequence mythologizes the document, while McNeill's documents myth. That is, where Rukeyser elevates banal evil of the Hawk's Nest document cache to visionary and cosmic proportions, McNeill sets down in document form, for the first time, her family's oral legend. While in some ways opposite, therefore, Rukeyser's archival poetics and McNeill's bardic poetics are united in their mirrored relationship. Despite their divergences in style and method—McNeill's bardic ethos contrasts sharply with Rukeyser's citational approach—McNeill and Rukeyser in the late thirties each write poetry that questions conventional modernist values including rationalism and faith in technological progress. West Virginia's sad losses figure into both stories, but while Rukeyser focuses on a harrowing incident of worker victimization, McNeill depicts a wider set of circumstances and tell a less grim story of development. Nevertheless, by dramatizing the wringing of energy and matter from the resource-rich lands and waters of West Virginia, *The Book of the Dead* and *Gauley Mountain* create a shared historical tapestry. From radically different viewpoints, each looks at West Virginia's history and demonstrates a critical response to industries of resource extraction. In the

end, each regards modernity with ambivalence or outright mourning. Rukeyser's radical poems of social research and McNeill's enduring local history, in the end, merely represent two kinds of witnessing as they strive to tell to a troubling history.

That McNeill fares so well in this comparison indicates that *Gauley Mountain* occupies a worthy place in the American regionalist tradition of modern poetry. Its distinctive importance is made most clear when we make the effort to appreciate in detail the specific view of modernization which McNeill has made the focus of her book. In general, when attempting to grapple with abstractions like 'modernism,' we understandably lack this kind of geographically specific attention. But even when situating such an abstraction within the context of the South, this risk persists due to the abstraction introduced by the regional category itself. Whereas modernity took on the shape of industrial agriculture throughout most of the South (expressed through the stages of industrialism as chattel slavery, convict labor, sharecropping, textile mills), it looked very different in less arable Appalachia.

Modernity came to Appalachia in the form of the saw, drill, the steam shovel, and the coal cart. Even while improving mobility and bringing comforts such as electrification and indoor plumbing, Appalachian modernity imposed these overlapping and synergetic industries of extraction. I have tried to show that McNeill's experience of modernity had everything to do with her geographic emplacement (as, to some degree, everyone's does)—that McNeill's close-up view of modernization in the mountains likely informed *Gauley Mountain's* critical depiction of extraction industries and, by the same token, likely motivated her attempt to elegize the simpler way of life she had known in her youth and through family lore. *Gauley Mountain's* sylvan romances are not neutrally exploring the backwoods culture that was decisively eradicated between the 1880s and 1930s—a culture that Caudill, overdoing it, depicts as



“moonshine and mayhem” (NCC 153)—when extractive industries assumed control of West Virginia’s economy. They mourn the loss of them. I contended here that *Gauley Mountain*’s narrative implicitly disparages the national-political *status quo* which, by the time McNeill wrote her book, had authorized the total exploitation of Appalachian resources and labor. In *Gauley Mountain* McNeill’s particularly Appalachian viewpoint finds voice in retrospective ballads about the brutal expressions of technology and commerce that leveled forests and cratered the Pocahontas County landscape. This viewpoint means that, despite *Gauley Mountain*’s relative conservatism when compared directly with *The Book of the Dead*, it is hard to deny that the two books share a similar political thrust of resistance to industrial capitalism. A critical adroitness in depicting what was, to the poet, very recent history, this historical process in compressed ballad episodes, especially in the poems “Timber Boom,” “Oil,” “Oil Field,” “Deserted Lumber Yard,” and “The River,” stands out among McNeill’s most important contributions and a factor that ought to interest scholars of modernism. These five ballads, especially, constitute examples of a form of regional modernism that I believe differs categorically not only from the dominant stream of modernism associated with the global metropolises, but also from the notion of southern modernism more recently theorized. We would do well to heed *Gauley Mountain*—to see how its perceptions and its blindnesses compare with our own.

The clear warnings the book raises for a civilization courting extinction<sup>61</sup> places *Gauley Mountain* in a now decades-long tradition of works responding to Appalachian modernity as an apparently endless tragedy of extraction. I refer to primary Appalachian texts ranging from memoir to literary and genre fiction, texts such as: Elizabeth Madox Roberts’ *The Time of Man* (1926) Stuart’s *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow* (1932), Haniel Long’s *Pittsburgh Memoranda*

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<sup>61</sup> See McNeill’s meditations on nuclear annihilation in the final chapter of *The Milk-Weed Ladies*, entitled “Night at the Commodore” (115-22).

(1935); Don West's *O Mountaineers!* (composed 1931-1965; published 1974); G.D. McNeill's *The Last Woods* (1938); James Still's *River of Earth* (1940); Thomas Bell's *Out of this Furnace* (1941), John Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954), Mary Lee Settle's sequence of historical romance novels *The Beulah Quintet* (1973-1982), John Knowles' *A Vein of Riches* (1978), Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven* (1987), Jack B. Reese's *Grubbing the Bowels of the Earth* (1988), Irene McKinney's *Six O'clock Mine Report* (1989), Anne Pancake's *Given Ground* (2001) and *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007), and Jennifer Haigh's *Heat and Light* (2016). Literary responses to Appalachian modernization have tended to give a clear view of extractivism in action.

## CHAPTER IV

### CASE STUDY: MCNEILL AND RUKEYSER—TECHNIQUE

*Gauley Mountain* fits into several common notions of modernism, making it a viable primary text for those already working in the field. A brief enumeration will allow me to move to more interesting and important qualities of the book.

First, *Gauley Mountain* embraces the 1930s cultural tendency toward documenting the pluralism of U.S. culture, converging with a mainspring of American popular modernism. McNeill comes of age in a nation which was increasingly cognizant of its own diversity and during a time when ethnographers, journalists, and travel writers gained cultural prominence and attempted to record and preserve knowledge of itself (Stott). She participated in an interwar upsurge in regional consciousness which saw the publication of many works from and about the ordinary people in diverse American cultural regions including New England, Appalachia, the Southwest, the Deep South, Midwest, and the West. Poets publishing before and after McNeill share analogous poetics.

For example, Genevieve Taggard's book of poetry *Calling Western Union* (1936), a work which takes the particularities of life in Vermont marble quarrying country and makes revolutionary verse out of them, shares with *Gauley Mountain* a deep engagement with localized experience. Taggard, who lived in Hawaii, Washington, and Vermont, writes and thinks very differently from McNeill but when organizing a book of poems is similarly focused on surveying her own specific rural territory. To take another example, Gwendolyn Brooks, one of the century's most celebrated and widely read poets, publishes major poetic works from the forties

through the sixties with poetic strategies even closer to McNeill's than Taggard's. Her poetry, especially of the early part of this period, includes many narrative and character-driven poems which, like *Gauley Mountain*'s "Martha MacElmain" (22), explore social life through depictions of ordinary people and relationships. Yet throughout Brooks' published poetry is a loving attention to the struggles of working-class Chicagoans that can be compared with McNeill's attention to West Virginians. Though over her writing career Brooks' poems would become more oriented toward free verse and political consciousness, a book like *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), with its marriage of traditional verse forms and poetic diction with contemporary narrative subjects and vernacular diction, shares similarities with *Gauley Mountain*. Aspects of these writings are modernist even as they engage with rural subjects and conventional forms.

Second, McNeill's attempt to compile an album of loosely tied episodes comprising a local history, a repository of situated knowledge, derives from contemporary cultural developments that have been termed "anthological modernism" (Mancini). Because it is dedicated to the cultural transmission of what could be called West Virginian pioneer culture, *Gauley Mountain* could be viewed as an example of "anthological modernism" in that sense of constructing a repository for situated knowledge. After all, while the American pioneer is an cultural construct, the historically specific populations of settler families, including the regionally influential Scots-Irish who left the crowding Atlantic coast for the Appalachian Mountains to the west in the 1760s, were very real—especially to McNeill once her family left the 1769 hilltop tract, as earlier parts of this unit suggested.

Third, the questions about American racialism raised by *Gauley Mountain* reveal a set of concerns, such as authenticity, identity, and assimilation, not totally unlike the many ethnic literatures and social writings of American modernism. The ethnic conflicts it chronicles can be

organized into four main themes: i) Native resistance to Euro-American occupation of Gauley; ii) ethnic rivalries among these Euro-American colonists; iii) Appalachian chattel slavery and the miasmatic racial guilt of Gauley's slaveowner families; and iv) the immiseration of a multiethnic industrial proletariat in 1930s Gauley. Typical among interwar Americans, McNeill is interested in racial identities and origins, especially that of her Scots-Irish ancestors<sup>62</sup> who take a central role in the book's events. McNeill's works suggest an ethnic viewpoint. And it is tempting to think of *Gauley Mountain* within a framework of ethnic modernism too.

However *Gauley Mountain*'s most vibrantly modernist quality is its theme of (Jamesonian) rupture, its simultaneous estrangement from and fascination with a prior world. *Gauley Mountain* shares with many modernist texts a fascination with ideas of the primitive and the nonmodern. *Gauley Mountain*'s curiosities and anxieties about eighteenth-century Appalachia, about the backwoods violence of white settlers in the Allegheny Highlands in the eighteenth century, can be seen from the first regular poem of the book, which strikes the reader with the bloody "stains / His torn hand dripped along the track" as a murderer flees justice "[a]cross the Allegheny wall" (*GM* 3).

It is not all grotesque: the past also means pioneer domestic life, the picturesque surroundings provided by the unbroken Greater Appalachian Forest, a conventionally American sense of liberty, and essays into the interior mind of the eighteenth-century Euro-Appalachian settler, in quiet moments or moments of extreme pathos. "Pioneer Lullaby" for example, is an astonishingly evocative, ambiguous text made even more moving when sung by Ginny Hawker in 1991 (McNeill & Groce). If viewed ideally, "Pioneer Lullaby" empathizes across time with

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<sup>62</sup> This group's conflicts with the numerous Native American societies already inhabiting the greater Ohio River Valley constituted the global events now called the French and Indian War (1754-63), Pontiac's Rebellion (1763), and Lord Dunmore's War (1774).

mothers of the past; if viewed materially, it retrospectively describes the role of women's labor in the reproduction of the settler society. Both these operate on a present viewpoint of the past. Like other works which detail marginalized, threatened lifeways, *Gauley Mountain* utilizes the binary opposition between *the modern* and *the premodern*, and related oppositions such as *present/past*; *colonist/colonized*; *city/country*; *center/periphery*. On these grounds, it can be viewed within the broad interwar cultural formation which Lemke has termed "primitivist modernism" or within Jameson's framework of modernism as a narrative rupture. One must sense both worlds, the old one and the new, to narrate the characteristically modernist condition of a rupture, or break, dividing the two.

The historical ruptures illustrated in *Gauley Mountain*, while certainly appealing to that binary opposition between *the modern* and *the premodern*, are critical of the industrial period of West Virginia's history but do not fall prey to the easy thinking these ideas might engender. Even ballads such as "Gabriel MacElmain, Pioneer" and "Gabriel MacElmain-1820" which rosily evoke a legendary heroic age, telling of the life of Gauley's first white squatter shepherd, resist adopting a simple viewpoint such imagery might facilitate, of a pure idyllic beforetime and a profane polluted aftertime. In contrast to a common trope in environmental storytelling, which opposes untouched wilderness and ruinous humanity as part of a conceptual separation of *nature* and *culture* (see Thirties American media icon, King Kong<sup>63</sup>), McNeill has a historical view of nature. As shown in Chapter III, historical events, including the taking of Shawnee and Mingo territories by land-hungry settlers in present-day Pocahontas County (*GM* 9), the timber boom,

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<sup>63</sup> This formal and conceptual separation of *nature* and *culture* endemic to American thought is not limited on screen to *King Kong* but persists well into late twentieth- and twenty-first-century filmmaking—even environmental filmmaking, from *Koyaniscatsi* on the art-film side of things, or *Planet Earth* on the science documentary side of things.

the discovery and extraction of oil, and the reforestation programs of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the New Deal days, occupy the foreground Gauley's fictional history.

But how does McNeill dramatize these ruptures for readers far from West Virginia? McNeill hones her own modernist literary trope, the *retroscape*, in order to historicize Pocahontas County settings and lore. My idea of a retroscape, directly inspired by McNeill's writings, denotes for me a spatio-temporally specific (even if fictional) location, vividly imagined beyond the scope of authoritative or official knowledge. As its name suggests, a retroscape is a past place, or a setting for past events. Yet its exceptional feature is not in the use of a historical setting alone, which is why I do not see retrosapes in, for instance, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953). Its distinguishing feature lies in its visionary or imaginative status.

The retroscape, to me, is a literary trope which uses techniques of landscape representation in order to reconstruct a geographically localized past, to register environmental change, and to conduct ecological storytelling over time. A speculative, or visionary, method of environmental history, it is useful for narrating changes in ecosystems and rural lifeways. It involves leveraging features of narrative setting, especially temporality, perspective or viewpoint, topography, naturalist descriptions, to depict change and, in a more political setting, to document human effects on the planet (e.g., resource depletion; extinctions; pollutants and toxins). In function, a retroscape takes its reader into a past version of a place, making the retroscape an apt vehicle for conducting environmental rhetoric, or doing environmental archiving in written media. A retroscape enables a speculative, or visionary, mode of environmental storytelling. Hence, although a retroscape like the Gauley land takes historical West Virginia as inspiration, it is invented by the poet through the multiple lenses of history, science, folklore, and artistic speculation.

A continuing theme in McNeill's writing across her life is the speculative imaginative gaze—seeing what is not there, what is lost, or what was always out of reach—as something which frees the poet to cover gaps of space and time. Her continual reconstruction of Gauley in different periods of time in *Gauley Mountain* exemplifies this theme, but so does much of McNeill's poetry. McNeill is basically a visionary poet, a claim that might surprise some, and that some might see as clashing with McNeill's self-designation as a folk poet. But there is no necessary conflict here: McNeill specializes precisely in visionary folk expression.

Of course McNeill is not unique among contemporaneous authors in rendering a quasi-history and an invented topography. Hers is a retroscape some might compare with Mervyn Peake's gothic-Victorian world of *Gormenghast*, J. R. R. Tolkien's linguistically sophisticated legendarium—*The Hobbit* was published in 1937—or C.S. Lewis' religiously allegorical world of Narnia, among other alternate worlds conceived in creative literature between the world wars. But McNeill's own approach—one that I believe demands regionally oriented readings—lacks the British medievalism of those works and is distinctively rooted in the natural and cultural history of Pocahontas, West Virginia.

Indeed while McNeill explores her retrosapes through the normally anthropocentric idioms of history, epic, romance, and legend, thus suggesting a prolonged engagement with culture and human affairs, much of *Gauley Mountain* is concerned with place, that is, the nonhuman physical world of mountains, waters, air, plants, and animals. *Gauley Mountain* deploys retrosapes filled with plants, animals, and human cultural sites as fountains of aesthetic and philosophical stimulation, or as rhetorical instruments, therefore it displays a sensibility of regional pride and rural affinity seen in the loco-descriptive poetries of early modern England



written around the time of the Enclosure Acts. Yet McNeill's more magical and speculative elements depart from that tradition.

McNeill's retrosapes situate her readers within highly detailed physical settings just as important as the characters within. Loving and lengthy catalogues of plant folk names document local botanical vocabulary:

Horehound and sage and blacksnake-tongue,  
Wild cherry, spice bush, "penny rorrel,"  
Blue monkshood, ginseng, sour sorrel,  
Thin twisted stalks, sharp jimson weeds,  
Bloody percoons, hot mustard seeds,  
And meadow docks—both broad and narrow,  
Rough bone-set, golden thread, and yarrow,  
Field balsam, catnip, dittany, (*GM* 18)

Like her autobiography, her poems of *Gauley Mountain* begin not with people but with place.

For instance, her song of the illicit moonshiner opens by setting the stage—

In a cave at the mouth of Dead Man's holler  
Where the wild plums claw and the black haws twine  
To cover the entrance, thorn and bramble (*GM* 61)

—in a narrative pattern that also characterizes the first lines of many Gauley poems, such as the one about the cabin-builder, which begins:

Where limestone water cleft a time-worn ledge  
To spread its moving silver as a fan  
And rim the bluegrass with a curve of foam (*GM* 10)

More than showcasing McNeill's knack for scene setting in concise lines, lines like these mark *Gauley Mountain* as a work of literature largely concerned with the creation and preservation of the dimly perceived *retrosapes* of West Virginia. This is very different from using a place as a rhetorical implement in literature (as in, for instance, Rukeyser's abstraction of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel into an allegorical symbol in *The Book of the Dead* or Langston Hughes' use of the Jamestown colony to indicate US settlement project at large in his poem "Great Mistake"). In her

telling the political history of a specific place, McNeill shares rather more with the later twentieth-century Acoma Pueblo poet Simon J. Ortiz, whose *From Sand Creek* (1981) similarly draws thematic continuities from history in a volume of tightly focused short poems.

As likely informed by McNeill's firsthand observation of destructive clear-cutting of trees, the physical environs of Gauley are unstable. They do not transcend human activity. Nothing seems to in Gauley. In ways that distance McNeill from nineteenth-century conceptions of nature, *Gauley Mountain* thus draws, perhaps indirectly, upon wide-scale developments in the arts and sciences which destabilized a concept of nature as timeless and unchanging. McNeill's depiction of West Virginia contrasts with a good deal of Depression-era works about Appalachia which, ignoring the changes in ecology which drive human events, and perhaps aiming for a "local color" effect, hyperbolize the backwardness of mountaineers. McNeill's socially sensitive viewpoint seems ahead of its time when compared with even the more scholarly works in that "local color" vein—such as *Cabins in the Laurel* (1935), Muriel Early Shepard's book-length study of Toe River Valley, NC, which included 128 photographs and plenty of lurid descriptions of life in a pristine countryside. Overlooking widespread pollution and erosion in the region as factors contributing to agricultural and social decline, the book was still trying to explain the apparent lag in Appalachian progress, and so leaned toward blaming the personal deficiencies of Appalachian people for their social ills.

McNeill assumes a different orientation to landscape poetry. Bonnie Costello has argued that modernist landscape poetry departs from nineteenth-century landscape poetry primarily through a recognition of the "flux and frame" (18) of landscape itself. Whereas nineteenth-century landscape art produces mythic and national coherence through a certain "iconographic detachment" from place (18), Costella claims, American writers of the early twentieth century,

such as Frost, Stevens, and Moore, depict fragmentary landscapes to “examine the formation of American identity in relation to place” (16). Modernist poets recognized “the dynamism of the physical world” (117) and

disassembled the natural scene with its invisible, controlling spectator, typified by Brant and Emerson. The moderns complicated the image of nature as a space of origin . . . Their landscapes are mediated and continually changing, spaces to act or dream in, but never quite possess. (Costella 16)

McNeill’s approach to narrating environmental space and history, in spite of her verse’s retrospective, romantic qualities, arguably meets Costello’s conception of modernist landscape poetry. McNeill’s overriding emphasis is on her own locality, and not as *either* a cultural *or* a natural location, but *both*—that is, as determined both by human and nonhuman forces acting upon it.

A clear through-line in McNeill’s life’s work is her attempt to know the surfaces and depths of her homeland, as shaped by and yet shaping human life. Throughout her writings ‘nature’ is revealed as doggedly cultural. For instance, in the second sentence of her remarkable autobiography, *The Milk-Weed Ladies* (1988), McNeill describes her family’s “patch of earth” as an earthly yet anthropic setting for human action in unique phrasings that would bring perhaps consternation to a naturalist: a “half stadium of limestone cliffs and mountain pastures” (3); “long pavilions of shade” (*ML* 100). In her all her poetry, but especially I think in the volumes *Gauley Mountain*, *Elderberry Flood*, and much of *Hill Daughter*, McNeill conceives of the Appalachian landscape as a historical formation—something determined by specific activities and not something possessing unchanging pastoral qualities.

At the same time, could my reading of McNeill not be viewed as unnecessarily forced? Should my argument not be simply dismissed as a tortured attempt to force a text into the already-established modernist movement by overstating the ‘modernness’ of her work? After all,

this is a traditionalist poet in so many senses. There is no evidence that McNeill followed the shifting landscape of transatlantic poetics in the interwar years, when critics and theorists contested the purposes and function of poetry and poetic criticism. And as a committed teacher, historian, and poet, she never published her own literary criticism or cultural manifestos. In so many ways, McNeill differs markedly from roughly contemporary American poets more concerned with the programs of high modernism. Take almost any passage:

McNeill's metered imitations of Pocahontas County folk material are tinged with a romance reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott, a scent of Americana reminiscent of the popular lineage of Longfellow, and a kind of English rural romanticism reflecting the influence of Thomas Hardy—some of the several literary writers McNeill read in her early life. Bearing these stand apart from the works of fellow southerners and ex-southerners such as Zora Neale Hurston, Carson McCullers, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate or Robert Penn Warren and from the (capital-'m') Modernists of the day, the Objectivist school represented by Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and Lorine Niedecker. This difference is only heightened when comparing McNeill to that early cadre of high modernists, the so-called Georgians (Forster, Eliot, Strachey, Woolf, Joyce, Lawrence), whose rejection of the literary practice of the so-called Victorians and Edwardians as naively conventional in favor of more radical textual interventions and different extremes of thought came to define 'modernism' in midcentury classrooms, anthologies, and literary history books.

More to the point, can *Gauley Mountain* really be called modernist poetry? *Gauley Mountain* contains neither free verse lyric, stream of consciousness, nor modernist collage, employing on the contrary several age-old modes of Western poetry: the narrative ballad ("Martha MacElmain"; "The Inn"; "Runaway"); the lyric ("Lydia Verner"; "Helmit Verner –

1918”); the dramatic monologue (“Tillie Sage”; “Donna MacElmain”; “Granny’s Story”); the dialogue (“Church Raising”); the third-person persona poem (“Ballad of Mad Ann Bailey”; “Francis Asbury, Circuit Rider”; “Claude Crozet”); the didactic or pedagogical poem (“Mountain Corn Song”; “Moonshiner”; “Faldang”); the verse catalogue (“Forting”; “Granny Saunders”; “Katchie Verner’s Harvest”; “Fran Saunders”); and the topographical/prospect poem or tableau scene (“Burying Field”; “Oil Field”; “Deserted Lumber Yard”; “Indian Pipes”; “The River”).

Working in these traditional modes McNeill, furthermore, produces more-or-less conventional, or readily recognizable, verse prosody. *Gauley Mountain* happily manifests in the shape of long-used formulas such as the “common ballad” in tetrameter quatrains, the iambic pentameter line, and the sonnet. It does so largely aloof to modernism’s battles and factions since the 1910s, and unconcerned with the assertion, made for decades in certain urban literary circles, that these forms were aesthetically depleted. McNeill prefers the closed line over the enjambed line. She favors an exacting end rhyme, conferring a patterned, song-like euphony throughout *Gauley Mountain*. All the poems follow some established pattern of prosody and/or end rhyme, meaning that deviations from a given poem’s established patterns of stanza, line, and rhyme are infrequent enough to raise an eyebrow. McNeill’s interest in working within mostly stable forms results in a relatively conservative approach to formalism. Thus, we should reason, *Gauley Mountain*’s formal traditionalism and generally ruralist bent have rightly led to its critical obscurity in modernist studies.

Though it may seem sensible enough, the position outlined above is mistaken on two accounts. The first relates to poetic form and the second relates to poetic content.

First, regarding poetic form, *Gauley Mountain* is not an entirely traditionalist book. It is true that it lacks the non-linear, fragmentary nature of a James Joyce novel or Gertrude Stein

lyric, and that comparing it to *The Book of the Dead* serves to reinforce this point. Yet McNeill does destabilize form in minor ways. She occasionally surprises with sudden modifications to line and stanza within the context of a stable form. Poems including “Oil” (58) interrupt structure, usually in ways that pinpoint flashpoints in narrative or character. Contemporary readers could justifiably see the short historical interludes I think of as “arguments,” which scaffold the crowding ballads into a plot structure, as prose poems. Rather than maintain a consistent narrator throughout the book, *Gauley Mountain* employs multiple perspectives in poems ranging from limited to omniscient narration and written variously in all three grammatical points of view. Like *Spoon River Anthology*, to which it was somewhat reductively compared, *Gauley Mountain* is multivocal fiction. To some extent McNeil’s form is conservative when viewed by many late-1930s standards. So I certainly do not suggest any equivalency between her rather traditionalist work and the self-consciously radical, iconoclastic works of the vanguard modernists and their 1930s followers. Yet the formal choices outlined above do typify *Gauley Mountain* to a degree that they do not typify works from the genteel nineteenth-century traditions of Victorian poets, Edwardian poets, or American Fireside poets. This suggests a sense of separation from the pre-1910s standard in transatlantic poetic form as well as from high modernism.

McNeill shares with many southern writers of the early twentieth century an ambiguous, tentative investment in modernist textual experimentation. If we accept Sara Blair’s conception of modernism as a movement in literature and the arts that can be identified by its emphasis on experimenting with the cultural power of forms (166), these modest interventions into verse shape and function arguably count as modernist experimentation. Here the useful concepts of proximal modernism and distal modernism applied by David A. Davis to southern American

literature are instructive of how the geography of uneven development explains the different modalities of American literary modernism.

As Davis convincingly argues in *World War I and Southern Modernism* (2018), southerners were profoundly affected by the experience of World War I. Their experiences in the war led them to encounter advanced modernization in places more technologically developed and politically liberal than the South. This, Davis argues, threw the culture of the American South into a tailspin by the 1920s, leading to the emergence of a distinct southern modernism. Taking a broad view of the textual trajectories of modernism in the northern and southern parts of the United States, Davis reasons that the regional modernism of the Southeast, on one hand, and the cosmopolitan ‘high’ modernism of the urban Northeast, on the other hand, can be seen best through an attention to the geographic contours of modernity:

Stephen Kern, Peter Osborne, and David Harvey have theorized that modernity represents a disruption in the existence of space and time [ . . . ] but that disruption did not happen instantaneously in all places. The disruptions of modernity concentrated in some areas and diffused through others, evolving over time through a dynamic process that was experienced differently in relation to a population’s exposure to disruption. Modernism radiates outward from centers from centers of disruption into marginal zones as flows of population, infrastructure, and commerce progress outward and inward. (6)

So the key variable in this accounting of American modernism is (rural) *distance* or (urban) *proximity* to “centers of disruption.” In this view, literary modernists from the South were “distal modernists.” Their works were prone to conservatism in form and content, Davis states, and commonly voiced “negative apprehension of modernity” (11). Because they “wrote from the margins of modernism, frequently opposing disruption and defending tradition as they created it,” they tended to focus on regional change as a central theme (Davis 6). With the rural Idaho-born Ezra Pound representing to Davis an exception proving the rule, “distal” writers were more attached to cultural tradition and less subversive than their Northeastern counterparts.

What Davis terms “proximal modernism,” on the other hand, refers to the politically and technically innovative texts of cities during this same time period. These are the challenging-to-read, subversive works emerging from those “centers of disruption” such as Paris, London, Rome and New York. The “proximal,” cutting-edge works associated with *-ism* movements such as Futurism are more readily classified as ‘modernist.’ Conceived and crafted in proximity to bright centers of population, industry, and learning, they reflect more readily the aesthetic ideals of academics, who also tend to live and work in cities.

This is a theory that helps to explain in broad terms the more traditionalist southern modernist from the (on the whole) more radical northern or international modernist.<sup>64</sup> These theoretical terms “distal” and “proximal” are indeed useful for assessing the textual differences between the modernist period’s rural, peripheral writings and its urban, cosmopolitan writings. A phrase like ‘distal modernism’ helps to explain what makes a text like *Gauley Mountain* a modernist text. It is an idea which helps to explain the contexts which lead southern literary modernism to fixate, as Leigh Anne Duck observes, on “temporal collisions, moments in which the region’s and nation’s multiple temporal forms convulsively intersect” (Duck 8). And on the other hand, the iconoclastic writings and artworks that have conventionally been termed ‘modernism’ are far better understood as ‘proximal modernism.’ Together these terms help to frame the well-observed fact that urban writers resisted the homogenizing forces of modernity by pressing the boundaries of their aesthetic genres, while regional writers have attempted to resist

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<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that this distal-modernist sensibility is not necessarily one of the American South. A Midwestern writer like Meridel LeSeur, for instance, can be seen as an analogue to McNeill insofar as she aims to document the specific folkways of a particular place. LeSeur’s *North Star Country* (1945) and *Gauley Mountain* (1939) share a fixation on the value of receding cultural forms and memories, despite their fundamentally differing literary techniques. As parallel texts with a similar set of concerns, including America’s history of colonialism and its pioneer mythologies, science and technologization.



these same homogenizing forces through “fidelity to ‘local customs’ and an assertion of the ‘value of ordinary rural lives’” (Storey 197).

The experience of being both within and without the modern world, seemingly at once, is identified by Davis as a key attribute of southern modernism. I believe McNeill’s writings, in particular her autobiography and her historical poetry, stand as a compelling expression of this distal apprehension of modernity. She writes with a more traditionalist bent than her contemporaries writing from places more economically and technologically developed. McNeill’s approach to poetry, which takes up a folk culture that has an uncertain future, echoes retrospective British writers caught up amid industrialization, which struck earlier there (like romantic figures Sir Walter Scott, Richard Doddridge, and William Wordsworth, and proto-modernists W.B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy) or any literature with similar concerns about capitalist industrialization. Surveying of the whole field of southern modernism’s primary texts, Davis sounds almost like he is writing about *Gauley Mountain* when he argues that southern writing

tends to depict modernity as an external disruptive force, it tends to be conflicted about nationalism, it tends to critique but not directly challenge race relations and gender dynamics, and it tends to engage in a limited amount of experimentation with literary form. (Davis 11)

McNeill even directly attests to this experience of a discontinuous modernity, when she comments in her autobiography about her puzzlement as a girl when her mother would sing. The tune the young Louise McNeill heard her mother singing, “Daisy Bell,” was a successful popular song from 1892, with the familiar chorus: “Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do. / I’m half crazy, all for the love of you” and concluding with the phrase “a bicycle built for two.” McNeill knew the song, but she had never seen a bicycle. That is, the song had reached Pocahontas, WV before the bicycle itself. In addition to comporting with a good deal of Davis’ theory of southern

modernism, this quirk of history is suggestive of the geographic discontinuity of modernization and the surprising shapes modernity takes in different places.

Writing *Gauley Mountain* on the McNeill farm on Swago Creek—no electricity, no plumbing, no civil sanitation—we might, following Davis’ line of reasoning, be tempted to call these nonmodern conditions. “Because of World War I,” Davis writes,

southerners experienced the effects of modernity often before the region actually modernized: they experienced cities before they urbanized, they worked in factories before they industrialized, they used new technologies before the South had electrical or communication infrastructure, and they made contact with populations that had more progressive ideologies before they liberalized. (11)

Based on this view, Davis rationalizes that “[b]efore World War I, the South was far from a site of modernity” (10). In contrast with a good deal of this work, Davis here makes a blanket generalization. It is a generalization refuted by, say, the Wright Brother’s famous aviation tests in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, or by the history of New Orleans, a city which had, well before World War I, had the staples of modernity: hotels, a mint, museums, a (struggling) steam-pump canal and levee network, a mafia, a public library, parks, bicycles, streetcars, and automobiles, a bustling global trade port, a municipal drainage system, and a multiethnic, cosmopolitan populace that spoke diverse languages and included sailors and immigrants from around the world. Or Davis’ generalization could be contrasted with the findings of the classic of regional historiography, *The Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* by C. Vann Woodward, a book which describes the South as remade before the outbreak of World War I in Europe.

The South was still very rural during World War I, it is true, and was even heavily rural until World War II, but rurality does not mean premodern. Industrial methods of production had changed the farming and textile industries in the second half of the 1800s. Modern changes in land ownership between the Civil War and World War I consolidated industry control of key

areas of the South: sharecropping agriculture, automation in southern mills and workhouses, new ‘mineral rights’ land use practices defined this period (Stoll; Drake; Whisnant; Lewis).

Meanwhile, for decades before World War I, diverse southern reformers and progressive social elites from outside the planter class, including Booker T. Washington, Henry W. Grady, and political Reconstructionists, worked variously to modernize (not the same thing as urbanize) this rural region. They argued for fuller integration into the United States and for different programs of progress and striving under slogans like ‘New South,’ a term coined by Grady in 1874.

Because of efforts like these, the South was in many ways already modern. And in economic terms, the South was already commercial, already tied into the global economy *long* before World War I; railroads, merchants, manufacturers, had ensured this to a significant extent even before the eleven southeastern states seceded from the United States in 1860 and 1861.<sup>65</sup> Modern conditions, including a social “divergence of town and country” (Downey 145) characterized life even if the South lagged behind the Northeast in key areas of infrastructure. Many southerners were mobile and connected. A sign of how much things had changed in the region, in 1913 Woodrow Wilson became the first southerner to win the presidency since the Civil War.

Significant aspects of McNeill’s work, especially *Gauley Mountain* itself with its depiction of modernization in West Virginia beginning in the 1880s with the extractive boom in white pine, indicate that Davis minimizes evidence of modern infrastructure and social organization in the pre-World War I South. We should not ignore the insights McNeill and her source documents provide into southern modernity, or ignore McNeill’s keen view of the ruin caused by modern changes in resource extraction technology. Similarly, we should not assume

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<sup>65</sup> For a compelling work of regional economic history which illustrates the trends capitalism followed in the antebellum American South, see Tom Downey’s *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790-1860* (2006).

that to be involved in the creation and maintenance of modernity, a region or community needs to be “urbanized” and “industrialized” and “liberalized” (Davis 11). *Gauley Mountain* is a special work in its insistence, implicitly made throughout, that regionalism is not antithetical to, but rather highly suitable for, exploring the new realities we associate with modernity. The view animating *Gauley Mountain*, one which McNeill would state outright five decades later in her autobiography, is that a person or community can describe the rapid changes of history better with the grounded perspective of long attachment to a single place. Where Davis views the southern modernist as experiencing “modernism without modernity,” *Gauley Mountain* demonstrates the opposite. It makes dramatically clear that being on the geographic fringes of modernity is to be fully a part of the modern world.

So the decaying lumber stacks of West Virginia, even where they are, rotting at a distance from huge cities with their factories and ports, are artifacts of modernity as equally as the modern city. I contend emphatically that it was not the case that southern modernists were responding to “modernism without modernity,” as if torn between their *premodern* experience in their daily lives and *modern* culture on the radio and in magazines. They responded *both* to modernism and modernity. As McNeill learned early in life, the economic processes of modernization deeply changed rural spaces; living in the country—even in remote Buckeye, West Virginia—did not exempt one from the conditions of modernity, even if one lived somewhere without cinemas, plumbing, and streetcars. Modernity looks different in different places; ruralism is often taken, falsely, as a signifier of premodernity, but a rural place can be modern. There are many reasons to see 1930s West Virginia, and even its sparsely populated pockets such as Pocahontas County, as deeply modern. Modernity in rural West Virginia looked like a deserted lumber pile, not a broadcast tower; modernity in rural Oklahoma looked like oil

fields, not a military a military academy; modernity in rural Louisiana looked like a sugar plantation, not an urban downtown. Despite the importance of the urban-rural divide, modernity (and inevitably, artistic responses to it) does span it.<sup>66</sup>

The second mistake of the counter-argument that McNeill is not a modernist writer relates not to form but to content. As the previous chapter demonstrated, *Gauley Mountain* offers a multi-layered critique of an economy based on resource extraction operations. To put this in other words, *Gauley Mountain*'s subject is modernity, and what it looked like in Pocahontas, West Virginia. Far from alleging that McNeill wrote urbane, cosmopolitan poems along the lines of Mina Loy's I am arguing on the contrary that McNeill's story of rural change is as thoroughly, if differently, modernist.

To view McNeill's retrospective verse in this way—that is, to read her sylvan romances and decidedly homespun ballads as part of a modernist artistic agenda—is to acknowledge the at times comic breadth and variety of modernism as an art movement. Such a view requires the broader conception of modernism which has taken hold in schools and publications in the past thirty-five years. The modernist cultural movement<sup>67</sup> to which my argument refers includes early

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<sup>66</sup> The theoretical basis for my partial disagreement with David A. Davis is Jameson's assertion that there is, as in *A Singular Modernity*, only a single modernity. That is, modernity is not an enclosed system that exists *here* (say, in Baltimore, MD) and not *there* (say, in Buckeye, WV). Entirely on the contrary, modernity is brought into existence by the very narration of developmental difference between these two places. The trees of Pocahontas County, American history testifies, built towns and cities outside Appalachia. More generally, the resources of Appalachia fueled the industries which built a good deal of American modernity. Even more generally, distal, peripheral hinterlands have supplied the materials with which cities have created their shocking disruptions. So despite the issue I have raised here in opposition to Davis' claim that "in the South, modernism preceded modernity," what I really argue for is a more thoroughgoing application of Davis' theory of regional modernisms. The conceptual opposition between 'distal' and 'proximal' phenomena is apt, and should be applied *both* to modernism *and* to modernity. Proximal modernity in the American Northeast implied distal modernity in its main resource and agricultural colony the American Southeast, because the experience of modernity itself *required thoroughgoing inter-contact between unevenly developed regions* for a distinct condition of modernity to be narrated in the first place. This thinking is supported by Davis' own model of modernism based on geographic proximity; my counterargument in the big picture only works to reinforce Davis' larger point that distinct geographies, proximate or distant to centers of modernization, produce a variety of modernisms.

<sup>67</sup> Constructed by waves of critics, scholars, and teachers in the humanities disciplines, this expanded concept of modernism has in large part supplanted the official canon of modernism inherited from the midcentury

twentieth-century works whose concerns were classified by the cultural intelligentsia as ethnic, regional, or otherwise particularized concerns. These include reevaluated works by writers including: John Joseph Matthews; Charles Alexander Eastman (born Hakadah and later named Ohíye S'a) (1858-1939); Claude McKay (1889–1948); D'Arcy McNickle; Henry Roth; Countee Cullen (1903–1946); John Milton Oskison (1874–1947); Mourning Dove (born Christine Quintasket, or Hum-ishu-ma); Jean Rhys; Gwendolyn Bennett (1902–1981); Langston Hughes (1902–1967); Lynn Riggs; Zitkala-Sa; Américo Paredes; Ana Yazierska; Jean Toomer (1894–1967); Younghill Kang; Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875–1935); and Lola Ridge. As the rise of these writers' reputations suggests, scholars have attempted to assess the shape and color of modernism more comprehensively, either by theorizing ethnic modernisms and immigrant modernisms (Sorensen; Sollors; Konzett), examining the mass culture from which high modernists aimed to differentiate themselves (Karl; Huyssen; Knapp), or by historicizing various regional modernisms (Cocola; Alexander & Moran; Duck; Davis; Dorman & Wilson; Baker, Jr.; Nikopoulou). These studies offer much-needed supplements to the more shopworn paradigm of transnational, cosmopolitan modernism; as they have shown, these alternative social viewpoints are also valuable literary viewpoints.

Modernism may once have been thought of as a conversation between Europe and the United States, and mapped by following the journeys of a few special expatriate artists across the Atlantic milieu, but in truth a thousand flowers bloomed: Toomer encourages us to think of modernism along a tense axis of North and South; Jeffers encourages us to think of modernism on coastal cliffs where the human and the nonhuman collide in a cosmic tragedy that is also an

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literary academy. As a result, today that older conception of modernism is rightly recognized as a demographically narrow movement in literary history, largely reflecting the works of a small group of highly educated British and American men and women, and called, because of its associations with high-brow elitism, "high" modernism (Kalaidjian).

ethnography (Walton 66-7); McNeill encourages us to think of modernism as a cultural response to extractive development, and an outgrowth of life in a remote corner of West Virginia.

A vivid strain of regionalism pervades modernism: Lorine Niedecker places modernism in the Wisconsin agrisystem; Carl Sandburg in the packing mills of Chicago; Toomer in Sparta, Georgia; Frost in Derry, New Hampshire; William Carlos Williams in Rutherford, New Jersey; Robinson Jeffers on Carmel Point in California; and Jovita González<sup>68</sup> in Matamoros along the Rio Grande. Continual study of regionally-affiliated writers of the Americas during the span of modernization—a rich tapestry including: Effie Waller Smith; Mark Twain; Américo Paredes; the Fugitives of Vanderbilt University; W. E. Blackhurst; Jean Toomer; William Faulkner; Katherine Porter; Jovita González; Emma Bell Miles; D’Arcy McNickle; Robert Service; Jesse Stuart; Willa Cather; Sarah Orne Jewett; Ernesto Cardenal; John Joseph Matthews; Genevieve Taggard; and Louise McNeill— will continue to add nuance to our view modernism and the modern period itself, by revealing the different ways modernity was experienced and culturally processed across geographic space.

Although the usage of ‘regional modernism’ has tended to recall texts about rural settings and subjects (hence the all-too-natural interchanging of ‘regional’ with ‘rural’), especially with reference to nineteenth-century U.S. literary history, it does not have to. The term also has secondary meaning, which is less reductive in scope, and critically applicable not only to rural texts but to any texts which exhibit strong local or regional affiliations. This alternative concept of ‘the regional’ prompts us instead to locate particular cities, which have traditionally been defined as ‘sites of modernity’ in opposition to regions with their residual cultural

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<sup>68</sup> The little-known novel *Caballero* was co-authored by González with Eve Raleigh in the 1930s, but went unpublished until 1996. See Priscilla Solis Ybarra’s treatment of the text in *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican-American Literature and the Environment* (2016) for more.

provincialisms, within some history and geography. In this second critical application, the broadened idea of ‘the regional’ can stage geographical criticism that, rather than viewing cities as mythical or absolute ‘sites of modernity,’ historicize them as particular places with localized backgrounds and concerns.

Taking a cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty, who makes the case for postcolonial criticism to “provincialize” Europe—a continent too reflexively held in studies of world history as a mythical or absolute site of modernity—studies in American literary regionalism are well positioned to ‘provincialize’ New York City. In *Provincializing Europe* (2000) Chakrabarty sought to propagate a view which would emphasize the regional particularity of Europe, and to forward these details as a replacements for the imaginary version of the European continent which in its worst excesses unthinkingly regards it as a kind of ahistoric universal. Similarly, there is plenty of potential for place-based humanities inquiry to ‘provincialize’ the cities, because in a sense cities occupy their own imaginary position within modernist studies as an ahistoric universal—as ‘the modern’ itself.

This kind of thinking is necessary because, for one reason, the city is itself an environment. Cities are sites where biological and microbiological life, weather, genetics, ecosystems, and other forces of the physical world coact, as well as where human beings experience and transform place, seek food and shelter, enjoy environmental privileges, and deal with environmental injustices. Regions likewise are more than just ‘places that are not cities.’<sup>69</sup> City, town, or county, place provides human beings with relations and contexts. “[H]umans are geographical beings” whose agency is “geographic agency” (1), argues theorist of geography

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<sup>69</sup> For more theoretical background on what exactly ‘region’ might mean, see the intercultural historicism José David Saldívar develops in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997). For more context, see the etymological research compiled by Raymond Williams in his entry on “Regional” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), 264-66.



Robert David Sack. As *homo geographicus*, human beings are such that their perspective and very existence is fundamentally oriented around place and space, in its various scales (Sack). Place, whether approached as a cultural or ecological setting, is a significant context for human life. It therefore follows that place gives form and force to the production of art works not only of rural but of metropolitan origins as well.

In the spirit of provincializing New York City as a particular cultural location rather than a universal icon of ‘the modern,’ this close reading reveals *The Book of the Dead* as a text both urban and regional in nature. While it is true that Rukeyser herself viewed *U.S.1* as a work of geographic investigation, I mean to suggest that over and above this fact—namely, that *The Book of the Dead* is regionalist insofar as it deals with the specific people, places, and events of 1930-31 Gauley Bridge—this authorial choice itself falls in line with (and modifies) certain regional publishing trends of the urban Northeast. Rukeyser’s approach to writing poetry between 1936 and 1938—a method involving travel, inter-regional social encounters, the attempt to champion the struggling, to perform some morally useful task—marks her as a regional poet too, a characteristically New Yorker poet. The biographical and conceptual outlines of *The Book of the Dead*, blending of travel writing, documentary investigation, and visionary poetry—highlight Rukeyser’s commonalities with other intellectual and social investigators from the Northeast’s cosmopolitan core.

An interest not only in cultural pluralism but in the possibilities of cultural syncretism drove the urban North’s fascination with Appalachia in the period of modernization. Appalachia is itself, historian Allen W. Batteau argues, “a creature of the urban imagination” (1). To many, the mountainous region stood as an alternative against which to define the mainstream nation. “Where the disparity between rural life and urban life in the United States conventionally

appeared as a difference of degree,” Shapiro notes, “the disparity between Appalachia conceived as a legitimately discrete region and the rest of the nation appeared as a difference of kind” (155). As such travel writings of New Yorkers in Appalachia tended to exhibit the utopian and dystopian extremes of many cosmopolitan writers who traveled to Appalachia and published, in trade journals and in magazines as the *New York Journal* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, their personal responses to its peculiarities. Ellen Churchill Semple, a Kentucky-born urbanite who studied at Vassar College and worked in both New York City and Chicago, produced works about Appalachia, along with writings by William Goodell Frost, which use geography and race science to explain the region’s markings of difference. It is no exaggeration to say that traditions of progressive “uplift” writing and colorful fiction about the mountains written by regional outsiders helped to create the regional category of Appalachia we still use (Eller *MMM* 43).

In particular, Progressive northern women played a major role in inter-regional contact during what Allen W. Batteau calls “the invention of Appalachia.” A large proportion of these writers were women involved with Protestant mission schools and home missions which, as Henry D. Shapiro demonstrates, institutionalized “Appalachian otherness.” In a 2020 article for the *Review of International Political Economy*, Jacob L. Stump has drawn on the historical management and study of Third World poverty to comparatively demonstrate how Christian and Progressive missionaries, such as the Konnarock Training School for Girls, entered Appalachia and

transformed a stable set of social differences into stark interpretations of neediness, institutionalized those interpretations, and enacted them onto the bodies of locals in specific ways that reflected global, colonial patterns of stark inequality (1830-1930). (1)

Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, in *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, traces how progressive writers (generally middle and upper class white

women) came to Appalachia seeking to fix the region's widely-discussed social problems, often paying little attention to the underlying forces making Appalachia the way it was. Dividing this extensive body of writings into three main overlapping streams—the literatures of the voyeur, the tourist, and the social crusader—Engelhardt finds that a large portion of the outside commenters did not necessarily work in the best interests of the ordinary Appalachian. In general, she writes, “the women who came to Appalachia with college educations; friends working in settlement houses, Audubon clubs, and women's clubs; and a genuine love for the mountains did not write stories arguing for the continued well-being of the place and people in it” (35). Even the works of social crusaders, such as Olive Dame Campbell, tended to be “built ultimately on privilege and complicity” as the special practice of those “with both the means to be educated and the means to get to the mountains” (Engelhardt 61). By the 1930s, when Harlan County, Kentucky, had become a topic of national scrutiny, leftist writers were mobilizing around the plight of Appalachian workers more generally. Late in 1931, Theodore Dreiser, along with John Dos Passos, Lewis Mumford, and Sherwood Anderson, and other left writers, organized a committee to investigate crimes against striking miners Kentucky's Harlan coal fields. The Dreiser Committee would gain the attention of President Roosevelt himself. In each of these examples can be seen a strong moral approach to those who visit Appalachia, a site which had become, to the northern urbanite, a site of struggle and need.

*The Book of the Dead* attempts to improve upon these traditions of travel writing about Appalachia even as it rehearses them. With the geographic context of her book the foreground, Rukeyser appears as a sophisticated successor to the 1910s social crusaders so elegantly examined by Engelhardt. Where writers for monthly magazines such as *Harper's*, *Lippincott's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* were eager to reinforce ideas of progress and integration as

solutions for Appalachian backwardness, *The Book of the Dead* witnesses at each turn the total failures of industrial capitalism and technological modernity. Likewise, while rosy nostalgia for pastoral nature typify the picturesque writings of Laura Maria Miller Grout, Katherine Pettit, and Daisy Gertrude Dame, who came to Appalachia to teach (Engelhardt 48), Rukeyser obviously abandons pastoralism for a more sublime and terrible view of physical nature: she sees in the town of Alloy a “commercial field” with “murdering snow” (*U.S.I* 47), while in a nightmare paradox, “the suns declare midnight” (*U.S.I* 52) The disease of silicosis spreads out over “one country marked by error” (*U.S.I* 61). Rukeyser seems fully aware of the touristic impulses of the travel writer, and challenges her readers to seek out more than pristine, empty lands:

What do you want—a cliff over a city?  
A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?  
These people live here. (*U.S.I* 17)

While she is self-reflexive at each step, Rukeyser nonetheless joins in a century-old tradition of writing *about* (as opposed to writing *to*) Appalachians. (Whomever “you” pronoun refers to here—the reader?—it clearly does not refer to “[t]hese people” involved with the tunnel project.) *The Book of the Dead* takes part in extractive culture in the sense that it wrings pathos, for an audience composed primarily of non-Appalachians, of the disastrous Hawk’s Nest situation. Positioning the poet within this northeastern regional tradition encourages us to read Rukeyser in a way that she has not really been read before, with both moral appreciation and moral skepticism, as a mobile agent scouting for resources in way that suggestively parallels her industrialist father’s own scouting. Rukeyser like other northeastern urbanites who turned aligned cultural investigators of the thirties, thus seem to develop forms of modernist self-regard seen in earlier travel writings about Appalachia. In this movement toward ‘cultural pluralism’

seen among northerners, exploring West Virginia becomes an occasion for examining the condition of modernity.

This also means that *The Book of the Dead* extends an important stream of American thought linking travel writing with progress. A good deal of nineteenth-century U.S. writing, favoring the traveler modes of local color, ethnography, and picaresque, hinges on the differences between places. In much of that century's local color literature, the setting is limited to a single region, opening it up to outside scrutiny, but the movement between places lent a peculiar power to other texts. Mark Twain, called by William Faulkner "the father of American literature," himself left his home in Hannibal, Missouri before authoring massively popular picaresque and travel books. Twain worked as a Mississippi riverboat pilot and an unsuccessful miner in the Nevada Territory's Humbolt mountain range (where he found no gold—only mica and quartz) before pivoting to work in the quartz mills and later finding a home working in journalism. Twain found success writing on the basis of his travels. Indeed he is probably best known as a travel writer during his lifetime. He saw in travel a medicine for the mind, writing in the conclusion to the best-selling 1869 travel book *The Innocents Abroad* that

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime. (n.p.)

This idea has become proverbial, in part thanks to popular American narratives of tourism and discovery including and extending beyond Twain's works. A romantic fascination with the open road gives us his picaresque *Bildungsroman* narratives, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). For Twain, the growth and maturation of the citizen or artist is innately dependent on a certain (from today's viewpoint, grossly limited)

democratic view. And this democratic view requires a degree of freedom from custom, which itself is gotten through geographic movement.

Leaving home young, as Rukeyser did, enables a different sort of personal development than an upbringing like McNeill's, confined mainly to the family farm and rural schoolhouses near Buckeye, West Virginia. For many protagonists of the picaresque, the development of the traveler as they move through different social settings is, to use an idiom popular in the U.S., 'the bottom line.' Mobility implies more than a moving body. It also implies a moving eye, a changing perspective, a sense of process or progress, a growing mind and soul, and a heightened focus on difference and change. Ruminations on roads, travel, and discovery in *The Book of the Dead*—

Past your tall central city's influence,  
outside its body: traffic, penumbral crowds,  
are centers removed and strong, fighting for good reason.

These roads will take you into your own country.  
Select the mountains, follow rivers back,  
travel the passes. Touch West Virginia where

the Midland Trail leaves the Virginia furnace,  
iron Clifton Forge, Covington iron, goes down  
into the wealthy valley, resorts, the chalk hotel. (*U.S. I* 9)

—evoke a 1930s cultural *Gestalt* that takes Twain's prescriptions seriously: a world of scenic train vacations out of the "tall central cit[ies]," National Park Service advertisements, documentary photography and reportage, and road construction projects by the Works Progress Administration. Scholar of modern American poetry John Lowney agrees, finding in *The Book of the Dead* extensive amounts of "verbal mapping": "Rukeyser's precisely rendered history of West Virginia [ . . . ] resembles the comprehensive introductory overviews of state history found in the American Guide Series" (Lowney 51). Throughout *The Book of the Dead* are locative

signposts. The poems move through the settings of Gauley Bridge, the tunnel, the river, Alloy, the dam, meeting rooms, offices, workers' homes, and nearby farmlands. Following Catherine Gander's theoretical study of *The Book of the Dead* as a textual mapping, and recovering Rukeyser's own hand-drawn map of the Gauley Bridge environs for its 2018 reprinting, Catherine Venable Moore characterizes the sequence as "itself a kind of map" (14).

Even without regard to *U.S.I.*'s status as a work of geography, readers of *The Book of the Dead* can sense the central importance of movement, motion, and exploration to the text. The bustle of New York City can be felt in these West Virginia poems, with their continual shifts in setting and viewpoint, its montage effects, its fragmented and distorted images, and its rush of motion. As Kertesz explains, the sensation of continual movement accompanies any reading of Rukeyser, in whose poetry "we are rarely permitted to rest at any phase" (108). Influenced by ideas about modern science, especially the work of physicist Willard Gibbs (1939-1903), Rukeyser in her prose *ars poetica* argues against stable logic or static thought as suitable bases for writing poetry (*The Life of Poetry* 177). In a sense, motion and change mean everything for Rukeyser's poetic. Her son William L. Rukeyser called her "the consummate New Yorker" (300). To him, he explains, this New Yorker states had to do not only with the fact that she had chosen to center her life in the bustling agora of New York City, but also with her lifetime of ceaseless motion and self-invention. Rukeyser's sense of Robert Frost's poetry—that it failed to "show the speed of the modern imagination in its seizing hold and letting go fast" (Kertesz 126)—underscore this fact. So there are multiple ways in which *The Book of the Dead* shows affiliations with travel writing. And looking forward in history, the geographical awareness *The Book of the Dead* seeks to cultivate even predicts a new phase of the American picaresque.

Rukeyser's touristic verve as a mobile New Yorker on a mission prefigures the Beat picaresque of the 1950s. Indeed, another restive New York City resident, born in 1922, would write perhaps the mid-century's most famous American novel on similar principles about the relationship between travel and truth. *On the Road*, written in 1951 and published in 1957, tells of a young man who abandons New York's world of posh intellectualism to seek a different kind of enlightenment by striking out on the open road for the American Midwest, West coast, and Mexico. While remembered for its aura of romantic rebellion, the novel is mainly about the sensitive thoughts of a New York traveler hitting the road for smaller, varied places. Echoes of *The Book of the Dead* can be heard in Kerouac's *Kunstlerroman* novel, written only thirteen years after *U.S.1*'s publication yet seeming to belong to a world apart. The proposition that the disaffected or outraged urbanite can experience American vernacular society in an unmediated manner by fleeing the city for the towns and regions is not, in other words, unique. Indeed it links Rukeyser's radical documentary mode with these more mainstream and well-known stories by U.S. writers.

Apart from the matter of travel writing, *The Book of the Dead* illustrates the extent to which New York's literary culture in the early twentieth century had been characterized by influence of Progressive Era journalism. In particular, the sense of social duty evoked by Rukeyser's self-appointment as a moral agent opposed to business corruption points toward the tremendous cultural prominence of the news publishing complex owned largely by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. The increase in magazine and newspaper circulation had created in New York an information culture bursting with social debates. Documentary approaches developed within this discursive environment. Pushing the boundaries of method and rhetoric, New York writers led in the development of what became known as 'muckraking' by



publishing works not only in Hearst's and Pulitzer's newspapers but also in the muckraking periodical *McClure's Magazine* and *The American Magazine*.<sup>70</sup>

Morally cleansing the social sphere is a key imperative in many of these writings. Liberal reforms when they occurred often accompanied some moral scandals uncovered by muckrakers. In the autumn of 1887, Elizabeth Cochran (using the pseudonym Nellie Bly) posed as insane and spent ten days in New York's Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. Cochran wrote and illustrated the bestselling article that resulted, "Ten Days in a Madhouse," for Pulitzer's *New York World*. Three years later Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890), a social reform bestseller attacking the living conditions of the urban poor, saw this muckraking cross from the periodical publishing market into the book publishing market. Of course muckraking was not confined to New York City. Three of the most widely read documentarists in this early vein lived and worked outside of New York, including: Frank Norris, whose *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) detailed the conflicts of the railroad industry with Californian wheat farmers; Pennsylvanian journalist Ida Tarbell, who published a book-length exposé of Standard Oil Company (an Ohio corporation) in 1904; and Samuel Paynter Wilson, who penned a wrathful investigation of vice and crime in the Midwest's largest city, titled *Chicago and its Cess-Pools of Infamy* (1915). But New York was the center of gravity for such reportage journalism in the United States, and it was often the high-profile New Yorker who wrote about various social and geographic locations.

What reasons account for this? As the nation's largest, oldest industrialized city, New York City had a long history of both opulent wealth and degraded poverty, and the open

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<sup>70</sup> For more on muckraking journalism's historical development, see Anya Schiffrin, *Global Muckraking: 100 Years of Investigative Journalism from Around the World* (2014); Judith and William Serrin (eds.), *Muckraking: The Journalism that Changed America* (2002); and John M. Harrison and Harry H. Stein (eds.), *Muckraking: Past, Present, and Future* (1973).

visibility of its slums made social misery itself a hotly contested topic from the 1870s onward. (In England these debates began earlier; see Henry Mayhew's lengthy series of articles on the London poor printed in *Punch*, a satirical magazine.) And this was not merely the work of journalists and activists. New York's business community and political leaders were hotly engaged in these debates. As Angela M. Blake has demonstrated in *How New York Became American, 1890-1924*, nothing less than a cultural crisis erupted in late nineteenth-century New York over the sensationalist representations of urban poverty by Riis and magazine muckrakers. Prompted by the city's abysmal reputation in those years, business leaders representing several interlocking industries (notably the travel industry and the New York tourism complex) made efforts to cleanse the city's public image to middle-class Americans and present the city as an attractive tourist destination. However, to some, the city's poor areas *were* what made metropolises attractive tourist destinations.

'Slumming' (a word dated to 1884) became a popular trend among affluent urbanites looking for a more immersive form of social observation. Visiting the poor quarters and establishments in plain attire, some of the more adventurous of New York's and London's wealthy classes who 'slummed' throughout the 1890s were likely smitten by the scandalous novel of fin-de-siècle decadence, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose protagonist leads a double life split between high-society luxury and the social underbelly (Harskamp). But slum tourism was also linked with social progress movements, and not just private thrillseeking, as argued by an 1884 article in *New York Times* titled "Slumming in this Town: A Fashionable London Mania Reaches New York." Social observation, paired with a concept of justice to which society might strive, pointed many toward political solutions. Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* was so scandalous that it helped popularize the demand which led to sanitation regulations in New York

City. And as Jaap Harskamp argues, Riis organized *How the Other Half Lives* itself like book version of a slum tour, moving the reader through the neighborhoods to depict and comment upon their unsanitary, unconscionable conditions. The question of how immiserated some could be, in the heart of such a rich and productive city, prompted New York's public intelligentsia to elaborate a historically new rhetoric of uplift.

The "consummate New Yorker" (W. Rukeyser 300), Rukeyser was convinced that investigative and documentary writing was capable of inspiring positive change. She was arguably right, especially in the long term,<sup>71</sup> insofar as *U.S.I* spread awareness of occupational silicosis and the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster among poetry readers. Extending this civic tradition of probing social and geographic spaces, Rukeyser like a Cochran or Riis, poses to reading audiences important questions of social reform by pointing out sites of injustice or corruption:

Only eleven States have laws.  
There are today one million potential victims.  
500,000 Americans have silicosis now.  
These are the proportions of a war. (*U.S.I* 60)

Trading poetic diction for the language of the campaign organizer in these lines, Rukeyser speaks to her reader in plain statements. The sophistication of *The Book of the Dead*, which skillfully interweaves this discourse with inspired modernist poetry as well as corporate and

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<sup>71</sup> When Rukeyser published *U.S.I* in 1938, the matters of occupational lung disease and the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster were subjects of public discussion. Congress was already moving to pass specific legislation on silicosis and asbestosis during the mid-thirties, just before Rukeyser's trip to Gauley Bridge. Many, if not most, of *U.S.I*'s contemporary audience were well aware of the general outlines, if not the details, of what had occurred in Fayette County, West Virginia at the beginning of that decade. So the true value of *The Book of the Dead* as a work of advocacy lies in its longevity, its ability to speak intimately about these issues to readers throughout the decades and their changing headlines. Readers in 1952, 1982, 2022, or 2052 are more removed from the tragedy; Hawk's Nest is not in the news anymore, as it was during the late thirties. The longevity of book-form poetry, as opposed to news and magazine articles, ensures that Rukeyser's message is carried to audiences across greater historical reaches.

governmental documents, is a yardstick for how much this rhetoric developed between the 1880s and the 1930s.

Like Rukeyser, other modernist writers in New York's literary scene integrated aspects of travel writing and documentary journalism in their works. With the writing of *U.S.1* Rukeyser joins other New York writers in the first few decades of the twentieth century who sought to magnify the power of literature to address the social misery or alienation apparent in daily life. Upton Sinclair left New York City after living in Queens and studying law at Columbia University to work undercover in Chicago's meatpacking industry. The novel of socialist realism which grew out of this research, *The Jungle* (1906)—despite criticisms from different political angles (Foley 136)—remains one of the foundational works of U.S. muckraking fiction because its repulsive depictions of wage poverty, political corruption, and unsanitary meatpacking contributed to the eventual enactment of the Meat Inspections Act. Emerging from the following generation of New York writers, Anzia Yeziarska's *Bildungsroman* novel *Bread Givers* (1925) is similarly calibrated to repulse its reader with direct treatments of urban poverty. *Bread Givers* takes the reader through the young life of Sara Smolinsky, a character who, like Yeziarska herself, emigrated from Poland (then the Russian Empire) to the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City. The reader is taken through social locations from the college campus to the degraded back alley, with the cramped tenement building the young girl shares with her starving, penniless immigrant family standing out especially. In addition to its themes of individualism, religion, and cultural assimilation, the modernist novel was noted in *The New York Times Book Review* for the view it provided into the life and passions of “an immigrant family in the dismal tenement of an overcrowded block of the east side of New York.” According to the review, *Bread Givers* succeeds an exploration of the “turbulent folkways of the ghetto,” conveying in

accessible terms, and to a wide reading public, the “grave joy and bottomless anguish [ . . . and] hope and struggle and defeat and achievement” of the New York poor. As the examples of Sinclair and Yeziarska demonstrate, social and spatial observation was a primary mode of literary writing for prominent New York writers in prose fiction.

In poetry, more predecessors and contemporaries appear, tying Rukeyser to regional trends in New York City that blended the seemingly opposed discourses of social observation with those of mythic visionary ideation. Dublin-born modernist Lola Ridge, who settled in New York City after a migratory early life in a New Zealand town, Sydney, and San Francisco, published her long poem of New York *The Ghetto* in 1918. Centering on Hester Street in the Lower East Side, the poem explores the same neighborhood depicted in *Bread Givers* and Henry Roth’s coming-of-age novel *Call it Sleep* (1934). Several aspects of *The Ghetto* (1918) prefigure *The Book of the Dead*. Most relevant for this study is the way modern technology, in Ridge’s poem, inflects the nature of human life and even the human spirit. The crowds of the ghetto are “[j]ostling, pushing, contriving, / Seething as in a great vat” (Ridge 25). Human minds, resembling bullets, appear metaphorically as “[e]gos yet in the primer” (20). In a passage near the conclusion of the long poem, New York City’s electrical energy system comes to signify the “circuits” of human interaction:

Electric currents of life,  
Throwing off thoughts like sparks,  
Glittering, disappearing,  
Making unknown circuits,  
Or out of spent particles stirring  
Feeble contortions in old faiths  
Passing before the new. (Ridge 25)

Lyric imagery in Ridge’s text is vivid and forceful. One positively feels a sense of the humming, electrified city as the site of new forms of exchange. Particles of energy, material, information,

and even “faith” traverse the “unknown circuits” of New York’s winding, transforming places. Merging a flaneur-like social observation with a more visionary register, Ridge creates a searching perspective that describes the modern city as a space for sacred contemplation. The sense of physical space, as a medium vibrating with mortal energies and profound philosophical stakes, conveyed by this passage shares commonalities with Rukeyser’s characterization of the Hawks Nest Dam in “Power” and “The Dam.”

Hinting at a poetic modality fomenting in New York City, *The Ghetto* and *The Book of the Dead* seem to access a shared lexicon. Each text merges lyrical vision with dirty, waste-ridden subjects, conveying a mythic and inspired sense of life in an industrial setting. A sense of revelation drives the poet’s attention to social problems of poverty and the plight of ordinary working men and women. Per Ridge’s scriptural couplet: “And there is no divergence and no friction / Because life is flattened and ground as by many mills” (18). Depicting the bodies of workers deformed to fit new industrial discipline of factories in New York—such as Sarah, a woman whose mind resembles an acetylene torch (8)—*The Ghetto* again parallels *The Book of the Dead*, whose characters are themselves mixed up with the components of industrial medical systems. Deep in the vaults of the Hawk’s Nest Dam, a welder whose “face is a cage of steel” quietly works with his torch (*U.S.1* 52). In “Praise of the Committee,” Rukeyser writes:

These men breathe hard  
but the committee has a voice of steel. (*U.S.1* 23)

And in “Mearl Blankenship”:

[Blankenship] stood against the rock  
facing the river  
grey river grey face  
the rock mottled behind him  
like X-ray plate enlarged  
diffuse and stony  
his face against the stone. (*U.S.1* 25)

And in “Arthur Peyton”:

my face becoming glass  
[ . . . ]  
Now they are feeding me into a steel mill furnace  
O love the stream of glass a stream of living fire. (*U.S.I* 46)

The echoes between these texts, as much as echoes noted between, say, different Kentucky folksingers might, should alert us to the existence of a common movement. Expansions in the vocabulary of social vision among poets of New York City imply a geographically specific tradition. Although she does not draw any special attention to New York City as a shared cultural context for these two poets, Louise Kertesz agrees that Ridge, on the grounds of shared techniques (movement of imagery; free verse lines) and themes (urban; scientific; religious), is “clearly in the tradition which produced Muriel Rukeyser” (80).

Less needs to be said about Hart Crane, who has already been convincingly established as close contemporary to Rukeyser in style and approach,<sup>72</sup> and who has a clear place in the development of this New York poetry of social vision. Crane spent much of his life living in New York City; it was his favorite place to live. He wrote about the city in his letters and poems, most notably in his modernist epic *The Bridge* (1930), an ode to the Brooklyn Bridge that is really less of an epic and more of a lyric sequence. Crane’s long poem, like Ridge’s and Rukeyser’s, aims to describe at the same time daily reality as well as some larger reality or mystery. It shares much with *The Book of the Dead*: its formal construction as a lyric cycle; its rhetorical obliqueness; its use of free versification; the importance of metaphorical or associative movement; the difficulty of interpretation; the rapid interchange of images, senses, and ideas.

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<sup>72</sup> See Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (1-38); Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead* (127); Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars* (176).

Crane sought to synthesize the fragmented modern world, and had ideas about revolutionizing poetry to achieve this end. Both poets wished to move poetry toward the capacities of another art form (for Crane, modern avant-garde classical and jazz music; for Rukeyser, documentary and experimental film). Indeed in a radio interview with Samuel Sillen, Rukeyser described her own poetry as analogous to Crane's with regard to its essentially nonnarrative methods:

Well, I should say that there are two ways of telling a story . . . the one that is used in the novel and the theater, which is the method of straight development and unfolding of the story . . . and the other that of the movies and some contemporary long poems: for example Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and Horace Gregory's *Chorus for Survival*. In this second technique, relationships are made clear in the same way that a movie shot of a city being bombed will show you first a picture of the plane dropping its bomb . . . and then will cut away to the ground and the explosion itself. [ . . . ] And in the same way, readers of contemporary poetry are finding that the adjustment of this kind of writing makes for vivid and active poetry. ("Radio Interview of Muriel Rukeyser by Samuel Sillen" 147)

As this statement tellingly reveals, *The Book of the Dead* is an attempt to develop this nonnarrative mode of representation Rukeyser saw in *The Bridge*. By instrumentalizing "montage as an alternative to narrative as a method for uniting the various elements in a long work" (Dayton 128), Rukeyser goes on to tell her interviewer that, in the case of her West Virginia poems, "I have tried to write a series of poems which are linked together as the sequences of a movie are linked together . . . so that during the sequence the reader has built up for him the story and the picture." In *The Bridge* yet another linkage appears between *The Book of the Dead* and cultural vortex of New York City. In other words, the Rukeyser of the late thirties and her text *The Book of the Dead* are embedded within a certain subset of New York's civic culture.

One of the great American urban writers, Rukeyser was a syncretic thinker who absorbed a good deal of the traditions of powerful writing in post-1880s New York City. One of the important achievements of *The Book of the Dead*—a functional union for the first time of three



very different writing modes: travel writing, muckraking journalism, and visionary poetry—is in fact, I argue, a union of three traditions prominent in New York City in the early twentieth century. It is an achievement marking Rukeyser as a writer not only with a demonstrated interest in regionalism (e.g., as founder of *Housatonic*, as author of *U.S.1* regional tendencies) but also as a writer herself legible as regional. While unique in some ways, Rukeyser’s poem sequence exhibits tendencies of representation and persuasion that were in broader development in that cultural hotspot.

The knee-jerk tendency in literary studies to read distinguished and canonical writers within some abstract idealist space of literary achievement, as if they were people without territory, must be resisted. It is not enough to call Rukeyser an “urban poet” (Kersez 92): she is a New York City poet. To call Rukeyser a regional writer is not to say her work overtly expresses a regional commitment or affiliation to New York City. On the contrary her corpus is marked by a ceaseless moving to and fro, a refusal to settle into a simple life, and an expressed solidarity with working people across the globe through her mobile activism and poetry. But this corpus—even its very tendency toward touristic and translocal ways of seeing and writing—is plainly marked by the churn of discourses employed by New York writers in nonfiction writing, journalism, and literature. On these grounds I assert that, although Rukeyser has not been classed by critics into a geographical affiliation as McNeill has been, her literary craft nevertheless is worth examining as a regional phenomenon. Rukeyser as much as any artist can be studied in her local context. Her work does not transcend cultural landscape or geography. Indeed, dimensions of *The Book of the Dead* accrue new meaning when one regards Rukeyser’s status as a mobile New Yorker as important.

I have tried to show that Buckeye, West Virginia and New York City, as sites where modernity was expressed differently, *both* produced modernist writers. If McNeill is a regionalist, then so is Rukeyser. If Rukeyser is modernist, then so is McNeill. Breaking down *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* as literary texts emerging from specific geographies illustrates the plurality and dynamism of American literary modernism across space and region. ‘Modernisms’ throughout the planet, emerging from the geographically specific locations of human experience, are at least as plausible as the existence of a cumulative, planetary art movement called ‘modernism.’ But what can be said, from a present standpoint, about the quality of these two modernist projects?

\* \* \*

As two visionary histories written in response to resource extraction, *The Book of the Dead* and *Gauley Mountain* are profoundly concerned with West Virginia’s histories of trespass, extraction, and conflict. The outsider regionalism of Rukeyser, more conventionally modernist in her attachments to movement through what Andrew Thacker calls “the spaces of modernity” (7), contrasted markedly with the insider regionalism of McNeill. Rather than argue for the superiority of one project over the other, I argue that the two are complementary, offering useful correctives to one another. Unit I concludes here by thinking about the strengths and shortcomings of these approaches to regionalism, from a contemporary view.

Even if *The Book of the Dead* comes to be regarded as an imperfect representation of the incident at Hawk’s Nest, Rukeyser was nonetheless joined with other activist writers (such as Hubert Skidmore, whose 1941 novelization of the disaster was suppressed) in addressing a profound silence about the Hawk’s Nest Tragedy, helping to publicize this horrid crime, a noble goal. As a result she has given her readers not only a work of art but also knowledge of an

essential part of recent history. The desire and willingness to disturb silence allows Rukeyser to write poetry on what would otherwise be a blank page. As leading figure in what is termed “the poetry of witness” (an international, cosmopolitan poetry in an antiwar vein), Rukeyser’s work in West Virginia point to some of the most useful functions of documentary art (Ware). Susan Sontag’s defense of documentary art—especially that which horrifies its viewers—in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) hinges on this specific function of documentarism to display to readers their own connectedness to whatever images are being depicted. Sentiment and sympathy are not the goal of such art, Sontag reasons. Instead, its goal is to instill apprehension of the “link between the faraway sufferers . . . and the privileged viewer” (*RPO* 102):

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. [ . . . ] To set aside sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (*RPO* 102-03).

Indeed “moral or psychological adulthood” is reached at the point at which sympathy and shock are overcome, when one is no longer surprised by images of evil and suffering of others, but are instead roused beyond emotion into an awareness of “our real relations to power” (Sontag *RPO* 114, 102). As the previous chapter shows, *The Book of the Dead* perceptively traces those connections between its afflicted subjects and its comfortable readers. There is little room for sympathy, for instance, when Rukeyser gazes upon the face of an afflicted tunneller and, in a paradoxical inversion, *he* looks at the reader: “In this man’s face / [ . . . ] / a single force looks out, reading our life” (*U.S.1* 23). *The Book of the Dead* scrutinizes not only life in the extractive zone but also “our life” in the zones of consumption, by revealing the debt owed to extracted regions. What makes Rukeyser’s documentary modernism distinctly useful, in contrast to, say,

balladry, is this enlarged capacity for mediating these different geographies and discourses within a single text.

In this regard *The Book of the Dead* also suggests the value of mobility for the development of perspective in both poetics and politics. In approaching the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster, Rukeyser brings to bear the benefits of an outsider position. Even dealing with the local specifics of Fayette County, West Virginia, she forwards a unifying, pluralist vision of the world, a world of many complicated parts. Her vision of modernity as not only its towering achievements but its sacrifices too—emptied and exhausted regions—this is a big, broad view of the interconnectedness of regions that is arguably more comprehensive than McNeill's view. For an investigative artist like Rukeyser, witnessing requires getting somewhere first, to see it in the first place. As an international jetsetter, she provides a cosmopolitan viewpoint that has a clear place in modernism. Rukeyser better than most demonstrates what good can be done with a “remarkably active life” (Schwartz) spent rocketing from the place to place. Rukeyser made travel and its research a part of the writing process, choosing tourism as a basis for literary production and political argument.

These strengths of Rukeyser's raise the issue of potential shortcomings in vision in McNeill's modernist project. One cannot help but wonder why the catastrophic 1930-31 tunnel project, which delved beneath another Gauley Mountain in central West Virginia, is not figured into her history in any apparent way. Given that *Gauley Mountain* deals with the thirties at length, the question arises of whether McNeill was aware of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster and chose not to reflect that event in her fictional history, or whether she had not learned of it by 1937. McNeill *does* chronicle industrial disaster in her later verse history of West Virginia, *Elderberry Flood*, such as in the poignant elegy “Monongah,” which mourns a specific coal mine

disaster in Marion County, West Virginia, which killed more than 361 workers on December 6, 1907. Reprinting this poem in her selected volume *Hill Daughter*, McNeill lists in an endnote some other of the state's worst mining disasters, alluding to a broader problem with worker safety when involved with extractive operations in Appalachia. The disaster at Gauley Bridge, especially if we let it become our idea of West Virginia history, is conspicuously absent from *Gauley Mountain*.

But what does Rukeyser miss? Is it possible that her touristic method, which follows established extractive conduits across the American geography, possess its own shortcomings in vision? When we contrast the significance of roads in *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead*, what becomes clear is that while roads are depicted prominently in both, they carry a very different meaning and function for the two texts. Both contain a poem titled "The Road." The road in *The Book of the Dead* is something that takes you somewhere. It is useful. It empowers the photographer and enables vision and knowledge. The road can "make you think of your country" or can "take you into your own country"; they transport you beyond the familiar, in the event that you should find "your wish pursuing / past the junction, the fork, the suburban station, / well-travelled six-lane highway planned for safety" and toward the wilder mountain lands. (*U.S.1* 9). Rukeyser's word "wish" is important here. The road to Rukeyser embodies investigative freedom and, on a more basic level, voluntary movement. On the winding road Rukeyser took with her photographer friend upward and southward into Fayette County, Rukeyser was, like generations of northerners before her, "surveying the deep country" (*U.S.1* 10), and in "The Road" analyzes the road as the conduit enabling the investigation of time and place.

On the other hand, for McNeill, the road *brings the world to you*. McNeill had seen relatively little of the world outside West Virginia when she wrote *Gauley Mountain* and, accordingly, her book has a more ambivalent sense of inter-regional movement and contact. As Chapter II documented, McNeill was alive when the first hard roads were paved in her area, a change which would lead the family off the 1769 farm (McNeill *ML* 65; 104). Long years spent in one place informed McNeill's sense of roads, not as simply as conduits of movement, but as conduits of blunt instruments of change. In *Gauley Mountain* the roads and railroads are one aspect of extractive development, alongside the ghostly farms, naked hills, and drilled, excavated lands. Its powerful and sad critiques of roads, McNeill's "The Turnpike" envisions the layers of time and memory that are flattened beneath the road which has been built over the old Shawnee trail: "Beneath a hundred years of thaw and freeze / The hoofprints of the bison blend in clay" (*GM* 44). A trail, now blasted, once made its way precisely where the hard road now stands. Importantly, the trail beneath the road is visible to McNeill but not Rukeyser. More examples illustrate McNeill's sense of roads as disruptive rather than liberatory. In *Gauley Mountain's* "The Road," Chapter III demonstrated, the overarching theme is of commodification driven by regional interchange and leading to class inequality. And in "Donna MacElmain," a nocturne on love that is strangely beautiful and mature for such a young poet, *Gauley Mountain* voices—in addition to a feminist inquiry into working-class marriage roles—a weariness with travel:

The hills and the night and your love are last seclusion.  
No world remains but this.  
No memory of my somber-winged confusion  
Invades your kiss.  
The sinuous road of the age unwinds no longer  
Its bright, elusive charms.  
My will to go free was forever strong, but stronger  
Your bronzed arms. . . . (*GM* 87)

Is this the perfect antithesis of Rukeyser? As this gloomy, cool poem wrestles with questions of home, love, and duty, it also clearly expresses a frustration with restless movement (here depicted as “somber-winged confusion”) and openly relinquishes the romance of the open road. The road, which elsewhere in *Gauley Mountain* is described as “silver hard” (*GM* 73), has “charms,” and they are “bright.” But they are “elusive.” It is a problem McNeill echoes later in “The ‘Hard Road’ (1920s, 1930s),” which ends by indicating the transformative moment of the hard roads’ arrival:

When the roads first came,  
When they looped and curled through the rocky cuts,  
When they brought the world,  
When they leaped the gorge,  
When they lowered the hill,  
When they brought the world with its good and ill— (*EF* 110)

Thus a reading of McNeill’s poetry suggests that Rukeyser is comparably less aware of hard roads as something transformative, recent, and in certain regards intrusive. Taking the road into Gauley Bridge as her starting point, the urban poet Rukeyser accepts the road as a given, while the rural poet McNeill does not.

Rukeyser’s poetic method requires the privileges of coming and going, the ability to afford transit, lodging, and dining services denied to the poor and most damagingly to the black miners her poem cycle depicts. From a certain perspective, one could critically attribute to Rukeyser’s sense of geography and place—a sense that is fundamentally different from McNeill’s—an attitude of ‘I get to go wherever, and depict whomever I please.’ As James Agee warns, a profound moral hazard awaits the one who comes to document the lives of the poor and marginalized. Translocal consciousness, while useful for Rukeyser’s liberatory agenda that would rouse her audience to action, also underlies Union Carbide’s tunnel project itself. Who can say that in researching *The Book of the Dead* Rukeyser is not ‘slumming’? Or that she is not

plundering the deprivation of an industrially-afflicted pocket in West Virginia for literary assets, rather like Samuel Paynter Wilson's plundering of the deprivation of Chicago tenements, or Jacob Riis' in New York City? Rukeyser followed a cultural trend wherein the scandalous urban exposes of the 1880s to the 1920s gave way to a surging 1930s interest in rural poverty, especially southern poverty (for example, in the works of William Faulkner, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and James Agee). In trafficking in this imagery, in choosing such a hideous subject, does *The Book of the Dead* follow existing circuits of extraction.

Anarchist Emma Goldman, another radical woman whose work as a political activist and writer lionized in the 1970s as a feminist and Jewish icon, levels a critique of muckraking that is pertinent here. For Goldman, muckraking was yet another mode of bourgeois domination over the hungry and unpropertied classes. She states that muckrakers are intellectuals who are still enslaved to police, courts, prisons—the state. They are often proletarians themselves but are steeped in middle-class traditions and conventions (182). They benefit from depicting their subject, but their subjects do not. So muckrakers—Goldman mentions socialist journalists Upton Sinclair, George Kibbe Turner, Morris Hillquit by name—make their money and nothing is changed for workers. It leads one to wonder what Goldman, who like Rukeyser was a reader of Whitman, might have made of *The Book of the Dead*, and whether she had the time or inclination to read it before her 1940 death in Toronto. Goldman's challenge appears to attack the very moral underpinnings of Rukeyser's West Virginia silicosis poems.

These charges remain, as far as I know, unanswered in the critical conversation surround Rukeyser's work. Accepting the poet's status as a shining moral beacon, as posited by Anne Sexton and others, critics of Rukeyser's poetry have joined in the necessary effort to remember the beauty and worth of the poet's corpus after decades of critical and political censure. Readers



today (including myself, admittedly, to some extent) seem as positive about Rukeyser's ethos as some reviews of Rukeyser's works from the past were negative. Criticism of Rukeyser's work in recent decades lacks the suspicion<sup>73</sup> marking so much of contemporary literary study, and at times borders on hagiography. Any full appraisal of *The Book of the Dead* ought to take into account such criticisms as Agee's and Goldman's. Tough questions arise from these criticisms: are these poems for, or only about, Appalachians? Are these poems an elaborate, artsy kind of silicotic slum tour? Where went the monetary dividends of Rukeyser's book, and what are the final dividends, in the big picture, of the poet's 1936 automobile trip to West Virginia? How did the locals view Rukeyser when she came to town to observe, take notes, and gather evidence? A surviving letter to Rukeyser from the photographer Nancy Naumberg (who accompanied the poet to West Virginia in the spring of 1936), dated April 6, 1937, lends a small glimpse into Rukeyser's daily life at the time:

Dear Muriel,

I wanted to give you a few of my personal reactions to Gauley Bridge, and also to suggest a general outline. First, following your first two sentences, I would suggest describing the disease, and its symptoms. [ . . . ]

Stress, through the stories of Blankenship, Milleretc. [*sic*] the necessity of a thorough investigation [ . . . ]

Stress the importance of silica rock [ . . . ] Show how the tunnel itself is a splendid thing to look at, but a terrible thing to contemplate. [ . . . ]

Are you going to the modern museum showing tomorrow nite [*sic*]?<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Analyzing the kind of work being done in literature classrooms and the broader professional discipline, Rita Felski writes about the need to move beyond suspicion and toward "postcritical reading" in her oft-cited pedagogical essay "After Suspicion," printed in *Profession* 2009.1 (2009).

<sup>74</sup> Naumberg's letter is held with the Muriel Rukeyser papers in the Library of Congress. The full text of the letter is also reproduced on the *Modern American Poetry* website.

The letter, cutting from the spiritual sinkhole of discussing the fatal Hawk's Nest Tunnel to Naumberg's casual invitation to visit the museum, underscores Rukeyser's comfortable, intellectual life, and suggests how wide the socioeconomic divide between the poet and the human subjects of her book are.

In spite of Rukeyser's intentions, *The Book of the Dead* partly risks collapsing into yet another social crusade perpetuating the spectacle of an Appalachian tragedy and tarring life in Appalachia as irrevocably dangerous or degraded. The very same year Rukeyser visited West Virginia, James Agee was conducting his own documentary project in Alabama. (Rukeyser's visit took place in spring, and Agee's took place in summer, so their field research nearly coincided.) Agee's moral warning (mainly to himself but partly, we can surmise, to other muckraking authors), that documentary art is inherently "obscene and terrifying" (23), suggests the existence of an illicit and profitable mode of cultural production based in publishing social misery. This documentary mode, so potentially exploitative, Agee reasons, that he finally confesses "it is in some fear that I approach these matters at all" (25). *The Book of the Dead* is remarkable in many ways, but it is very typical as the expression of an urban, middle-class regional outsider coming to 'fix' a small working-class village.

A scene from McNeill's youth illustrates this insider-outsider dynamic at play in the composition of *The Book of the Dead*. When she was eleven, McNeill was a student at a summer bible school when "a lady came in from way-off" to teach. She was taken in by a local churchwoman named Hiram Barns. When the teacher, whose name was Ms. Virginia, left them, McNeill wept and "could think of no one else for a week"; but soon after Ms. Virginia betrayed her students and the community that took her in:

Later, we began to hear things about her. It turned out that Miss Virginia had gone away and written a bad story about us in a church magazine. Hiram Barns was a

subscriber to the magazine; and when it came, there was a story about the community of [Swago], by Miss Virginia. In the story she told how it was up in the mountains, how ignorant and crude the people were. She told about Hiram Barns's house and made fun of it and of how Mrs. Barns dipped snuff. Hiram Barns passed the magazine all around the neighborhood, and we all read what Miss Virginia thought about us. I felt sorrow and disillusionment, and, for the first time, I began to wonder about the people beyond Swago Crick. (McNeill *ML* 78)

McNeill's efforts to write what she calls "the lore and language of my people, the Appalachian mountaineers" (*PH* vii) must have been informed by this disappointing turn of events. That incident instilled in McNeill a learned suspicion of the mobile class, especially those who would visit West Virginia only to write about its very worst aspects. Certainly, Rukeyser does not over-indulge in depictions of the "backwoods intransigence" (Harry M. Caudill qtd. Weller xiv) that mainstream audiences sought and continue to seek in media about Appalachia. But for all the good it tries to do in humanizing its subjects, *The Book of the Dead* by the very nature of its project does not go far in revising for mass audiences—as the more optimistic *Gauley Mountain* can be argued to revise—Appalachia's regional reputation for invariable fatalism and exploitation.

These considerations now point to what makes McNeill's regional modernism so valuable to readers in the twenty-first century. Even though *Gauley Mountain* like *The Book of the Dead* surveys extractive modernity in West Virginia, it does so with entirely different priorities. The communal, place-based form of modernism *Gauley Mountain* speaks into being offers a valuable corrective to the cosmopolitan, translocalist modernism associated with unmoored, mobile life. While the poet of *Gauley Mountain*, as has been suggested, had much to say in criticism of the way West Virginia modernized, I believe the book's real importance may lie in its demonstration of literary localism.

What I am calling literary localism is an ideal and a basis for poetics. As demonstrated by scores of depression-era writers, many of whom like McNeill linger in scholarly obscurity, locally affiliated writing can yield not only variety but detail. More precise explorations of modern life, many thirties writers seem to have reckoned, are more compelling, more true. In the case of *Gauley Mountain*, this hyper-local perspective goes beyond merely including locally significant proper nouns within her book, as a simple means to provide detail in setting, character, or plot. McNeill goes further, making her setting her subject (as suggested by her title).

Like many American regionalists of her day, including fellow working-class Appalachian Merle Travis, McNeill blazes new paths of artistic practice committed to specific sites. Having each participated in living traditions of folk performance in the “live context” of Appalachian “folk groups” (Toelken 55), they integrated these techniques into their work, and entered the print and recording markets of the day as regionally-marked. Claiming this expected role as a folk conduit, Travis modifies and conducts different kinds of ballad song forms into a modern pop/radio format, and McNeill modifies and conducts oral narratives into a short print verse ballads. In each case, they invoke a regional commitment in the precise moment of regional collapse. McNeill speaks of the experience of West Virginia from the inside. The emotional and intellectual hardships associated with any rural populace who witnesses the deterioration of a place and the disappearance of a way of life haunt *Gauley Mountain*’s thematics of settlement, homemaking, and the transformation of places. *Gauley Mountain*’s allegiance to place as its primary axis thus attempts to remedy these forms of homesickness. How might other disaffected, displaced Appalachians, newly arrived in the towns and cities after fleeing a declining

countryside, have respond to Gauley Mountain, and how did it differ from the response of the literary clerisy?

McNeill's decision to write a hyper-localist book is significant when we consider the poet's circumstance. Part of a recently uprooted family, the young woman lived, taught, worked, and wrote in a social climate and an economic system which were not merely indifferent, but even hostile to rootedness. Because of their situation within the sparsely inhabited rocky hilltops of southeast West Virginia, an unfenced country of limestone cliffs and caves, her family were one among the last holdouts in the eastern United States to resist depending on the cash wage economy and fully entering an accelerated social milieu associated with industrial life and modern striving. As Chapter I outlined in brief, the industrial 'scramble for Appalachia' which occurred from about 1870 to about 1930 saw an upending of the established social order in backcountry Appalachia, where deedless squatters lived on farming, foraging, hunting, and trade. Vestiges of this relatively stable economy of rural subsistence-and-bartering, can be seen in the McNeills and their relative clans as discussed in McNeill's autobiography. Though they occupied an upper position in this order, with their fairly large original farm and their access to education, their agrarian household was ultimately incompatible with the new, large-scale resource extraction economy which was being planned for the region by timber, mineral, and energy firms and their backers in the rail industry.

McNeill herself was concerned about the actions of people unconnected to the long term wellbeing of the West Virginia resource zone and its inhabitants. Recognizing that the industrialists and developers who came to modernize Appalachia were the same forces that built the roads and railroads, McNeill would continue to write about the mobile with suspicion. Utterly opposed to Mark Twain's dismissal of the idea of "vegetating in one little corner of the

earth all one's lifetime," McNeill's poem "The Company (Coal Miner)," a highlights the inequality existing between mobile and immobile classes of people. In the poem, the coal company "owned the Baldwin-Felts" and "set the tippie on its stilts"—a familiar enough picture of company control—but the company owners' *mobility* is what the poem ultimately identifies as salient:

They owned the mountain and the mine,  
The river and its fork;

They summered in the Byzantine  
And wintered in New York. (*HD* 90)

Against a spirit of the age which encouraged Appalachian children to leave their home communities in search of wages, parents to leave for extended work trips, and whole families to pick up and leave, McNeill chooses to write about single place. At a time when news and entertainment was beamed into the Appalachian homes and the wage-based cash economy fully saturated even the remoter pockets of West Virginia, McNeill writes about the vanished subsistence culture of her own childhood stories. And she seems to write as one aware that insider memory of this culture was threatened by the culturally erosive effects of interregional contact—the coming of roads and oil drillers being two notable examples she chooses to memorialize in *Gauley Mountain*. This disposition is unsurprising considering McNeill's position in the last generation of nine to live in the old McNeill farmhouse; witnessing the family's departure from the original family settlement, she watched in microcosm the collapse of Appalachia's relatively stable backwoods agrarian economy.

The opposite is the case with Rukeyser. The road's attraction ultimately draws Rukeyser's poetic away from local subjects. Of course Rukeyser never fully investigated the business of sand and concrete in which her father had been a partner, though it is conceivable

that, despite the Rukeyser family's reticence to discuss business at home during the poet's youth, she might have had access to many documentary materials and interview subjects, should she choose to go looking. It is tempting to think of the sandmining exposé that Rukeyser might have written, were she to take on a localist literary project in the vein of McNeill. Port Washington had no large-scale disasters; measuring in fatalities, nowhere in the United States has an industrial disaster ever occurred which has been worse than occurred inside the Hawk's Nest Tunnel. Yet that sand and gravel extractive zone nevertheless has a specific history that remains to be fully recovered. Given Rukeyser's masterful thematic treatment of silica and related products of steel and glass in *The Book of the Dead*, one wonders why the poet was never drawn to write a long poem concerning New York City's concrete and glass edifices, its stacks upon stacks of bustling life, with reference to the extraction of Port Washington sand. This project, that never was, might have done the kind of heavy lifting *The Book of the Dead* does in using montage techniques to illustrate hidden relations between people, forces, and materials of the world. And the poet's personal proximity to the sand quarries, her father's business office, and sandminer subdivisions in Port Washington might have facilitated an investigation, of real intimacy and power, from an *insider* position.

Although forms of American literary regionalism often represented a cultural project of the U.S. leisure class (as historians such as Batteau, Brodhead, and Shapiro have shown), satiating with things like dialect and primitive caricature the touristic and ethnographic viewpoint of nineteenth-century urbanites on rural America, regionalism is more than that. *Gauley Mountain* illustrates how the regional mode can also launch projects of self-definition by rural writers who overall are less comforted and flattered by interregional contact. Take its exploration of regional history and identity. On a very basic level, *Gauley Mountain* tells the legends of

early-1900s Pocahontas County as she knew them. Because *Gauley Mountain* reflects the worldview and logic systems of a close society, it has the special function of conserving local communal knowledge of that society. And as a result of its local specificity, *Gauley Mountain* corrects enduring myths about West Virginia and its history, myths which are common outside the region.<sup>75</sup> “A country soul,” Stringer observes, “Louise McNeill pursued higher learning as a way of enriching herself and her community” (2).

*Gauley Mountain* works in opposition to the modern age’s displacement of local discourses. The oral ballad form appears to be a primary local discourse McNeill aims to conserve. In particular, poems in *Gauley Mountain* exhibit oral compositional determinants, adapting the Appalachian folk tale, as she knew it, into a twentieth-century poetic idiom.<sup>76</sup> With their huge, heroic characters, such as Sol Brady, the poems of *Gauley Mountain* foreground the

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<sup>75</sup> For example, McNeill’s depictions of varied multicultural contact between Appalachians of many ethnic backgrounds—Shawnee, Mingo, Delaware, West African, Scots-Irish, English, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, and Mexican—likely surprised many readers of the 1930s and 40s who believed Appalachia was an Ulster Scot colony in the nation’s midst. Similarly, McNeill’s depiction of class polarities, even in the remotest towns and worksites of upper-elevation West Virginia, belie commonplace views of Appalachia as a socially and racially homogenous population of poor, uneducated Anglo-Saxons which has been cut off by topography from the larger multicultural nation. While fictional, *Gauley Mountain* educates readers about the main themes of West Virginian history, from settlement to industrialization, showing an often fatalistic, but never unitary place. Like West Virginia, Gauley is socially complex and multi-ethnic place. To take another example, educational aspiration is a theme in *Gauley Mountain* even in the remotest settings. Education resurfaces as a generational topic, from the poem about two “hunters who lived in adjoining tree trunks and disagreed on theology” (7), to the literate woods-trickster character “John MacElmain” (63) with his Greek and Latin books, to the shiftless, illiterate “white trash” clan of O’Kanes (79). During the Depression the McNeills were often poor, yet G.D. was educated and practiced law to finance education for all his children, including Louise, who would teach throughout life. They lacked comforts and sometimes even necessities, but had Kant and Emerson volumes on the bookshelf. Given these arrangements, Appalachian stereotypes seem both humorous and irksome. While McNeill’s depiction of the O’Kanes is appealing to widespread readerly expectations when approaching a book promoted in its Foreword as “a West Virginia book” (Benet xiii), they too are depicted with a certain love. *Gauley Mountain* combats assumptions of Appalachian uniformity and ignorance by showing Appalachians of every stripe: industrious and lazy, wise and foolish, educated and ignorant.

<sup>76</sup> Walter J. Ong argues that orally transmitted narratives, because they are based on memory recall, make use of “monumental, memorable, and public” characters whose qualities and feats can be readily called to mind by a given storyteller (Ong xx). The poetic voice in *Gauley Mountain* is rhetorical, styled, and performative in that “public” sense. Bardic techniques have been attributed to McNeill in *Gauley Mountain* (Kinderman; *GM* xi-xiii). It begins with an invocation (*GM* ix)—signaling the commencement of storytelling *via* the event of the sounded word (Ong 31; 73)—and, moving in an episodic manner which courses through its line of characters and plot events, offers a feast of morsels.



unlikely feats of West Virginians and the colorful and dramatic situations in which they find themselves. Consider the larger-than-life lumber man Sol Brady:

Sol's razor strap was a saw mill band  
And grab spikes grew from his knotty chin. (*GM* 55)

The young Kentuckian Merle Travis—the other Appalachian modernist recovered in this project—grew up among coal camps, not lumber camps, but he would echo this motif with his 1947 hit “Sixteen Tons,” in which the song’s speaker, an embittered coal miner, threatens:

I got one fist of iron, another of steel,  
and if the right one don't get you, then the left one will.

Like Travis, McNeill elaborates classic ‘bad man’ ballad tropes, common in Appalachian worksites where industrial blues ballads including “John Henry” thrived (S. Nelson), and in doing so symbolizes industrialism’s transformation of the Appalachian working man, especially within extractive industries which maimed thousands of workers in the region. This suggests that one of the traditional skills *Gauley Mountain* transmits is the ballad skill of story singing.

Lacking the obscurity of cosmopolitan modernists, *Gauley Mountain* falls squarely under the rubric of popular modernism, as part of the 1930s Appalachian folk revival. On the other hand, *The Book of the Dead* (which disregards compositional conventions of syntax, punctuation, and narrative) can be difficult to follow at times—the common critique of Rukeyser as “obscure”—a fact which could potentially work against some of Rukeyser’s goals, by narrowing her audience. It partly remains a scholar’s book, participating in the experiments in representation also seen in works by Lola Ridge, Mina Loy, and Hart Crane. Rukeyser strives for ‘the new’ in idea and style. Ironically, McNeill (who became a professor of history and English at West Virginia University) wrote as a popular modernist, and Rukeyser (who never settled into an academic career) wrote the books best loved by academics. Like so much of literary

evaluation, this is in part a matter of preference. To some the matter may come down to a simple ‘either-or’: Rukeyser is either much deeper than McNeill, or much more pretentious. Different readers will decide differently.

Unlike Rukeyser, McNeill prioritizes narrative coherence, musicality, and accessibility. Despite the large scale of her story, it achieves an aesthetic wholeness so unlike the shattered texts of cosmopolitan modernism, such as Eliot’s fragmentary epic “The Waste Land.” The traditional verse forms themselves—including the sonnet, heroic couplets, and common ballad verse—extend a ceremonial wholeness throughout the work. To a remarkable extent, *Gauley Mountain* suggests the folk origins of many of its materials, relying not only on the true-to-history names of Pocahontas settler families but also on the basic formulas of oral narrative (Kinderman). Other “mnemonic shaping” tools also structure McNeill’s poetics. These might be examined more closely: there are the type figures, the formulary number groupings, numerous instances of the bizarre, and a reliance upon narrative genealogy (Ong 70, 141, 42). Of course, *Gauley Mountain* is not itself an oral work (except whenever McNeill recited it, as she often did publicly), instead displaying the effects of poetical literacy upon oral legend. Poetry is a technology of memory. Following poetic theories of Coleridge and Valery, Susan Sontag concludes that style functions “to preserve the works of the mind against oblivion”:

This function is easily demonstrated in the rhythmical, sometimes rhyming, character of all primitive, oral literatures. Rhythm and rhyme, and the more complex formal resources of poetry such as meter, symmetry of figures, antitheses, are the means that words afford for creating a memory of themselves before material signs (writing) are invented; hence everything that an archaic culture wishes to commit to memory is put in poetic form. (AI 34)

McNeill set herself both the task of elaborating and versifying the lore, and on the other hand the task of representing West Virginia’s extractive history—a perhaps unrepresentable history containing the timbering of 15 million acres of forest—making these techniques of rhythm,

rhyme, and romance perhaps more attractive as literary means by which to mediate this story. *Gauley Mountain*'s deployment of folk storytelling techniques within the national print market, under the imprint of Harcourt, Brace, and Company, a New York publishing firm, therefore resembles a project of local cultural survivance.

Consequently McNeill appears as a custodian of local culture in poems, working to “to preserve the works of the mind against oblivion” (Sontag *AI* 34) by teaching subsistence and barter skills. One characteristic example from *Gauley Mountain* is “Katchie Verner’s Harvest,” which establishes a to-do list for storing up plants for the winter months. The ideal harvest in Gauley would consist

Of grapes in scroll-worked silver,  
Red-streaked-with-amber plums,  
Winesnaps and seek-no-farthers,  
Green peppers, russet pears,  
White roasin’-ears for drying  
On frames above the stairs,  
Queer handled gourds for dishes  
And dippers at the spring,  
Long butternuts, fat pumpkins,  
Cream-colored beans to string,  
Wild meats to jerk and pickle,  
Brown chestnuts tipped with cold,  
Cranberries from the marshes,  
Tree honey dripping gold (*GM* 24)

A predominantly four-beat meter, with unchanging steadiness, reinforces the memorability of this poem’s rural lessons. Though its end rhymes are irregular and its rhythm is often modulated, this catalogue nevertheless is doing what only poetry, chanting, or music can do: organize memory into rhythm. Tuneful, McNeill’s catalogues create an itemized archive of rural life and deliver them with a time signature. McNeill takes us all the way back to traditional verse mnemonics, the rhymes associated with cradles and nurseries (such as “red sky at night, sailor’s

delight; red sky in the morning, sailor's warning" or "Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November").

Additionally, how better to get a sense of historical change in the twentieth century than to probe the materiality of the life of one's ancestors? *Gauley Mountain* chronicles not only the heroic and monumental elements of her semi-fictional history (represented by such figures as Gauley Mountain, Gauley River, and the trail from the east, and such character archetypes as the Indian chieftain, the pioneer woman, or the lumber man), but also its more ironic and banal textures. "Forting" details borderland life among eighteenth-century by listing the items Euro-Appalachian settlers took with them when they 'forted' in times of raids and skirmishes with West Virginia's indigenous nations whose lands they were occupying and parceling out:

A plow and seed for next year's crop,  
A candle wickin spread,  
A box of crested silverware,  
A pan of wheaten bread,  
Herbs for drawing arrow wounds,  
A jug of elder wine,  
A deed, a keg of hammered nails,  
A slip of camphor wine,  
A water barrel, a side of meat,  
A wallet stuffed with gold,  
Linen bands for staunching blood,  
An iron bullet mold; (*GM* 17)

Now suppose this passage appeared under the name of T.S. Eliot. If this were the case, the literary critic might be disposed to point out the classical *enumeratio* trope, and remark on the distinguished poet's reworking of that trope: "Look how the poet shuttles the catalogue form from epic to domestic contexts, counting not the Greek ships upon the Aegean but the jumbles within a log cabin!" The charting of the past and leveraging of tradition this poem achieves might go on to occasion a comparison between Eliot's and Pound's aesthetic orientation toward history. Or, bothered by the list, the critic might attack Eliot's attachment to Anglo-American

settler colonialism and trumpet the potential of “Forting” as a primary text for postcolonial studies and American studies. In either of these cases, the search for a modernist outlook somewhere inhabiting all this apparent nostalgia, if “Forting” were attributed to Eliot, would signal the poem’s value as a serious text. What really has changed would be the seriousness with which we approach the text.

In a serious light, then, *Gauley Mountain* proves itself as an aesthetically sensitive, if formally conservative, statement of regional resistance to the perceived recession of traditional lifeways. “Forting” itemizes household supplies common to Virginia’s western frontier in the 1770s. Accordingly, the crucial subtext of “Forting” for McNeill’s audience is not Homeric poetry or literary realism; it is instead the world of consumer objects surrounding the twentieth-century reader. The differences between these objects and ones in the poem conveys in personal, everyday terms the scale of historical change. Verses like these are not, therefore, simple wish fulfillments. Their appeal to displaced rural audiences is not solely due to their promise of nostalgic escapism into a past golden age with the sensory pleasures of georgic poetry, though they do offer that. After all, during the thirties Appalachia underwent mass outmigration to mill towns and cities outside the region (Eller *UG* 22). The Gauley lore—teaching how to dance, distill moonshine, grow corn, and prepare for winter—in addition to its own usefulness, has the additional effect of illustrating the extent of modernization in terms of daily life.

In other curious overlap, both *Gauley Mountain* and *The Book of the Dead* contain a poem about corn. And the way each poet writes about corn reveals much about the strengths and weaknesses of each’s approach to literary modernism. Rukeyser’s “The Cornfield” is one of the most powerful documentary moments in *The Book of the Dead*. It details the secret burial of black miners killed by silicosis, exposes the lies told to cover up their deaths, and exposes the

attempts to conceal the crimes that were committed during the tunnel's construction. "Buried, five at a time," Rukeyser shows the world, "pine boxes, Rinehart & Dennis paid him \$55 / a head for burying these men in plain pine boxes. / His mother is suing him: misuse of land" (*U.S.1* 43). Rukeyser shows what McNeill does not see, identifying the perpetrators (and her sources, such as George Robison) by name—and calls us to action:

. . . Under the mounds,  
all the anonymous.  
Abel America, calling from under the corn,  
Earth, uncover my blood! (*U.S.1* 44)

"The Cornfield" evokes the best aspects of proximal modernism and its most useful strengths. It is indeed a new kind of poetry for its age. It does not thoughtlessly undo poetic tradition; it redesigns poetry as something with amplified social power. This social power signals the continuing value of Rukeyser's plural regionalism. But flip the coin to its other side. McNeill's "Mountain Corn Song" evokes the best aspects of distal modernism by taking up masterfully the work of cultural preservation. In the pedagogical gardening poem, McNeill offers a procedural on growing corn in the Allegheny Highlands. Devoting each of its three stanzas to sowing, growing, and harvesting respectively, she relies on the mnemonic usefulness of rhyme to teach when and how to plant and care for cornstalks.

Oak leaves are big as a gray squirrel's ear  
And the dogwood bloom is white. (*GM* 30)

"[T]his is the time" to sow; "this is the season" to harvest (*GM* 30); and here, McNeill writes, are rhymes to sing while gardening. While Rukeyser's radical documentary form and McNeill's georgic form of practical agricultural poetry significantly diverge, there is a clear shared agenda to convey West Virginia information to its audience. Rukeyser gathers evidence of a crime against humanity in the Gauley extraction zone and publishes them to a national print culture that

can respond to this crime; McNeill relates forms of knowledge that have fallen out of use in modern times with an urgency suggesting the need to preserve Appalachia's (increasingly revealed to the poet as marginal) culture.

Why is the modernism of McNeill worth our attention in the 2020s? There is already a scholarly consensus that the modernism of Rukeyser is worth our attention. But what can literary localism, as exemplified by McNeill's writings throughout the middle of the twentieth century, do for us now? The environmental crises of the twentieth century are many and interlocking, encouraging planetary ways of thinking. As a result of global shipping and travel, the distribution of living species on Earth is becoming more and more homogeneous, while extinction is constantly reducing the number of overall species, their populations, and their ranges; meanwhile, a growing proportion of the world's biomes have been converted to agriculture while global resources, including wood and water, continue to shrink in measurable ways (Angus 40-1). Events beyond what we think of as environmentalism, like the advent of the space exploration, the Internet, the global justice movement, and post-1990s anti-globalization politics in the U.S., helped to lay the groundwork for this planetary viewpoint. And the rise of earth system science and the notion of the Anthropocene geological epoch have codified them in scientific theory. If "the behavior of the Earth System" (Steffen et al 83) is at the top of the agenda, as contemporary climate scientists claim (Angus), then it should accordingly be the focus of the concerned layperson, right?

Representing a very different viewpoint, *Gauley Mountain* shuns the abstractions that enable these ways of thinking. McNeill pursues neither the mobile, cosmopolitan styles of literary modernism nor the global scales of thought and action that more broadly defined the twentieth century and its world wars. It assumes its own expertise and usage on grounds of local

attachments and familiarity with a place. The georgic poetry of *Gauley Mountain* is unimaginable in a work of travel-research writing like *The Book of the Dead*—how to forage it; how to garden it; how to live on nearby plants—and very differently orients readers to West Virginia, its history, and its peoples. It establishes a framework for small-scale living that, as a thematic antithesis of the many trespasses, killings, and takings which defined the Gauley's settlement and industrial development, is suggestive of a more sustainable way of living.

Environmentalists can vote on governmental leaders and policies, advocate for global climate justice as a broad ideal, and can make lifestyle changes with unclear but plausible benefits for planetary wellbeing. But actions have limited utility in comparison to the impacts made by mindful and persistent local action. The Earth System cannot be acted upon in an appreciable way in the same way that a residential community, a watershed, or a local animal population can. How can the planetary system be stewarded except in specific instances? Small scale struggles—such as the Standing Rock Indian Reservation's morally defensible but ultimately unsuccessful blockade protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline in the recent decade, an effort aimed at protecting their Cedar Creek and Cannonball River—can take on worldwide significance for the environmental movement.

But even when they remain local struggles, as they usually do, they matter. They point to the beauty and usefulness of human action. In “Reforestation,” the ironic yet optimistic poem on civilian tree planter crews, *Gauley Mountain* celebrates environmental policies and finds hope in the promise of New Deal politics to begin an era of reforestation on the stripped mountainsides; still, the poem's repetitious use of local landmarks and names attests, this action's real goodness is felt locally: “The groundhog digs another winding burrow, / For now the C.C.C.'s / Are timbering the saw-razed slopes of Gauley / With white pine trees” (McNeill *GM* 95). The localist



orientation, emphasis on wildlife and topography, and propensity to narratives here recalls the works of Robinson Jeffers, who found and lost literary fame in interwar America, but in almost every other conceivable facet, this does *not* recall Jeffers. My point is to suggest what differentiates the two. McNeill's humanism clashes with Jeffers "inhumanism" (a concept based on the nobility of elemental nature; biophilia; glory in power and force; and human insignificance). While sharing some of the fatalism of *The Book of the Dead* or a Jeffers tragic poem, *Gauley Mountain* is far more optimistic about humanity than those others. McNeill condemns the non-reciprocal relation modern industrial society has taken to the biosphere and to traditional ways of living and knowing it, but remains engaged with narratives both sad and happy in a way that reveals a closer and more encompassing identification with Appalachian readers.

This is a whole different tenor of environmentalism.<sup>77</sup> Where Jeffers aligns in American ecophilosophy with the anarcho-primitivist tradition represented best by thinkers such as Edward Abbey, John Zerzan, and Derrick Jensen, sharing with them generally pro-wilderness views and non-humanist sensibility, McNeill aligns in American ecophilosophy with humanist thinkers such as Lewis Mumford and Aldo Leopold, who rethink the coexistence of people and nature in an effort to conserve and expand plenty of productive, beautiful, lived-in and spiritually-sustaining countryside. What makes human beings valuable is not lost even amid all the crimes of Gauley history. This is a philosophy that, while distinct in tone from *The Book of the Dead*, shares with Rukeyser both sorrow for history and hope for its redemption. Maggie Anderson agrees that

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<sup>77</sup> The reality that the Carmel coast of California was during the interwar period a much less developed than even West Virginia, which had been settled earlier by Euro-Americans and so was shaped longer by intensive agriculture, I think is one factor accounting for this difference.

Although the poems in *Gauley Mountain* document a harsh and violent era of our history—one which took much that was irreplaceable in human life, wildlife, and natural resources—Louise McNeill was not a poet without hope for the future. She saw hope, particularly, in our intelligent connection to history and in our stewardship of what land there is left to tend. (*HD* xxv)

Irene McKinney, West Virginia Poet Laureate, celebrates the “intimacy” and “direct lyrical speech” of *Gauley Mountain* not as aspects of mere style, but as the basis for nothing less than self-definition: “who speaks *for* you?” McKinney asks. “Who has carried the whole living history of your place and people forward into the present?” (*GM* xxiv). Peoples benefit from having the “whole living history of [their] place and people” to lend weight and meaning to their actions.

In the twentieth century, narrative romance and West Virginia shared signs of exhaustion. West Virginia had undergone a series of destructive processes that left it in a precarious ecological state in the first few decades of the twentieth century. But McNeill’s commitment to narrative romance, an allegedly depleted aesthetic form,<sup>78</sup> suggests that it still has value. And as a writer from a zone of intensive resource extraction, her use of this aesthetic form functions rhetorically to reinvest value into her ruthlessly exploited homeland. As a writer from an extractive zone, LM doesn’t give up on what seems depleted: the narrative romance, a discarded form, still has vigor or value; a discarded region, used up, consumed, still has vigor or value.

In other words, McNeill’s commitment to culturally marginal skill and knowledge sets as subject areas (such as moonshining, herb saving, corn planting, and dancing), and her formal commitment to allegedly depleted poetic conventions, are decisions which rhyme perfectly with her orientation toward southeast West Virginia after the extractive boom in timber, a stripped land that seemed both marginal and depleted. Techniques in *Gauley Mountain*—modified

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<sup>78</sup> That narrative verse romance was exhausted as an art form was a 1930s critical viewpoint Stephen Vincent Benet, in his Foreword to *Gauley Mountain*, not only acknowledged but defied.

accentual verse, rhyme, ballad verse, tropes of literary heroism—indicate that McNeill was clearly motivated by the convergence of narrative romance, an inspiring literary genre to the poet in her youth, and Pocahontas County lore, its natural history, its peoples, useful plants, and prominent families. History’s great events imprint on ordinary human beings, these choices suggest. A steadfast, maybe stubborn refusal to fragment many of her poem’s beating rhythms or the direct register of her narration—a refusal which can be interpreted as a “distal” rejection of modernity’s blurred time and space, of the modernist collage or Vortex forms—reveals McNeill’s unwillingness to abolish oral storytelling traits even from her print-market project. Rather than shock and alienate readers with difficult or incoherent poems, McNeill makes the most out of the communication techniques her kin and community cultivated. McNeill employs Appalachian oratorical techniques she gleaned from her father G.D., who toured professionally beyond the mountains as “the boy orator of the Alleghenies” (McNeill *ML* 12).

Resistance to the new is a feature of much modern regional writing, as many scholars including Raymond Williams, Leigh Anne Duck, and David Davis have noted. I believe regional histories of resource extraction serve to partly explain this resistance. For Ezra Pound, who despised the monotony and philistinism of the world economy of Fordist mass production and a *Zeitgeist* of materialistic consumerism, the injunction to “Make it new!” meant nothing less than a revolution of the arts. The idea that poetry should be ‘made new’—to call for, of all things, more newness—might seem ironic to someone with McNeill’s background, reeling with the shockwaves made in Pocahontas County’s forested highlands by ‘the new.’ McNeill grasps at an aesthetic alternative to a paradigm of “the new” associated with Pound’s injunction to “make it new!” and, through the creep of Pound’s influence, associated with modernism writ large.

McNeill reaches toward the past models she read in her childhood and early adulthood.<sup>79</sup> This decision illustrates that American poets did not respond uniformly to rapid changes of the twentieth century, with aesthetic novelty and experiment, as reference entries and scholastic primers on modernism sometimes imply. Mechanization and the standardization of daily life that accompanied it certainly led many poets of the interwar period to pursue more and more the intriguing exploits of radical formal experimentation and writerly autonomy. But just as interesting is the range of alternative responses. Other writers, especially rural and working-class writers, sought very different relationships with traditional literary form.

The poetry of Louise McNeill champions the future of what seems used up: it is a poetry of antithesis to extractivism, which finds what it seeks, uses up and discards, and moves on. It is a poetry that points to the historical dynamics of modernism which exist beyond the dominant narrative of the big business, pro-development forces which have reordered life in Appalachia through massive resource extraction operations. McNeill's philosophical response to terracide in Appalachia, her rejection of widespread ecological death as an acceptable expression of technological modernity, is perhaps best articulated in a poem published three years after *Gauley Mountain* in *Time is Our House* (1942). This poem, "Threnody for Old Orchards," is a furious eulogy for the poet's extended family's chestnut orchard. Mourning the loss of this happy and useful place, sold off by the poet's family and logged after the American Chestnut blight ravaged West Virginia forests in the 1920s and 1930s, McNeill writes:

Gone is that time and gone my orchard country  
And all the fields and farmsteads of this plain;  
[ . . . ]  
And all so lost—all so lost forever—

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<sup>79</sup> McNeill acknowledges the literary influence of *The Rubaiyat*, the Bible, Longfellow, and her favorite books at home, where she read "Dickens, Homer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Victor Hugo, Thomas Hardy, and *The Girl of the Limberlost* [and] *Lorna Doone*" (ML 39).

That had I, of the Greek, some tragic song,  
Here, from the sounding well of this old orchard,  
I would inflict my wrong  
On all the world, and all the world would answer,  
And draped in hairy garments, walk the stage,  
And cry the death of kinsmen and of orchards,  
And rage and rage and rage. (*HD* 101)

These lines, written just a few years after *Gauley Mountain*, read like the work of a mature poet.

Yet this remains a consistent viewpoint across decades of McNeill's publications. Another thirty years later, McNeill revisits the scene in the poem "Chestnut Orchard" in *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore* (1972). In that poem the chestnut orchard still stands ("Plenty for you and plenty for me, / And a bushel left for the gray squirrel's store") and the speaker happily calls to a fellow, "Let us go up to the chestnut trees":

On a hill—by a dream—we will find that place,  
And the great trees standing, untouched by blight,  
In the silver fog and the golden light. (McNeill *HD* 29)

These lines are deeply opposed to terracid industry. Representing the spiritual significance of small, out-of-the-way places, this elegy for the lost orchard stands as a formal challenge to experimental modernism. Yet mourning—or the refusal to mourn, as Patricia Rae argues (13)—is a common modernist tendency, aligning McNeill with a larger reaction against the dislocating experience of modernization. As Seth Moglen observes in *Mourning Modernity*,

many writings in [the modern] period experienced losses so fundamental as to have become constitutive of identity; that these men and women had lost so much that they felt themselves to *be* lost—disoriented, unmoored, cut off from the continuities of a social order that seemed itself to be shattering. [ . . . ] modernization had produced, above all, an affective crisis—a crisis in the possibility of love. (Moglen 3-5)

In recognition of this challenge, McNeill's readers have praised her poetic for its resilience and strong durability. To critics they are "dark, deep, hard as hickory nuts" (Groce *GM* xxvii). Her poems are "like fine antiques: elegant, durable, widely appealing, and never outmoded. In fact,

like a vase or quilt that we treasure down the generations, they have an aura of necessity, a lasting presence among the newer, shinier piece we may read in anthologies today” (Stringer 1).

Evaluating *Gauley Mountain*’s value in the Appalachian classroom, Irene McKinney argues for a viewpoint on poetry that asks

how tough they are as well as how beautiful or profound they are. Or how beautiful they are *because* they are tough. McNeill had a voice . . . that was harsh, direct, and forceful. Her toughness came from her resistance to the merely decorative or folksy. (McKinney xxv-xxvi)

As McKinney explains, beauty and toughness cohere in the art of poetry. McNeill’s poem’s resistant to the endless remaking enforced by the agendas of modernization. This acknowledgement of the durability and resilience of McNeill’s poetic represents a good deal of the contemporary response to McNeill. In A. E. Stringer’s view, McNeill’s poems “are so sturdily constructed that they have survived the changing literary fashions that might seem to render them obsolete.” Stringer continues:

The academic, the beat, the urban, the experimental, the confessional, the international, the post-modern, the performative: these and other trends have shaped the making and valuing of poetry in the new century, but McNeill’s work remains powerful because of the craft and devotion she brings to the materials. (2)

In a literary period supposedly distinguished by unmoored, deterritorialized expression, *Gauley Mountain* demonstrates the literary power of proximity, intimacy, and experience. And in addition to enriching our sense of modernism as a variegated phenomenon, it stands as one of Appalachia’s contributions to modern art and thought.

UNIT II:  
MUSIC, 1946-1947

## CHAPTER V

### CASE STUDY: TRAVIS AND ARMSTRONG—LEGACY

In summer 1946, Kentucky folksinger Merle Travis recorded his first studio album in Hollywood, CA. The box set of 78 rpm records, released by Capitol Records in 1947 as *Folk Songs of the Hills*, included four traditional songs and four original compositions by Travis, all inspired by his early life in Kentucky coal mining communities. It was a commercial failure, “disappearing from shops before the introduction of ten and twelve inch LPs” (Green, Liner notes) and thus crucially missing the wave of 33-1/3-RPM “long-playing” vinyl record releases spearheaded by Capitol records itself in 1948. Also released that year, but competing for a spot on altogether different charts, was RCA’s recording of Louis Armstrong’s historic May 17, 1947 concert in New York. Armstrong’s *Town Hall Concert* sold out on music store shelves, just as tickets for the concert had sold out. The reception of these postwar recordings could not contrast much more.

Accordingly, it may seem odd to readers to compare the recordings of such different musicians, who were, furthermore, at such different stages of their careers in 1947. After all, in that year Armstrong was an internationally established touring and recording artist in his mid-forties: not only was he famous in the big band jazz scenes of Chicago, and New York, but he regularly drew massive crowds to concerts in Europe. Meanwhile, Travis was only twenty-nine when, in 1946, Lee Gillette asked him to record folk songs for Capitol records. Nevertheless, this chapter offers a comparison of these two musicians, and their self-designation as conduits of regional vernacular styles. Despite the gaps in age, popularity, and canonization outlined above,



each musician was to become a key modernizer of his respective musical tradition over decades of performing and recording.

Yet the narrow coincidence of timing—*Folk Songs of the Hills* was released June 9, 1947, twenty-three days after Armstrong’s sold-out concert at Town Hall—reveals a yet-unwritten chapter in the cultural history of regional modernism in America. As I will argue, surprising parallels emerge from a comparison of their artistic production in the fateful year of 1947, when a shift occurs in their careers. This chapter proposes a comparative view of the 1947 recordings of Armstrong and Travis to illustrate how during this crucial year, each musician, pivoting, constructed a new symbolic-performative identity. I argue that these career pivots, in distinct yet parallel fashion, each represent a flashpoint in the history of American popular music—the arrival of a regionally-oriented and particularly charismatic, self-regarding musical modernism.

Travis and Armstrong redraw older categories of music, rethinking harmonic, melodic, sonic, textual, visual, and rhythmic aspects of music. Each approach music as something historical and in development, achieving new kinds of tonality and politics for their time. Their bold developments in performing, recording, marketing, and instrumentation make each a vector for the popularization and codification (always a deeply selective and creative project) of regional musical forms into the popular standards which we still live with. Following Scandura and Thurston, I interpret this productive interplay between invention and retrospection as a thoroughly modernist engagement with “technologies of cultural memory and forgetting” (11). This culturally conservative tendency to embody an authentic, representative style and repertoire reflects a widespread desire, especially among migrant, urbanizing groups, to recover a point of stability in the midst of 1940s stylistic pluralism in both pop music and rapid changes to life in general.

This conservative tendency also constitutes, arguably, significant development in commercial music as a wearied, late-modernist art form. At a moment when their respective genres are undergoing rapid changes, Travis and Armstrong mean deliberately to set themselves apart discursively as American regional traditionalists, and carriers of a genuine folk idiom. They respond to a desire for cultural coherence and for a stable mode of musical expression that had some link to ‘the real.’ Insofar as this reference to an *ur*culture hearkens back to a time before world wars, this is music artfully combining technical and commercial innovation with a nostalgic sentimentality. As country music historian Bill Malone has notes, the American South’s many mythologies informed the status of blues, country, and jazz as authentic holdouts against the tide of pop music, which threatened to “absorb and dilute all musical genres while also de-regionalizing music styles” (*SMAM* 57). Country music especially has been globally marketed as “a southern phenomenon” drawn from the American South’s folk reservoirs (Malone *CM* 1).

In their musical and lyrical articulations of selfhood, each makes an implicit claim to human (e.g., racial, classed, regional) authenticity through techniques of regionalist autobiography. For both these musicians, this style exudes a calm sincerity. Such a commercial strategy, this unit will show, reflects historically specific factors in the modern South, namely a rising sense of rootlessness connected with the depopulation of the countryside (Stoll 210) and, among the poor and working classes, widespread experiences of itinerant labor, ecological devastation, food insecurity, and housing precarity. In maintaining deep ties with an originating location, Armstrong and Travis assume the role of folk translators in a way that is indicative of a narrative break with the imagined past, and exemplary of what J. M. Mancini has called “anthological modernism.” In sudden returns to form, carried out commercially and

technologically, Armstrong and Travis promise an escape from the breakneck development of jazz and country as modern pop genres, in order to retrospectively cohere a prior, authentic genre tied to a folk region.

What made these sonic media characters plausible, even legible, to mass audiences? In short, the extractive mode of cultural production did. I show that cultural models of intelligibility and communication in 1940s pop music often relied upon popularly understood forms of regional difference. That is, the commodities themselves, the record discs, sold not merely music but a human, exotic, music that was valuable because it came from elsewhere. The records openly conveyed *Louis the scattin Delta trumpeter* and *Merle the hillbilly minstrel*. Here I take inspiration from the structural poetics theory codified by Jonathan Culler to engage these sonic documents as an exploration of articulation itself, by considering gaps, silences, omissions, opacity, incongruity, enigmas, flaws, and excesses (123, 260). Force, and not mere form is my object of study, in part to minimize boredom and maximize the drama of reading (Culler 263) and in part to acknowledge Edward Said's maxim in *The Critic, the Text, and the World* that cultural artifacts, while formal in nature, do not *only* work formally, but also operate sociohistorically (167-69). In assessing the aural and visual strategies of legitimization operant in these postwar vinyl records, I hope to contrast the romanticism of Armstrong and Travis' (textual) lyrical personalities with an analysis of their (historical) conditions of social and economic production. I will suggest that the regional assertions made in these 1940s recording are fundamentally modernist, an aesthetic and market response to the incorporation and homogenization of U.S. regions following the American Civil War. Further, I argue that their modification of pastoral and minstrel modes of late nineteenth-century entertainment can be viewed as part of the United States' extractive mode of mass culture.

To show how *Folk Songs of the Hills* and *Town Hall Concert* are legible as extracted regional assets, I look at the commercial presentation of these entertainers alongside a formal analysis of their work to study how uneven regionally uneven economic development (in particular as expressed in extractive and migratory flows within the U.S.) shaped the jazz and country recording genres in general and the careers of these musicians in particular. This comparison between Armstrong and Travis reveals lingering rituals of southward-looking U.S. popular culture—pastoral and primitivist tropes with which self-regarding modern Americans narrate their own modernity, in celebration, in lament, or somewhere in between. Most saliently, the music industry's activities in marketing southern music in the first half of the twentieth century (when working class southern musicians like Bessie Smith, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, and later Ray Charles attained national celebrity) mirror broader patterns of the transregional flows of energy and resources within the U.S., with some of the most productive and exploited southern labor populations becoming, in a new age of electrical recording and broadcasting, suppliers of cultural resources to the nation (and, as Armstrong illustrates, the world).

Jazz and country occupy different social and cultural spaces and, as a corollary, are discussed together only too rarely. Interestingly, jazz music since the 1920s has gone the way of art—no longer a popular dance music but an enshrined facet of American modernism—while country music since the 1920s has largely maintained its reputation as commercial entertainment. Yet as a critical regional approach reveals, the two recording genres long played similar roles. The artforms of jazz and country spoke to displaced and relocated southerners as well as northerners with their own anxieties about industrialism, urbanization, and the southern migrants, black and white, they increasingly encountered. Indeed, Armstrong and Travis rely on shared

discourses of cultural authenticity which foreground *place* and its affiliations. Place is paramount. As commercial records, *Folk Songs of the Hills* and *Town Hall Concert* overlap in other surprising ways that reflect historical processes of mutual interchange between black and white musicians.

Although today we tend to think of jazz as quintessentially urban, the lyrical subject themes of Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* turn out to be as rural as the chordal compositions of Travis' *Folk Songs of the Hills* are jazz-influenced. In much the same way that ragtime and jazz had taken hold in the urban North in the early twentieth century, concurrently with massive influxes of new southern black migrants, the expansion of country music markets in the urban North coincided with vast populations of mobile rural whites undergoing similar social displacements. With world war, economic depression and the massive growth of cities—and more narrowly, with the depersonalizing of musical sounds now firmly achieved in the cultural imagination—the familiar projection of 'back home' authenticity in Travis' folk-country and Armstrong Dixieland revival jazz each reveals a profound affective urge for rural and traditional life, embodied by lively local characters. Armstrong and Travis' surprisingly parallel shift to regional performances could offer listeners exciting new instrumental sounds clothed in the familiar trappings of minstrelsy (itself a phenomenon that "was felt in southern music well into the twentieth century" (Malone *SMAM* 23). Expressive of a relational condition, based not merely in self-involvement but in the negotiation of otherness and difference, modernism has often found voice in colonial, national, racial discourses. Fetishism for race and for the past, we will see, continually held a place in this sphere of pop culture consumption.

Hence, this unit's exploration of music indicates some of the ways in which pop culture consumption materialized for audiences the often-scattered notion of modern identity, in a

process Jonathan Friedman calls the “commodity construction of identity” (361). As sound reproduction technologies became an increasingly important element of the modern U.S. national consumer economy, a sense of self could increasingly be attained through consumption of things like box sets of 78-rpm records. Transmitted by radio into homes daily or sold on pressed discs, the blues-offshoots of jazz and country music provided a sense of home to those millions who took to the road in search of work during the Great Depression. The following chapters demonstrate that American popular culture by the 1940s had thoroughly focalized its anxieties about regional difference on the striking differences seen in migrant populations as they poured into U.S. cities both from the countryside, the southern regions of the country, and from abroad. Extracted cultural assets from the regions provided socially relevant material for popular entertainment.

A closer look at Armstrong and Travis’ 1947 record releases points decidedly toward a few key vectors of American modernity—industrial development, mass urbanization, the depopulation of the countryside—and a few key stress points in American identity itself—primitivist and romantic figuring; romantic locations and characters; vibrant regional fantasies—in the postwar period. With modernization’s relative completion by the mid-1940s, and with greater contact between the subregions of the United States, due to mass transit and communications technologies, I believe cultural value was increasingly indexed along the nation’s regions, even in a postwar moment often historicized as markedly nationalist. Both thoroughly modern genres in their own right, jazz and country are sonic records of the uneven development of capitalist modernity, reaching the ears of masses of poor refugees who had relocated to factories and mills in northern towns and cities. As Americans confronted other Americans with strikingly different habits and appearance, record labels and the Hollywood and

Broadway industries elaborated newer and newer ways to target the displaced southerner as well as the bemused northerner. As ideological formations, otherized regions (with their distinct physicality and inhabitants) contributed significantly to the cultural legibility of *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills*. As such, the two recordings arguably acted as regional assets caught up in an extractive mode of cultural production.

Like Unit I, Unit II seeks to understand some of the reasons behind the persistent exclusion of Appalachian cultural production from modernist canons. With this larger project in mind, a primary goal of this album comparison is to argue that Travis should be viewed as a key modernist composer and performer. It is appropriate that Travis—equal parts folksinger, folk composer, radio barn dance musician, developer of the electric guitar, pioneer of ‘soundies’ (early music videos intended for the first video jukeboxes and composer of novelty pop tunes)—be regarded as a key popular modernist in American music, and that his significant contributions be acknowledged.

In an analogue to Armstrong’s well-documented return to form during the Dixieland jazz revival, Travis turned decisively away from his 1930s and 1940s approach to composing and playing when he assumed an explicitly regional performance style. Whereas his compositions for the 1930s and early 40s radio broadcast are positively modern in their eclectic, electric pep<sup>80</sup>, *Folk Songs of the Hills* points toward an opposing motivation to present a well-calibrated pastoralism. On these grounds Merle Travis is a focal point, not for country music’s explosive appearance as a pop form—since this occurred with the early electrical recordings and

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<sup>80</sup> “Smoke, Smoke, Smoke,” “Divorce Me C.O.D.,” “So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed” are largely forgotten pop country hits which light-heartedly satire vulgar consumerism by observing conditions of economic life and parodying the advertising slogans of the 1940s. As novelty music, or “topical folk” (see Humphrey), these tunes earned Travis moderate commercial success.

broadcasts of hillbilly music in the 1920s and 1930s—but rather for the later development of country music as a coherent popular genre.

I aim to show in the following pages how two of America's twentieth century popular music genres—jazz and country, as exemplified by Armstrong and Travis—reveal the degree to which modern cultural value (i.e., authenticity, intelligibility) in the United States was regionally indexed. This unit advances a geographically and historically oriented inquiry into *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* to inspect the complex roles regional signifiers play in American postwar popular music and to discuss how region has informed scholarly models of musical modernism in the recording genres of jazz and country. The desire among mass audiences to encounter not only pleasurable musical novelty but 'authentic' southern familiarity in their music, informs the commercial and critical legacies of both *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills*. I contend that regional pressures and contests—the flows of energy, talent, and resources that typified American modernity—lie at the heart of jazz and country's popular appeal, and explain why during the twentieth century southern music became American music.

The regional modernism I have described in *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* did not occur discretely. On the contrary, it participated in a broader postwar vogue for rural fantasy which swept through the Hollywood industry with *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952), through the Disney mythos with *Alice in Wonderland* (1949) and *Peter Pan* (1953), and through transatlantic literature with Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* serializations, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946), C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), J. R. R. Tolkien's *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949) and later *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), famously concerning the pastoral region of The Shire and the provincial underdog-hero Frodo Baggins. In these and many other postwar works, various anti-development



sentiments, political or personal, are rehearsed in fictive regions that, in their rustic simplicity, anxiously contend with industrialism. Geographically specific narratives, characters, and techniques predominate, as in *Folk Songs of the Hills*. This family of works, as evinced by their overriding focus on fictionalizing physical settings, point to public anxieties about commercialism, pollution, and a consolidated global economy, anxieties ultimately projected onto imagined geographies. The tendency of midcentury audiences to locate the historical past in a mystified elsewhere suggests, on a broad social level, a lingering ideological kneejerk whereby modernity is acknowledged contemporaneously through the measuring of regional differences.

Uneven development formed then, and continues to form now, the texture of different regional experiences. In measuring these differences, it is unsurprising that modern audiences would form their own identities and listening preferences using the dissociative, exclusionary social languages of primitivism, regionalism, and racial essentialism. These negotiations between plural Americas within the United States between reinforces this dissertation's theoretical premise (c.f. Jameson) that modernity is a *relational* condition.

The popular modernism of Armstrong and Travis—along with the contemporary works just mentioned—invites us to more seriously consider the meaningful role of geography in the modernist imagination. While David Harvey influentially describes modernism as an art movement concerned primarily with temporality rather than spatiality, noting how modernists usually emphasized in their works the process of *becoming* over the process of *being*, this position overlooks the experience of place, and crucially the movement between places, in the experience of modernity. Since the 1990s, geography has rightly become more important to modernist studies as recent decades have seen modernist scholars explore the distinctive *modernisms* emanating from different geographies of the early twentieth century. It is now

widely postulated, for instance, that regional modernists express different aspects of modernity than the detached ‘placelessness’ of modernism as conventionally conceived, and are worthy of scholarly reconsideration. New modernist studies’ ‘transnational turn,’ which challenged Eurocentric frameworks for the study of modernist works by assessing their imperial and post-colonial contexts, has fundamentally revised our understanding of modernism not as cultural practice pumping out of metropolises, but rather as itself “inherently deterritorialized” cultural practice (Alexander and Moran 3). As Andrew Thacker demonstrates in *Moving through Modernity* (2003), a study of the spatiality of modernity and modernism, space and place are fundamental dimensions of the experience of modernization. Modernism often expressed a geographical self-consciousness, “disrupting and reconfiguring common-sense space perception” in order to “coordinate between local situation and global contexts, bringing different spaces into the same imaginative orbit but rarely, if ever, making them cohere”; as a result modernism “invents novel modes of geographical perception” (Alexander and Moran 7). The space-distorting effects of modernist writing, what Thacker terms its “polytopic quality,” calls in turn for a shift in critical practice toward “geographically attentive modes of reading” which foreground the role of place in modernist texts (Thacker 7,8; Alexander and Moran 7).

Second, Travis and Armstrong’s 1947 recordings invite us to organize the category of modernism, rather than along lines of form and style, or as split along a “great divide,” but in a way that correlates the sonic text and its features with a broad landscape of humanistic market desires. It is not merely the rapid mechanical movement through space—a key focus of modernists (Thacker)—that defines the spatiality of modernity, but also the inherent class relationships between American regions. My critical assertion is that, by emphasizing the historically specific flows of energy and capital taking place in and between U.S. regions during

the modern period, the ideological processes of racializing and regionalizing involved in the production and reception of modernist pop music come into greater relief. A focus on the cultural positionality of extractive zones, such as Appalachia, because it further heightens that relief, allows us as readers and listeners to view modernist art as an economic-aesthetic practice, embedded in the nation's geographic imagination, we can describe as culturally extractive.

The regional idioms underlying Armstrong's revivalist jazz and Travis' Kentucky folk music illustrate how effectively *region itself* absorbed modern audience's tastes for the alluring effects of primitivism and nostalgia. Occluded in the bulk of American modernist scholarship, the United States' internal resource extraction zones and productive peripheries nevertheless, during and after the period of modernization, acted as prime symbolic locations to invest with romantic notions of premodernity. In a process of capitalist incorporation of the regional hinterlands, resource-yielding bases like Appalachia and the agrarian South became culture-yielding bases accommodating the affective and psychological pressures of modernity, sating a middle-class desire to escape the monotony of industrialism and mass culture even as they provided the raw materials for civil culture as manifested by electricity, wood, water, food, and minerals. Subordinate regions fulfill requirements of modern civilization which include both the material economic necessity of extracted materials, labor, and energy and the symbolic necessity of a primitive other, a primitive location which the modern subject might suppose as still existing outside of modernity. Appalachia, as a key example, both underlies and is excluded from modernity.

As modernity's shadow, the continued visibility of the mythic region untouched by modernity promises that modernity, in its ever expanding, consuming vortex, can proceed in its own gathering development, can continue to exist as an ontological reality. Capitalism, David

Harvey observes, in a purely economic sense “does indeed require something ‘outside of itself’ in order to accumulate” and that “some sort of ‘outside’ is necessary for the stabilization of capitalism” (141). In the superstructural domain of culture, an external territory serves as an antonym to capitalist modernity. Hence, in a characteristically American (that is, settler-colonial) logic of developmental expansion, the modern space must be actively carved out of its conceptual negative opposite, the premodern space, out of whose raw materials it fashions modernity. Working simultaneously in the unique cultural turning point of the immediate postwar years, the charismatic regional music of Louis Armstrong and Merle Travis—who never met one another and who thus far have never been mentioned together in modernist studies—showcase the distinct forms and textures which regional modernism can take.

Like the chapters on poetry, these chapters encourage compensatory attention to and appreciation of Appalachian artists of the 1930s and 40s—and so it will describe Merle Travis as a significant figure in U.S. musical modernism. But Louis Armstrong does not serve as static object here, and will not act as a passive concept by which to evaluate Travis’ regional project. Instead, this unit revises our understanding of Armstrong to more fully appreciate his role as a regional artist. Together, the three chapters in Unit II places *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* in a shared context of postwar American musical regionalism that I believe occurred across recording genres. They reappraise Louis Armstrong’s famous May 1947 concert at Town Hall as a notable work of regional modernism, and argue that Merle Travis’ 1947 recording, as an analogous work of regional modernism, deserves greater attention in the field of modernist studies.

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Louis Armstrong, who spent his formative years as a street musician in New Orleans and a riverboat jazz player on Mississippi River excursion steamers, played a definitive role in the development of jazz music, most notably in the realm of solo performance and improvisation (Panassié 8). Born in 1901 in racially segregated New Orleans, Armstrong was listed as illegitimate on his birth certificate.<sup>81</sup> His family faced dire poverty, but growing up in Storyville, New Orleans' prostitution district, Armstrong benefited from a supportive household, being chiefly "raised by his mother, younger sister, and a community of prostitutes who looked after him" (Teresa 684). This changed however when, after firing his father's pistol during a New Year celebration, Armstrong was incarcerated for two years in the Colored Waif's Home, a juvenile detention agency. Acquiring a tin horn at age seven, Armstrong formed singing groups on the fringes of urban society: on riverbanks, streets, and in the beds of trucks. He began to attract the attention of the public with his virtuosic bouts in the New Orleans musical battles, which occurred when two trucks, each carrying a full band, met on the street and held public musical duels of which the nearby crowd would choose a winner (Panassié 6, 15).

Within this competitive and highly demanding performance context, Armstrong developed a charismatic performance style and a repertory drawing from the many musical traditions which converged in New Orleans. As Bromberg summarizes,

the incredible musical environment of early New Orleans—with its extravagant mix of spirituals, blues, funeral marches, quadrilles, field hollers, work songs, physical clowning, even Voodoo influences—contributed to Armstrong's unique musicality and showmanship.

Armstrong thrived in a leisure marketplace richer than most in its potential for upstart musicians. "In New Orleans," Brothers notes, "the plantation traditions were urbanized and

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<sup>81</sup> Various documents, in particular a baptismal record, date Armstrong's birth to 1901, contradicting Armstrong's lifelong claim that he had been born with the new century in 1900.

professionalized, with many points of . . . entry into a diverse and low-paying market” (450). Its port facilities, alongside municipal improvements in drainage, transportation, and electrification, made New Orleans the Deep South’s great metropolis and center of musical culture. Vernacular musics served socially vital roles in churches, where gospel and spiritual songs were sung, in dance halls where bands played, and in the streets where New Orleans marching bands enjoyed a cornucopia of drums, fifes, and bugles—old yet sturdy Civil War military surplus. Feeding these activities were colonial and diasporic musical styles converging in New Orleans’ bustling seaport milieu. Built upon these many musical bases, public musical culture in modern New Orleans largely prioritized novelty and interchange over *status quo* distinctions of “high” art and “low” entertainment (Powell 391; Brothers 453). Polyphonous vernacular music had long been a vital social ingredient in New Orleans churches, dance halls, and street parades, meaning that early jazz musicians were at an advantage because they “drew upon the total musical environment of New Orleans” with its “wide variety of entertainment formats” (Malone *SMAM* 53). As a tourist destination for disaffected northerners hoping to “see the country,” New Orleans hosted a massive riverboat leisure economy in the twentieth century’s first decades. In short, New Orleans in the 1910s, “a major town in a milieu of master-slave agrarianism” (Powell 391), exhibited an astonishing concentration and co-mingling of musical traditions.

When he finally secured a position as a professional musician, Armstrong could hope only to be a substitute horn player. Only later, as he grew in reputation in the New Orleans “honky tonk” establishment circuit, where white audiences gathered to hear small groups of black musicians perform the explosive new music now retrospectively called Dixieland jazz, was he hired as a full-time trumpeter in 1917, temporarily taking at the remarkably young age of seventeen King Oliver’s position after Oliver left Kid Ory’s orchestra (Panassié 7). Even as a

professional musician in these early years, Armstrong worked odd jobs to support his mother's household. For years, Armstrong toured tirelessly as a trumpeter, tap-dancer, singer, and bandmember around New Orleans and on riverboat steamers. During these years Armstrong's "unprecedented lyrical power as a very young cornet player dazzled virtually everyone" (Merod 185). From age seventeen to twenty, Armstrong made his living mainly by playing on riverboats, beginning in September 1918, when he performed on a Streckfus Steamers excursion boat in the New Orleans harbor. The Mississippi River promised Armstrong mobility, in the post-World War I years, a defining modern quality and a prologue to Armstrong's global touring career in the 1920s and 1930s. As the monumental geographic feature of the region, the river provided a major basis for Armstrong's early musical career. Incessant water travel and rootlessness marked the riverboat musician's day to day life, alongside an alienation from mainstream onshore cultural norms. (And as I show in Chapter VII, riverboat music culture shaped Armstrong's style indelibly.)

Having established a reputation as a performer on steamers and in dance halls, Armstrong rose to regional, then national, then international fame with surprising alacrity. Armstrong toured Chicago, New York, and the industrial Midwest throughout the 1920s and 1930s, garnering a wider reputation not only as solo performer and dance hall band leader, but also as comedian and actor. When he arrived in Harlem in 1924, his rural boots and clothes marked him at first as a regional outsider—"a newly arrived provincial" (Panassié 11) in a Northern cosmopolis. His career soared. Armstrong's influence and notoriety grew in the 1930s, when he recorded prolifically, wrote, acted, and—meeting a growing international demand for jazz—embarked on transatlantic tours as "Louis Armstrong and his Harlem Band" to England, Denmark, France, Holland, and Italy. Armstrong's style of New Orleans jazz had achieved global appeal.

In its broadest implication, Armstrong's contribution to musical culture from 1917 to 1945 was to develop New Orleans ragtime and Dixieland musics into a modern, world-famous twentieth century jazz. As among the first American players<sup>82</sup> to bring jazz to Europe, he became "a cultural emissary for his music and the United States" (Merod 189). A musical innovator himself—"the first modern jazzman" (Panassié 54)—Armstrong had pioneered new expressive subtleties on the cornet and trumpet by applying instrumental techniques such as glissando, rubato, and vibrato in unexpected ways. Famously he also popularized scat singing in live and record studio contexts.<sup>83</sup> His impact on jazz during this period is nearly incalculable. A rare consensus appears across jazz scholarship, Martin Williams remarks, fixed upon the lodestar of Armstrong:

If we take the most generally agreed-upon aesthetic judgments about jazz music, the first would undoubtedly be the dominant position and influence of Louis Armstrong—and that influence is not only agreed upon, it is easily demonstrable from recordings. (5)

Armstrong, who "first internalized and then transformed the African-American musical vernacular" (Brothers 3), remains a capacious presence, whose influence is so pervasive in jazz as to make his full contribution hard to fully acknowledge. Yet in broader terms, Armstrong is commemorated as an artist who defines an era,

the greatest master of melody in the African American tradition since Scott Joplin, the central figure in virtually the entire tradition of jazz solo playing and singing, and arguably the most important American musician of the twentieth century. (Brothers 11)

His achievement transcends jazz and orbits notions of genius itself—he is, in Cornell West's assessment, "charismatic—and a genius—to the core" (107).

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<sup>82</sup> The earliest proponents of jazz overseas include James Reese Europe (1881-1919) and Sydney Bechet (1897-1959), in addition to Armstrong.

<sup>83</sup> For more, see Brent Hayes Edwards' article "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat" in *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Spring 2001).



In short, Louis Armstrong occupies an undisputed position in American popular modernism. Alongside Armstrong's individual career can be plotted major cultural transformations, including the advent of jazz, the transatlantic upper classes' growing taste for swing during the Depression and the early forties, and later, jazz's gradual acceptance by cultural elites as a serious art form. Jazz "was 'born' as the twentieth century began, with precise chronological proximity to Duke Ellington's birth in 1899 and Armstrong's in 1901" (Merod 184).

The explosion of New Orleans jazz in the 1910s and 1920s, followed by its transatlantic trajectory in the 1930s and onward, signified novelty, even modernity itself to many contemporaries. Though only one modern novelty among many, jazz was an especially visible aspect of the mass leisure economy which engulfed early twentieth century America. Thus it attracted a well-documented wave of criticism (sometimes fueled by racial animus those of African descent) during what came to be known as the Jazz age. A seductive sonic form, traditional jazz's nimble syncopations and polyphonic textures both titillated and perplexed many in the Anglo-American mainstream, who tended to approach jazz through primitivist concepts of racial difference. Insofar as jazz, along with ragtime, its dazzling parent form, emerged as a cultural interruption of established musical performance traditions—from classical chamber music to everyday religious music to European-American dance music, marches, and parlor music—its acknowledgment as *new* was guaranteed, but was it *modern*? And was it modernist art?

Scholars prior to the interventions of poststructural criticism and new modernist studies located literary modernism primarily in innovative, monumental works often grouped alongside *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. 'Modernist' as a critical term in the midcentury denoted certain

major literary tendencies including Symbolism's synesthetic imagery (c.f. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yeats, Eliot, Crane, Stevens), Imagism's radical rejection of lyrical norms (c.f. Pound, H.D, Williams), and later Objectivism's impulse toward new modes of transparency and sincerity (c.f. Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, Bunting, Niedecker). Especially during the heyday of the New Criticism, 'modernist' designated, in ways that complemented the classroom needs of postwar academia, texts with "formal complexity and pervasive irony" (Wollaeger 8). The term aimed to capture a decades-long trend beginning early in the century, when artists in these and other art movements like Vorticism, Futurism, Surrealism, Impressionism, Cubism, and Expressionism "experiment[ed] with the cultural power of art forms" in various programs aimed at reconfiguring the artist's role in a shifting social world (Blair 166). Likewise, modernist music, as Daniel Albright explains, was located mainly in the formally complex, secular, and experimental forms appearing during in the high modernist period. 'Modernist music' in its first academic conception referred to asyntacticism (c.f. Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, and Erik Satie), atonalism and microtonalism (c.f., Aloise Hába), multiplanar psychoacoustics (c.f., Charles Ives), and Dada music (c.f., Kurt Schwitter, Marcel Duchamp).

By 1950, modernism had become established as a field of study concerning the emergence of these artistic modes roughly of 1890 to 1945, and prioritizing aesthetic autonomy, formalism, and the monumental artworks mainly of the male European and American traditions. Early modernist studies internalized Ezra Pound's resistance to Fordist industrial rationalism and sought to understand how artists resisted the homogenizing effects of the modern age through scholarly analyses of innovation in artistic form. It also internalized T. S. Eliot's preoccupation with aesthetic tradition and "a common history that ordered art" and enables viable distinctions

between “authentic accomplishment” in the arts and the roar of mass commercialism (Latham & Rogers 6).

More recently, critical discussions have explored how those artists conventionally posited as “moderns”—Picasso, Joyce, Klee, Eliot, Woolf—reacted not only to technological and cultural changes but as well to prickly demographic and political changes, such as those that surrounded such rising public identities as the New Woman and New Negro. Houston A. Baker, Jr. critiques this first-stage modernist canon for its restricted attention to pessimistic white American artists who, witnessing their downward relative social privilege with the final twilight of nineteenth-century Western genteelism, constructed within modern art enclaves of “elitism”:

One means of shoring up one’s self under perceived threats of ‘democratization’ and a ‘rising tide’ of color is to resort to elitism—to adopt a style that refuses to represent any *thing* other than the stylist’s refusal to represent. [ . . . ] Regardless of their strategies for confronting it, though, it was change—a profound shift in what could be taken as unquestionable assumptions about the meaning of human life—that moved those artists whom we call ‘moderns.’ (5)

High Modernism’s aesthetic self-isolation from the cultural commons had everything to do with the twentieth century’s sea changes regarding *who* could partake in bourgeois public life and appear in mass media. The preoccupation with “high” and “low” style, freighted with biases of class, color, and sex, built too upon Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s cautionary account of the “culture industry” in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which warns of standardizing effects of a rising mass media and mass production society, and similarly positions the virtuous, gifted artist as an opponent of vulgar, material culture.

In that critical paradigm, ‘low’ entertainment forms like jazz had no place in a modernist canon—in particular a white modernist canon. As a part of the culture industry, Adorno vehemently condemned popular music. He singled out the commercial mediation of the jazz music which spread across Europe in the 1930s as indicative of the false liberation which

ensnares modern subjects within capitalist hegemony. Adorno's comments represent a broader anti-jazz, anti-syncoption movement in the 1920s which sensed, with "apocalyptic fear" that "jazz was the forerunner of the decline of Western civilization" (Lemke 64). Yet as numerous scholars have noted, even in this antagonistic account of modernism, in which the elite or 'high' culture (represented by the artist) is opposed to the common or 'low' culture (represented by the crowd), mass culture itself plays an integral role in the definition of 'the modern' in art and culture. Mass culture and its encroachment on the life of the mind was perceived as a counterforce against—and therefore an instigating factor of—modernist artistic genius. Even Walter Benjamin, whose suspicion of mass culture was more ambivalent than that of the Frankfurt School's main contingent, asserted that the "mechanical reproduction" of a work of art nevertheless denudes that work of the "aura" produced by its singular and immediate, or live, presentation ("The Work of Art").

These ideas remain prevalent in later twentieth century jazz criticism as well. Jazz musicologist Ted Gioia maintains that mass production remains a material explanation for the cultural devaluation of mass-produced music. The sheer accessibility and re-playability of records, so unlike a nineteenth-century performance by Liszt or Chopin, "encourage the contemporary listener to treat music as just one more part of day-to-day life which, thanks to the conveniences of modern society, can be taken for granted" (T. Gioia 9). The logic here is simple economics:

Following some sort of cultural law of supply and demand, the proliferation of any art form appears to lead inevitably to its devaluation. Just as the photograph has led to a trivialization of the image and the spread of printing has lessened the dignity of the written word, so has the easy accessibility of inexpensive recordings led to a devaluation both of the musical performance and the performer. (T. Gioia 8-9)

This perspective owes much to the continued legacy of modern thinkers including not only Adorno and Benjamin, but Erik Satie's 1920 writings on "furniture music" and José Ortega y Gasset's 1925 essay "The Dehumanization of Art." Andreas Huyssen influentially labels this persistent distinction between the "high" and the "low" in modernist culture as "the Great Divide." According to Huyssen, modernists experienced what he calls "contamination anxiety," a powerful fear of the intrusions of popular culture into all aspects of life, twinned with avant-garde aesthetic motives aimed at staving off the impersonal monotony of mass production and entertainment.

Jazz potently demonstrates the contested nature of scholarly definitions of *modernism* over time by dramatizing, on one hand, how the term *modern* can carry both positive and negative valences, and on the other hand, how competing concepts of *the modern* produce distinct modernist canons. During the decades between 1960 and 1990, postmodern literary criticism and theory "devalue[ed]" the narrow, established field of modernism with feminist and postcolonial reassessments, multi-cultural critiques, and skepticism of formalist analysis in favor of more overtly political deconstructions of the "process and play" of cultural production. But there has never been a single, definable modernism (Wollaeger 8).<sup>84</sup> Indeed, as time goes on, even the most comprehensive accounts conclude that no neat, single definition for 'modernism,' defined either as a cultural movement or a scholarly field, exists (Latham & Rogers). There has been a continual questioning of the inherited modernist canon (Guillory). Raymond Williams, for example, critiquing the dominant modernist field of cultural studies in his 1987 lecture "When was Modernism?" urged the scholarly recovery of excluded moderns for renewed literary and

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<sup>84</sup> For a gloss on the history of modernist studies, see Mark Wollaeger's "From Old Modernism to New" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism* (2012). For a more comprehensive account of the modernism's consolidation as a scholarly field and a descriptive term, see Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers' *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (2015).

cultural study, challenging his audience to “search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century” (52).

During and after the 1990s, more recent focuses on geography, transnationalism, feminism, ethnicity, and new media constituted the new modernist studies, in some ways restoring a revised concept of modernism as a unified field of study. These necessary critical interventions have more doggedly evaluated the qualities of *modernism* and have resulted in a more comprehensive accounting of modernist achievement. As a result, it has become a critical norm to ascribe a modernist disposition to pop culture entertainers, so that, for instance, in *Jazz Modernism* (2002), Alfred Appel, Jr. can make a compelling case for interpreting Armstrong’s coarse vocal style along high modernist criteria as

a deliberate strategy, an exaggerated Expressionist ‘impurity’ calculated to balance or compensate for his nonpareil brilliance as a trumpeter. (126)

As the “modernist” category has expanded to include a broader range of works, the binary premise of a “great divide,” while evocative of the class tensions within modernist culture, has become less useful in defining a body of modernism. Alissa G. Karl, in *Modernism and the Marketplace*, acknowledges that “modernism often fits into a narrative of resistance, marginalization and outsiderdom that emphasizes its supposed suspicion of and hostility toward popular or mass-cultural forms” (5). However, as Karl interjects, this is an “often overly simplistic story of modernist antagonism toward the marketplace” which in its ardent distinction between commerce and art, unduly narrows our conception of modernist thought, feeling, and craft to the non-commercial (6).

Indeed, it would be absurd to characterize Armstrong’s creative work as indicating “suspicion of and hostility toward popular or mass-cultural forms.” Armstrong leveraged the commercial market with dexterity throughout his career as a street-studio-stage musician, an

actor, and a memoirist. In a stunning career of musical mediation and interchange, Armstrong had produced some of the most commercially viable jazz records of the Great Depression. In contrast to earlier accounts of modernism as fundamentally the negotiation of the “great divide,” which minimize the import of Armstrong’s aesthetic accomplishment, contemporary theories of modernity and modernism, such as that offered by Jani Scandura and Michael Thurston in *Modernism, Inc.*, actually place Armstrong’s revivalist project of cultural recovery in the 1940s at the heart of modernism itself:

Modernism, as the aesthetic articulation of modernity, comes to signify less a quest for the new than for those secrets of hindsight that that pursuit necessarily entails. [ . . . ] [I]t is not so much the ‘great divide’ between the high and the low that preoccupies us here as it is the technologies of cultural memory and forgetting, production and consumption, encryption and disinterment. (11)

As a chief architect of the New Orleans jazz revival, Armstrong’s proficiency with “technologies of cultural memory and forgetting” and his gift for plumbing “those secrets of hindsight” leave his creative imprint not only in the internal mutations of jazz music itself, but in world memory of the American modern period as well.

Consider the ways he integrated commercial influences into his musical style. From 1926 to 1928, Armstrong recorded his major solo trumpet compositions, tailoring his style to the tastes of mostly black audiences. Then from the early 1930s and onward, Armstrong went on to incorporate mainstream-style crooning into his blues and jazz repertoire, utilizing electrical microphones and national radio networks. It was during this later period that the more familiar Armstrong appeared, with his “radical paraphrase of familiar popular tunes” resulting in a clear stylistic arc: the “ragging of the crooner repertory just right for broad white appeal” (Brothers 9; 460). As his popularity grew, then, Armstrong’s performances gained institutional sanction, and he headed larger and more accomplished bands on longer concert tours. During the 1930s,

Armstrong issued rendition after rendition of popular folk and standard tunes, which transformed his source materials while appealing to their broad recognizability. Along with a readiness to collaborate across the color line and play with white jazz musicians and a knack for co-opting white compositions, “the combination of creative drive and hustle for the rewards of the white marketplace” formed a powerful set of market skills (Brothers 11). His staggering popularity and his “world-class stature gave the jazz world its first superstar, and also gave the music a credibility it had never had before” (T. Gioia 16). By producing these records, Armstrong helped to inspire a mass movement of American jazz players who would take center stage during the big band era, when jazz became “firmly entrenched as America’s popular music” (T. Gioia 18). Armstrong is credited namely, the gradual maturation during the interwar years of “casual” vernacular Dixieland into “a soloist’s art form” based around “musical personalities” in front of professional orchestras (T. Gioia 16).

In the well-established story of popular musical modernism, Armstrong finds a prominent rank in the long catalogue of artists who participated in the Harlem Renaissance. A diasporic movement that “evolved into a cradle for the revival of black culture” (Nikolopoulou 155), the Harlem Renaissance is now understood by humanist scholars across the disciplines as a wellspring of cultural modernism.<sup>85</sup> Performing frequently in Harlem contemporaneously with other musicians Paul Robeson, Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, and Duke Ellington, Armstrong attained unrivaled celebrity. It is no exaggeration to deem Armstrong’s jazz “an integral and pivotal part of the culture industry” (Lemke 81) during his lifetime, in ways that

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<sup>85</sup> Its name denotes the African American cultural presence in the urban north that was amplified during the “Great Migration” of black Americans of 1910 to 1920 from southeastern to northeastern regions of the nation: “removed from the plantation economies of the South and fueled by the incomplete promise of emancipation, Harlem fostered a community vibrant and dynamic, moving towards a new black aesthetic in art” (Nikolopoulou 155).



both fit within and eclipse the Harlem Renaissance. Armstrong's biography itself has become a touchstone for commentaries on such subjects as jazz music, urban modernism, and American race relations. The popular narratives of his rise to fame, his success in appealing to mainstream audiences, his tensions with black radicals of his era, his participation in the Great Migration, and his monumental contributions to world culture, are familiar stories, timeworn tracks in the American cultural retrospect.

The ferocious din of historical and social ideation around Armstrong indicates that the trumpeter's achievement "transcends the evanescent fame of American popular cultural success," spawning a vortex of meanings that render his "a life now more mythologized, and forgotten, than honored and embraced" (Merod 165; 187). For instance, Carrie Teresa contends using the contemporary critical framework of memory studies, racial ideology has incessantly shaped biographical treatments of Armstrong, with his public persona discursively instrumentalized in different, and often competing, projects of public memory. Journalists, musicians, and biographers of Armstrong have hotly contested Armstrong's influence in racial politics, depicting the musician frequently in extremes—variously, as a jester-minstrel with accommodating "Uncle Tom" behaviors, or alternately as a reliable advocate for civil rights progress wrongly defamed by other, more militant activists. A "symbol in which expressions of public memory make sweeping arguments about the nature of the struggle for freedom,"

Armstrong

has been used as an exemplary model that signifies the dilution of racial identity only to binary conceptions of 'Tomming' and militant activism. Largely where public memory has missed the mark [ . . . ] has been its reticence to engage with the dynamic nature of Armstrong's life as reflective of the plurality of the Black community itself over the course of the 20th century. (Teresa 698)

A complex figure who was made during his lifetime into an unwilling representative for his race and for his nation overseas, Armstrong continues to be prominently cast “as a racial figure, as an unrivaled musical stylist, and [ . . . ] as an innovator who gave birth to a new art form or who, at least, inaugurated the spirit and energy that launched a new musical *modus vivendi*” (Merod 171; 169). Despite vigorous debate about the *nature* of Armstrong’s historical importance and legacy, his *inclusion* within that history—and within contemporary canons of modernism—is seldom challenged.

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Robert Travis, Merle Travis’ father, was a tobacco farmer in Beech Creek, Kentucky until economic hardships finally forced him to sell his family’s land and move into a coal mining town. Once he and his sons began to mine coal, he mined until his death. Though Robert Travis would never return to farming, he expressed regret in his later years for ever selling the tobacco farm, and retained many agrarian values and habits. His youngest son, Merle (born Nov 17, 1917), had grown up in a coal camp in Ebenezer, Kentucky but showed no interest in mining work. “Most everybody was in debt,” and “money was scarce,” Merle Travis states in a July 10, 1961 home interview, a digital recording of which has resurfaced online. Travis enjoyed more family support than Armstrong, who began life as a fatherless waif, but he too faced chronic poverty as his family moved from camp to camp. He needed an income to contribute to the family household, so as a boy Merle Travis worked odd jobs, peddling meat on the roads in winter, crafting in his free time his own banjos out of tin canisters, and briefly attending school. In the same interview, Merle recalls, as one of his earliest memories, that he had been vaguely fascinated by guitars, and their woody smell.

Merle Travis decided early in life never to mine coal. Eager to see more of the world and in an effort to earn wages outside of the extractive industry that ordered his family's life, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, where the money he made doing Corps work in Fort Knox and elsewhere allowed him to purchase a Gretsch guitar. Travis' rejection of coal mining work in his teens, and his decision to pursue a mobile musical career, represented a revolt against cultural expectations in general and against the wishes of his parents in particular. Sharing the sense of occupational inevitability felt among wage-workers in single-resource economies, Travis' father believed that a mining job was compulsory for a boy growing up in a coal camp. "I believe the trashiest thing in the world" he said, "is to see a feller goin' down the road with a banjer under his arm and a drove a hounds follerin' him" (Green, Liner notes). Nevertheless, music was an undeniable pastime for the family; from the age of twelve onward Travis, along with his father and sister, was immersed in the culture of folk instrumentation of central and Western Kentucky, where multiethnic performance traditions had been developing for decades. Travis' heroes were thumb-and-finger guitar pickers who were acquainted with his family. Dozens of coal miners in Travis' community were playing in a style which had been established, in living memory of the time, by the black country blues guitarist Arnold Shultz.

At around the turn of the century, the itinerant musician Arnold Shultz had ceaselessly travelled around a roughly thirty-mile area of western Kentucky known as the Western Coal Field, near the Ohio River and the Green River, in Muhlenberg County. The location holds a unique cultural importance due to geological, topographic, and socioeconomic factors. "Slavery, the Green River, and the mining of coal" especially "are crucial to an understanding of the development of Travis picking" (Lightfoot 126). The basic historical arc is as follows. Long before it actually became a coal field, the Western Coal Field was an important hub in the slave

trading and agricultural markets of the early- and mid-nineteenth century and was in fact the site of large slave auctions. With steamboat travel and commercial markets expanding on the Mississippi, Ohio, and Green Rivers, and given the enormity of the No. 9 and No. 11 coal seams, Muhlenberg County later became a vital hub for the exporting of Kentucky coal. Then, decisive historical changes helped to facilitate the development of Travis picking:

When slavery was abolished blacks had turned either to subsistence farming or working as roustabouts on the steamboats, but when large-scale steamboat activity evaporated on the Green in the late 1920s, many black men became coal miners, working and making music with their white neighbors. [ . . . ] The irregular schedule of mine operations helped to charge black-white interaction. (Lightfoot 129)

The region's economic and demographic history resulted in thoroughgoing black-white cultural interchange among the working classes. These factors made the region a nexus of intermixing regional musics developing in the early twentieth century. Thanks to river commerce, a variety of musical styles interacted. Culturally, Muhlenberg County lay in a middle zone: between a key blues-jazz corridor (i.e., the river system linking Memphis to St. Louis) and the fiddle-scraping 'old-time' or 'hillbilly' string bands (i.e., the coal-rich Appalachian foothills). Similar processes of cultural interchange were at work elsewhere in Appalachia. Black section-worker musicians from the Piedmont south brought guitars with them to West Virginia during the era of massive railroad constructions (1870-1920), and according to Douglas B. Green "brought with their guitars an African-based musical style that emphasized rhythm, always severely lacking in Anglo-Celtic musical tradition" (9). West Virginia railworkers were singing "John Henry," for instance, around the turn of the century (S. Nelson). Reflecting what Archie Green calls "polarities in American folk society" (*OAM* 170), Travis picking exemplifies the stylistic synthesis occurring within what musicologist van der Merwe calls the "multiracial climate of the

American underworld” (87). During the era of modernization, this location’s cultural climate fostered a rich syncretism and mutual influence of styles.

In Muhlenberg, Shultz played jazz and blues guitar on riverboats in the mid-1910s, absorbing a range of black musical traditions such as blues, country ragtime, gospel, and breakdowns. Then in the late-1910s and early-1920s he popularized “a truly regional tradition” (Lightfoot 137) of guitar playing when he inspired a cadre of disciples in the Muhlenberg coal communities. In 1918, Kennedy Jones reacted to hearing Shultz’s thumb-based guitar style by purchasing a case of thumbpicks and freely distributing them throughout the area, becoming a sort of “bridge between Shultz picking and Travis picking” (Lightfoot 135). During this period, Shultz built up a regional reputation as a masterful guitarist with a mesmerizing alternating bass string technique, knowledge of how to build jazz-influenced chords high up the guitar neck, and—a novel musical experience—the capability of playing contemporary pop songs as a soloist by arranging them in his fingerstyle approach. Shultz alternated a steady, percussive bass rhythm and chopped rhythm chords with his thumb and laid over of that rhythm a syncopated<sup>86</sup> melody with his finger. Teaching guitarists Ike Everly and Mose Rager, who would become Merle Travis’ chief mentor (Lightfoot 121), such songs as “Cannonball Rag” and “I’ll See You in My Dreams,”<sup>87</sup> Shultz synthesized widely varying musical styles and gave his neighboring players something to imitate. Barber and folk musician Mose Rager, as well as Travis family friends Ike Everly, and Lester English, had taken to imitating the chordophonic syncopation that had developed on steamboats in Western Kentucky by African-American instrumentalists and been taught to them by Arnold Shultz and his admirer Kennedy Jones.

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<sup>86</sup> Syncopation is the assertion of notes into the offbeats and in-between spaces of musical time.

<sup>87</sup> Travis would later make these same instrumental tunes into country record hits.

Like Armstrong, Travis emerged from an informal musical community which welcomed the crossing of social boundaries. When in the 1930s Merle Travis' sister-in-law began to play guitar in a circle of fingerstyle guitarists in the camp, he first heard this distinct West Kentucky picking style. While banjo and fiddle instrumental traditions in Kentucky were also highly developed, they lacked the exhilarating movement Travis saw in Shultz's style of country ragtime picking. Travis likely also recognized that, as is reflected in the general shifts in instrumentation in the 1930s and 40s, the guitar was an instrument better adapted to vocal accompaniment recording than the banjo or fiddle, with their higher pitch and piercing tones.

Following in this chain of influence (from Shultz to Jones to Rager, Everly, and English) is Merle Travis, whose own contribution—and the reason that the picking style bears his name<sup>88</sup>—was to bring this country ragtime guitar style unquestionably into the national culture (Lightfoot 121). Once he had learned to imitate Rager in his own way, Travis left home on a boxcar journey against his mother's wishes, in a final refusal to enter the mine shafts. Travis made his first radio performance in 1936, playing "Tiger Rag" at a local amateur broadcast show in Evansville, Indiana. He spent years, in his late teens and early twenties, touring the Midwest and south. He rode freight trains and steamboats and busked for coins on street corners, in railyards, and barge decks along the way. And Travis' life on the road with his guitar was beginning to pay dividends. As they had granted to Armstrong, musical and social talents granted the young working-class man mobility and income.

Any apt description of Merle Travis' musical output acknowledges its increasing stylistic heterogeneity during these years, as Travis absorbed the tricks and sounds of 1930s country radio. Travis, in one biographer's words, was "forged in the crucible of 'live radio'"

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<sup>88</sup> In recorded interviews Travis has repeatedly suggested calling the style "Rager picking" rather than "Travis picking" (Lightfoot 121).

(Humphrey). When he left Kentucky to work in Cleveland for a barn dance radio show, “Boone County Jamboree,” the mesmerizing and little-known style of fingerpicking he brought with him made him stand out to producers and, along with his skills as a composer and vocalist, made him a valuable asset to radio stations. Travis was hired in 1937 with Clayton McMichen’s Georgia Wildcats. In the broadcasting studio, producers expected versatile virtuosity. Much like the radio itself, Travis needed to be able to play just about anything, and be able to do so ‘live’ in a consistently pleasing manner for modern audiences. Country music historian Richard Peterson too employs a crucible analogy to describe the radio barn dance scene, calling it “the single most conspicuous crucible for the development of country music in the depression-plagued 1930s”:

[Radio barn dances] profoundly shaped country music. The use of microphones fostered the development of softer, more intimate crooning and elaborate harmony styles of singing. Major station radio work facilitated artistic growth . . . (116)

Within this high-pressure, competitive working environment, where studio executives reshuffled musicians routinely, slashing employment contracts, Travis obtained a permanent role in the string band the Drifting Pioneers, who broadcast regularly on a radio dance show in Cincinnati, Ohio. It speaks to Travis’ ability to soak up so many musical styles, from popular crooning to western swing to country blues to folk balladry, that he was able to secure in 1938 a six-year engagement with the 50,000-watt WLW station. In the 1940s Travis starred in some of the earliest ‘soundies’ (precursors to contemporary music videos) in addition to transitioning to studio recording. In a midcentury career resembling that of Johnny Cash’s, Travis played roles in over a dozen films, both as a musician and an actor, in addition to singing.

Armstrong and Travis’ biographies up to the mid-forties invite many points of comparison. Both were born into poor families in the American South, where they experienced hunger and material wants in their youth. For each, musical society and local performance

offered an alternative to underemployment and menial work. During their careers, each influenced untold numbers of musicians following them, thanks not only to their virtuosic talents but to their gregarious and lively professional demeanor. Eventually both took to the road, embarking on fluid performing careers as multifaceted entertainers. They each took turns as dance hall, radio, and recording musicians, and as actors, appearing in feature films. Travis' northward travels in the thirties fit into a greater historical tapestry depicting the transmission of southern regional styles to northern listeners. Threaded into this tapestry too are Armstrong's trips up the Mississippi in the 1920s to St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. For these mobile singers, commercial success lay in a certain stylistic absorbency and musical synthesis concordant with the demands of radio and recording markets. Appearing out of such highly demanding performance contexts, Armstrong and Travis honed forms of modern showmanship which were suited precisely to industrial sound recording technologies and entertainment markets.

Yet whereas Armstrong (and jazz music) have figured prominently in the story of modernism, Travis (and country music) have not. Since modernist scholarship has tended to emphasize the twentieth century's cities and their emergent cosmopolitanism, it has so far proven easier to explain such formations as modernist architecture, the urban proletariat, jazz music, and the Harlem Renaissance within frameworks of modernist art than, say, country music, with its calculated projections of rural innocence. Walter Benjamin, early commentator on modernity, extrapolated from the poetry of Charles Baudelaire the figure of the *flaneur* (French: "idle man about town"), who observes the city's sidewalk throngs with a bewildered detachment, as a starting point for the modernist perspective. In Benjamin's formulation, "the shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd" ("On Some Motifs" 176) is the instigating factor in



Baudelaire's proto-modernist lyrical detachment. This shock indelibly "is imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure" among urban throngs ("On Some Motifs" 165). Citing the assumptions of influential theorists of modernism such as Malcolm Bradbury and Marshall Berman, literary scholars Alexander and Moran summarize the received account of modernism, which posits the aesthetic movement as "an art of cities":

Modernism is, by definition, liberated from provincialism and local allegiances, caught up in an ambivalent but creatively productive relationship with the fluctuating events of modernity and modernization. Paris, London, Berlin, St Petersburg, New York: these are the principle centres of the modernist maelstrom [ . . . ]. (1)

As the sites where art institutions and educated audiences congregated, cities were the kilns that fired modernism's most conspicuous art objects. Yet scholarly inclination within modernist studies has gone too far in transposing this observation wholesale onto the very concept of modernism. David James, in his 2009 assessment of "interwar regionalism," reminds that decades of scholarly emphasis on "figures of displacement" has rendered localized or region-specific modernism "the generic 'other' against which the vitalities of global modernism are defined" (51). In a broad sense, longtime critical favoring in the modernist field of cosmopolitan and expatriate artists has tended to define modernist artistry itself as antithetical to presumably inert regions.

Yet this is an opportunity to historicize jazz and country music comparatively within a shared backdrop of modernization in regional ecologies and societies. As the twin faces of popular mid-century American music, country and jazz both emerge from blues traditions of southern music. Like all U.S. pop music, both jazz and country owe their general development to the cultural exchanges which have been the norm within the "multiracial climate of the American

underworld” (van der Merwe 87). Geographically speaking, the blues, jazz, and country recording genres grew out of a shared context in the postbellum South:

In the decades following the American Civil War there was a profound upswelling of innovation in the musical expressions of poor and working-class people of the American South and a mixing with the commercial music of the day. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century three streams were being distinguished: blues, jazz, and an amalgam that would become country music. (Peterson 8)

The ensuing history is familiar: with the recording of vernacular country and blues musicians, and the marketing of these recordings to targeted white and black listening audiences—respectively, “hillbilly records” and “race records”—the mid-twenties saw the emergence of racially-segregated pop genres: country and blues (Green *OAM* 35; Denning 4-5). In a process Manuel terms the “commercial construction of racialized genres” (418), record companies sought to record sounds that would appeal to particular consumer demographics they primarily conceived in terms of race. These segregated genres reflected literally segregated music shops, and each genre would spawn commercial subgenres yet unimaginable in 1925.

Since the mid-twenties, jazz and country have garnered starkly different critical legacies. By now, jazz and country occupy cultural positions so isolated from one another that their shared origins in the race-hillbilly recording boom are obscured. Jazz, beginning as a supposedly mindless form of dance music in the first decades of the twentieth century, attained “art” status by the middle of the century, as its role in modernism was continually reevaluated and jazz musicians adopted an increasingly avant-garde disposition (typified by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Thelonius Monk). Thus today we have seen the rise of “jazz studies as a new field in the liberal arts curriculum at the college and graduate school levels” (O’Meally, Edwards & Griffin 1) even as jazz has declined in popularity, leaving newer genres such as R&B, rock and roll, and funk to each in turn become the reigning forms of dance music.

Country, in the same timespan, while it too branched into new artistic directions and integrated distinctive styles, achieved no such metamorphosis. It has remained a plainly commercial form.

In other words, jazz became more mobile as a cultural formation than country, doing what country could not. It leapt the “great divide” scholars have located in modernist culture between ‘high’ art and ‘low’ entertainment. It achieved viability where country could not—namely, in institutions of high art. Here another interesting parallel between literature and music surfaces. In *The Difficulties of Modernism*, Leonard Diepeveen has argued that modernism, among art movements, has done the most to enshrine difficulty as the decisive aesthetic feature of high art. It is possible that the perceived difficulty of postwar jazz music compared to postwar country—recall the cliché that listening to jazz is, like playing chess, a pastime requiring some intellectual work—has lent it greater legibility as modernist, given the way literary writers and critics have celebrated aesthetic difficulty as a modernist virtue. Richard Peterson formulates this curious outcome as a central question in *Creating Country Music*. “How is it,” Peterson asks, “that country music has become an element of commercial popular music rather than follow the path of jazz or the blues to become a kind of art music or commercial folk music?” (9).

Today, in the twenty-first century, this critical divide between the genres has reached dramatic proportions. Peterson outlines this difference:

Jazz, which began in the marching band music of black New Orleans, is now often performed in classical music concert halls, is taught in conservatories of music, and is played along with classical music on ‘good music’ radio stations, with the result that jazz has become *art music*. [ . . . ] [B]oth the blues and jazz have experienced a great deal of aesthetic mobility, and neither is today appreciated much by the working-class Southern black communities that originated jazz and blues. [ . . . ]

Country music is widely enjoyed by people in all walks of North American society and around the world, but its primary audience is the children and

grandchildren of the poor rural Southerners that gave commercial country its birth  
[ . . . ]<sup>89</sup>

Country music, as much as it ever was, is a part of mass culture. Country is still designed for broad appeal and popular with lower-class, less educated Americans. In contrast, though continually favored by more educated audiences, few lower-class Americans in the twenty-first century listen to jazz. Along with country music, it is not jazz but the hip hop, rock, electronic, country, and ‘alternative’ music genres that are widely popular today. Therefore, the polarization of jazz and country, commercial genres institutionally segregated *a priori* by skin color, is further compounded by more recent class-based distinctions of taste.

As representatives of the scholarly reception of the jazz and country genres, Armstrong and Travis are appropriate. Travis’ critical obscurity within modernist studies is emblematic of pop country music’s persistent exclusion from elite musical circles, while Armstrong’s privileged position in scholarly accounts of American modernism is emblematic of jazz’s ascension to art music status. For its conspicuous role in inventing modern jazz, and for popularizing jazz internationally, Louis Armstrong’s effervescent and decades-spanning career stands at the center of popular musical modernism. Though more is yet to be understood about the shape and significance of Armstrong’s legacy, he is a mainstay in stories of modernism. A musician whose “impact on jazz has never been disputed” (Bromberg), Armstrong’s distinctive trumpet and vocal styles are associated, by musicians and non-musicians alike, with American modernity.

Merle Travis, meanwhile has waned in popular memory, being known best today by fingerstyle and ragtime guitarists. It is true that Travis’ songs “Sixteen Tons,” “Cannonball Rag,”

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<sup>89</sup> The answer Peterson finds, to explain this critical disparity, owes to both stylistic and economic conditions which led to country being viewed condescendingly and narrowly. Country music’s constitutive discourses of authenticity. Country music remained institutionally distinct in part because it maintained “in its lyrics and in the images of its leading exponents the dualistic, populist, individualist, fatalistic, antiurbane zeitgeist of poor and working-class Southern whites, although most of its fans do not have these characteristics” (9).

and “Dark as a Dungeon” are frequently covered by folk revivalists and are favorite expressions of blue-collar life. Yet in an interesting series of paradoxes, Travis was often eclipsed by his notable contemporaries Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Tennessee “Ernie” Ford, Gene Autry, Hank Williams, and Tex Williams, overshadowed by his own songs as they have been exhaustively rerecorded, and even curiously upstaged by “Travis picking” itself, with its long train of star proteges Chet Atkins, Tommy Emmanuel, Thom Bresh (Travis’ son), and Jerry Reed.<sup>90</sup> One is more likely to find an article on the subject of Merle Travis in a guitarist magazine than in a scholarly journal (Gold; Chappell). Peterson’s oft-cited 1997 monograph *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, which explores the institutionalization of country music between 1923 and 1953, mentions Travis in passing only twice. (However, I note here with anticipation, things may change once Merle Travis’ recently discovered autobiographical writings are published. Titled *Sixteen Tons: The Merle Travis Story*, this collection of Travis’ recovered manuscripts is to be published by BMG Books, with additional biographical writings by Deke Dickerson. It is currently slated for release in November 2022—at the time of this writing, still in the future.)

So what is country music, and on what grounds can a case for its modernist qualities be established? Douglas Green provides a conventional descriptive definition of country music: “music from, by, and about the people of the American countryside” (4). This definition captures country’s early origins in backcountry recordings and is partly correct. But Green’s straightforward definition of country music also reflects uncritically a shopworn, organicist view of country music, and so is partly misleading. Modern country music is better understood as an amalgam of urban commercial ventures based on already-heterogenous folk cultures of the

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Yandell and Richard Smith are other important, though less prominent, Travis pickers.

largely agrarian American South. The earliest recorded country music first emerged as sound recording machines became portable enough to be hauled to rural locations across the American South. The earlier country music of the 1920s was usually recorded ‘on location’ in temporary studios set up in the homes of musicians, in villages, towns, and cities around the South (C. Wolfe 25). Yet increasingly, musical talent relocated near urban recording studios across the South and Midwest. As rural performers like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers attained regional celebrity status, they began to record (and later broadcast) their music in a professional, urban milieu. The 1920s commercial boom

brought hundreds of farmers, miners, carpenters, and preachers from rural places like Burton’s Fork, Kentucky, to the very epicenters of urban America to sing and to play banjos, fiddles, and guitars into machines. . . . [T]hese machines turned this music—which only a generation before had existed only as practice—into things. (Mancini 208)

This materialization of musical practice “into things” fits into familiar narratives of modernity, marking a modern break or rupture from an earlier narrative stage in musicmaking. However, scholars have traced the technologization of music as a key component of the modern popular song, and shown that in the context of American popular music, the advent of commercial recording technologies in the early twentieth century mark a change in degree, not of kind. The explosive new forms of sonic entertainment emerging from the 1920s commercial recording boom, while remarkable, are not without root or precedent.

Indeed, the popular recording industry rather extended earlier, familiar patterns of mechanization exemplified by the nineteenth-century’s sheet music and player piano industries. The wholesale commodification of musical cultures—achieved first in the early modern period by the sixteenth century English broadside ballad press (Dugaw)—reached a frenzy point between 1870 and 1930. In the decades associated with the Technological Revolution, or second

industrial revolution, just as huge numbers of Americans began to eat food imported from afar, huge numbers also began listening to music made far away. Especially after 1880, with not only the mass production of musical instruments on Taylorist and Fordist lines but with the rise of the advertisement industry, American music became institutionalized, industrialized, rationalized, and efficiently marketed as a popular commodity which could consistently deliver pleasure to audiences and profit to producers (Taylor 285). As Mancini states,

the case of the recording boom shows quite clearly that 1920s rural America—like so many other ‘traditional’ culture nexuses whose prehistories turn out to be as hybrid and as commercial as they are unitary and communitarian—was already commodified. (220)

The 1920s boom in electronic recording is thus an intensification of a longer capitalist history defining the modern era. Pop music’s producers, advertisers, marketers—collectively, its “commodification apparatus”—attempted to naturalize the use-values, exchange-values, and sign-values, of new musical forms and music itself as a commodity detachable from human musicians (Taylor 297; 301). During those sixty years, the sheet music press, manufacturers of musical instruments, the Tin Pan Alley complex, designers of player pianos, dance hall managers, makers of gramophone records and players, tavern owners, talent scouts, record labels, radio stations, musical society institutions, and makers of jukeboxes—successively expanded American commercial entertainment into forms that would have been unrecognizable to previous generations. In his analysis of the mechanical player piano, Taylor writes of “the elimination of the ‘personality’ playing the player piano” as a technological development, alongside radio and the phonograph, of “the conversion of music from music as something that people made themselves to a commodified and reified ‘music’ that people bought” (293).

The trends toward urban recording and broadcasting technologies outlined above do not in themselves connote any observable modernist aestheticism. But the abstracted pop country

song form resulting from these trends, which Comentale describes at length in his academic exploration of hillbilly music, *Sweet Air* (2013), does. Though since the time of Stephen Foster it had been itself a modern phenomenon, the popular song became in the 1930s and onward truly *modernist*, in the sense that it had become fully detached as a commodity from traditional contexts of music production (Comentale 85-6). In Comentale's phrase, the influence of commercial radio and recording industries, artists, and audiences created "twentieth-century pop audiotopias" (21; 74-5). In modern pop we have not only the abstraction and autonomization of the art form itself but also a geocultural deterritorialization of the arts. Regional songs became pop songs precisely as "modern experience eroded local ties and opened up the sonic terrain in new ways" (Comentale 22). Troubling simple associations of country music with nonmodern provincialism, Comentale's unorthodox book, contextualizes the popular country song within technological modernity, is a refreshing intervention, and one this current study hopes to further.

On the other hand, the critical groundwork for theorizing country music modernism was laid by folklorists of an earlier generation. The hillbilly record industry that created the first commercial country music has been elegantly examined by folklorists, literary scholars, and cultural studies scholars who have sought to understand the country record industry as a historical formation wholly distinct from its romantic projections. D. K. Wilgus had first made the country music industry a subject of folklore study throughout the 1970s and 80s, advancing a comparative and historically oriented inquiry into its material contexts. "Music is always close to life," Wilgus states ("Discussion from the Floor" 182). Therefore, Wilgus reasons, the subject of country music

deals largely with the industrialization and urbanization of the southern regions; it is concerned ultimately with the urbanization of the United States. The South in general and the Appalachians and Ozarks in particular entered the game late, after their frontier folkways had developed and solidified for a longer period than



elsewhere in the country. The shock of urbanization, therefore, was greater and the reaction more extreme. . . . [country-western music] is indeed a laboratory for the study of some aspects of the American character, particularly those related to the urbanization of the rural folkways. (Wilgus “Urban Hillbilly” 157-58)

Though the 1920s are remembered as the Jazz Age and not the Country Age, I infer from Wilgus’ claim that country music, which blazed into sudden existence on mid-1920s hillbilly records, ought to be studied as a distinctly modernist formation. As a corollary, recognizing urbanization as a constitutive process of modernization should not imply that only urban spaces are modern, but rather that rural spaces too are deeply changed by modernization. Indeed country music—not only that of Merle Travis but of more influential figures like Maybell Carter, Hank Williams, and Johnny Cash—steadfastly invites its listener to ask how urbanization alters rural life.

As the product both of various southern American regions and of an increasingly consolidated urban recording industry, modern country—a genre to which Appalachian artists contributed significantly—can reveal another dimension of modernism within the multiplied, global sense in which it is now studied. More narrowly, a comparison between Merle Travis and Louis Armstrong, an authoritative figure in modern jazz who has recently been called a “master of modernism,” highlights Travis’ historical trajectory as truly modernist too.

## CHAPTER VI

### CASE STUDY: TRAVIS AND ARMSTRONG—EXTRACTIVISM

In addition to laying out the chapter's critical context—that is, the critical indexing of Armstrong and of jazz within American musical modernism—Chapter V broadly narrated the early stages of Armstrong's career leading up the crucial turning point reached in the early postwar years. As I will now show, that turning point demonstrates the currency of regional affiliation in musical performance and dramatizes the extractive mode of cultural production. Both Travis and Armstrong plug into a cultural mainstream that sought out exotic qualities like southernness. This feature of southernness plays a conspicuous role in both musician's commercial viability during this turning point. But first, we need to understand that turning point itself.

In 1947 Armstrong and Travis each brought *place* itself to the forefront of their music, both lyrically and stylistically, to a degree that surpassed their earlier productions and surpassed the popular style of their day. Yet, as will be shown, these musical assertions of regionalism mirrored a broader cultural shift of mind in the 1930s, a period during which thinkers, with increasing directness, scrutinized American life in its diverse manifestations through new forms (such as ethnography and documentary) and art movements (such as a resurgent regionalism<sup>91</sup>).

In the face not only of decades of rapid social dislocation but of an uncertain musical future, a late modernist reaction occurred in popular music. Armstrong and Travis in particular had witnessed by the mid-1940s a profusion of new subgenres within the relatively young

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<sup>91</sup> According to Alexander and Moran, “regional affiliations are apparent in the work of many high modernists but are perhaps particularly pronounced in that of ‘late’ modernists writing during and after the 1930s” (3).

popular genres of jazz and country. Practicing an emerging calculus of mass commercial dissemination, each musician invoked their own regional affiliations to formulate an apparently vernacular, place-specific, and manifestly coherent musical idiom within recording genres that were becoming in themselves decreasingly coherent. Each's 1947 stage and studio projects leverage, in distinct but parallel ways, sign-values associated with American cultural peripheries in the rural South. And this leveraging of regional tropes and techniques provided a kind of anchor. Travis' Kentucky ballads, recorded in a Hollywood studio, and Armstrong's bombastic live New York concert, are products of metropolitan culture, yet each overwrites its urbanity by prioritizing an American periphery as both a cultural origin and a lyrical topic (in such tunes as Travis' "Muskrat" and "Over by Number Nine" and Armstrong's "Dear Old Southland" and "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?"). Armstrong and Travis each designate themselves as preservers of a culturally authentic music tradition. Their autobiographical affiliations with the American South—whether it be the mountain South or Delta South—serve to narrate cultural origins far from the industrial centers of U.S. modernity in the North and East. This commercial and aesthetic regionalism works dynamically through counterposed forces: a progressive impulse to innovate and incorporate and simultaneously a classicalist impulse to regain (or more precisely, to *relocate*) the supposedly lost origin of a given music.

So audible and visible in their records, Armstrong and Travis' southernness takes on an aesthetic prominence, pointing toward the salience of regionalism to many Americans in the postwar period. I view the situation faced by these artists (and many others of the period) as deeply self-contradictory. *Town Hall Concert* and *Folk Songs of the Hills* express their cultural authority using, idiosyncratically, progressive technical developments and the commercial norms of the larger mass market. That is, their apparent legitimacy as conservers of a genuine local

form of music is paradoxically connected to their very ability to deterritorialize the musical idioms of their home regions for mass audiences. They somehow fulfil the cultural displacement of their southern regions in the act of capturing it in the moment of its technological dispersal.

It is impossible to reliably distinguish supposedly “authentic” regional articulations from commercial persona-making strategies aimed at how best to render forth a pop star. A more cynical interpretation might simply conclude that Armstrong and Travis cashed in—signed the lease, so to speak, to exploit their home regions’ stylistic holdings—thus reflecting a major trend in twentieth-century America: the full-scale capitalist commodification of each region’s physical and artistic resources. A more productive and interesting conclusion is that, as modernist performers, musicians like Armstrong and Travis stand in the chaotic zone of interchange between vernacular and mass culture. They make themselves into explicit conduits between two mutating worlds: on one hand, rapidly expanding commercial entertainment markets and on the other, disintegrating peripheral cultures. That is, in a dialectical opposition, only in transforming local musical cultures are they ostensibly preserved going forward into modernity.

A brief consideration of two cultural contexts—that of American literary regionalism and that of what Sieglinde Lemke calls “primitivist modernism” in her book of the same name—helps us as current-day listeners infer some of the significance of Armstrong and Travis’ postwar regional turns. As broad cultural trends shaping modernism, both regionalism and primitivism provide insight into what really are multiple “great divides” that fractured modern artistic sensibilities. And in this respect, they illustrate modernism’s inherent relationality. Despite their many differences, both regionalism and primitivism register modernization’s social imbalances as well as its disruption of geographical space. American literature of the latter half of the nineteenth century had long made conspicuous use of provincial settings and themes of ruralism

as a marker of premodernity. Regional writing, “the principle place of literary access in American in the postbellum decades,” enabled the public self-exploration of the post-Civil War nation (Brodhead 150). American authors in a tradition from George Washington Cable, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Charles W. Chesnutt, Edward Eggleston, Mark Twain, and Sarah Orne Jewett, to Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor drew upon national interest in American regions to critical success. The pastoral themes in nineteenth-century local color writing provided an aesthetic escape from industrialism and the cultural homogeneity which ascended with the market-capitalist consolidation of U.S. regional economies *circa* 1865-1900. By and large these earlier works evinced elegiac dispositions of grief and removal for declining cultural regions, presenting regions in their stories as (fictional) enclaves of happy premodernity isolated from the larger nation’s centralized economy and hegemonic culture. The resource-yielding peripheries, such as Appalachia, became stages to be symbolically invested with romantic notions of premodern simplicity in works by authors like Mary Noailles Murfree, John Fox, Jr. and Constance Fenimore Woolson. Fictional excursions there offered a diversion from, or a balm for, the affective and psychological pressures of modernity. This, I contend, was the expression, in musical markets, of the extractive mode of cultural production this dissertation theorizes.

Similarly, the primitivist vogue of the high modernist period has been attributed, in cultural historiography, to a powerful yearning among American and European audiences for forms of entertainment they found exotic—normally the cultures of the colonized global south and of those racialized in Western societies as nonwhite. Even more glaringly than literary regionalism, primitivist modernism often relied upon the exotic gaze of the modern observer on less modern subjects. Beginning in the late 1800s but flourishing in the interwar years, a major

trend in painting and sculpture found European artists, including Picasso, Klee, Gauguin, and Matisse, exploring and appropriating the so-called “primitive” features of non-Western art. While racist and colonial attitudes of European-American audiences certainly inflected much of it, primitivist modernism also drew from the decolonial currents of the 1930s which found expression in the Harlem Renaissance and in the French Négritude movement. In light of these complexities, these decades represented, according to Nikolopoulou, “a new era, during which fascination with colonial tropes and post-First World War politics created an elusive terrain of racial and national mythologies” (153). Indeed, these mythologies shaped critical understanding of “modernist” and “primitive” expression in convoluted ways that reveal the mutual interdependence of the two terms:

Although the two concepts [*primitivism* and *modernity*] appear to connote opposite historical trajectories, primitivism alluding to the past and modernism pointing towards the future, breaking down the two in terms of their representational practices yields surprisingly accordant results. (Nikolopoulou 153)

Primitive culture infuses modernist culture, whether it be celebrated as an antidote to modernity or simply reduced to modernity’s passive opposite. “The fascination with the nonwhite and nonmodern was always,” Lemke postulates, “a fundamental part of modernism” (29).<sup>92</sup>

As literary regionalism and primitivism each show, the status of modernity required always a negotiation of cultural difference. For Frederic Jameson, the modernist sensibility corresponds with no clear, stable historical period, as is commonly supposed; instead it represents a rhetorical operation built upon dissociation. This rhetorical operation, Jameson suggests, relies upon a dialectic opposition whereby modernity is expressed through stories of

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<sup>92</sup> Primitivism can be viewed as a constituent factor in many parts of the modernist movement and beyond. Indeed Lemke argues that primitivism is no less than “a prominent feature in much of twentieth-century Western art” (29).

breaking with an imagined nonmodern past. In other words, Jameson theorizes, modernism emerges due not to intrinsic qualities supposed to be “modern,” but through the narrating itself of one’s own break from premodernity. Jameson views modernity as “a unique moment, in which the past is created by way of its energetic separation from the present; by way of a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and expels and ejects it” (25).

Jameson continues,

It is this vital energy of the present and its violent self-creation that not only overcomes the stagnant melancholies of the epigones, it also assigns a mission to a temporal and historical period which ought not yet to have the right to be one. For the present is not yet a historical period: it ought not to be able to name itself and characterize its own originality. Yet it is precisely this unauthorized self-affirmation that will finally shape that new thing we call actuality, and for various forms of which our contemporary usage of modern and modernity are made to stand. (25)

and further:

[ . . . ] all of the themes generally appealed to as ways of identifying the modern—self-consciousness or reflexivity, greater attention to language or representation, a materiality of the painted surface, and so on and so forth—all these features are themselves mere pretexts for the rewriting operation and for securing the effect of astonishment or conviction appropriate to the registering of a paradigm shift. (36)

In sum, then, Jameson theorizes that “modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category” (40). A caustic feeling of historicity itself, of living *within* history, typifies modernity, with that experience manifesting time and time again, in modernist discourses, as a rhetorical trope of dissociation. Modernity, itself “a rewriting, a powerful displacement of pervious narrative paradigms,” (Jameson 35) in sum is evident in the modern’s own claim to modernity. The modernist condition requires *a priori* some separate site, an outside-of-modernity—often “rewritten” within primitivist or regionalist frameworks—against which to narrate its own unique position as modern.

Listeners of early jazz music typically conducted their own Jamesonian “rewriting operations” along these lines by positing that the music expressed the essential and intrinsic qualities of black musicians in opposition to white-coded ‘art music.’ Daniel Stein describes a transatlantic debate over jazz which aimed “to gain discursive control over a music that expressed difficult notions of black agency, artistry, and racial affirmation as a time when socio-political and musical changes were occurring.” These discourses, which Stein traces in-depth in the writings of Belgian jazz enthusiast and Armstrong biographer Robert Goffin, follow a long Francophone tradition of colonial anthropology concerned with the “noble savage” archetype (c.f. de Montaigne, Rousseau, Apollinaire). The jazz writings of Goffin and other critics often served an ethnocentric (specifically Eurocentric) agenda of cultural imperialism, working “to distinguish between a culturally superior self-interested in the sonic productions of the primitive Other” (Stein). The writings of Hugues Panassié have been similarly discussed as voicing a primitivist conception of jazz (Perchar). In primitivist discourses of jazz, Stein explains, “black Americans are celebrated as a lowly but spellbinding people whose allegedly uninhibited and primeval spirituality can be embraced as a cure against feelings of modern alienation and fragmentation.” These organicist ideas of how musical sounds reflected the intrinsic qualities of so-called primitive peoples motivated “essentialist assumptions about the racial roots of jazz” (Stein).

As an apparently primitive art form, jazz was simultaneously valued and devalued. Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen’s modernist novel *Quicksand* (1928), employs these primitivist discourses when she hears jazz music for the first time and perceives it as an essentially biological phenomenon of black people. For the character Helga, the band and their audience formed “a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic”



(54-5). While listening to “the joyous, wild, murky orchestra,” Helga is *transported* (in more than one sense):

And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jungle [ . . . ] the savage strains of music [ . . . ]. (54)

Larsen's impression of jazz's “savage strains” is unremarkable for its time: the undulation between the themes of primitivism and modernity, scholars of the Jazz Age have shown, characterize modernist performance in diverse contexts. As John Gennari explains, in the early twentieth century, jazz held status “not as a modernist art *itself*, but as primitivist fodder—as Dionysian instinct, passion, emotions, subconscious impulse—for the ‘true’ modernists” (465). To Robert Goffin's ears, the sound of Armstrong's traditional jazz carried no less than “the primitive cry of the New Orleans blacks” (201). In *Stony the Road* (2019), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that during the Harlem Renaissance, the primitivist fiction of Africa shaped assessments of the twentieth-century New Negro on both sides of the color line:

For many of these black artists, Africa was not a place or a source of formal inspiration; it was at best a theme, at worst a fad. No one indirectly or otherwise actually became African. Most African Americans, unfortunately, thought of Africa in the same terms as white Americans did. Duke Ellington's name for his original jazz band was the Jungle Band; there was the famous Jungle Alley in Harlem, [ . . . ] Josephine Baker played an African prince living in the jungle . . . (227-28)

Associated with body rather than the mind, with the appetite rather than the intellect, early jazz represented to many modern audiences a compelling yet always culturally subordinated new musical form. It is indeed against this dismissal of jazz as mindless dance music that bebop in its characteristic way delves further into psychic introversion and aesthetic autonomy. Still today, the popular music commentariat in the United States downplays artistic discipline when

appraising the talent of black musicians, viewing such talent instead as untutored, intuitive outpouring (Brothers 10). But as Helga's interior observations show, early jazz evoked in listeners a vaguely African geography as well.

Larsen's passage in *Quicksand*, in which Helga repeatedly invokes the "jungle" as a biophysical origin for jazz, reminds us that primitivist discourses of the modern period relied not only upon the ideologies of racial essentialism, but as well upon symbolically laden references to geography. Geographic referentiality played a discursive role in the touring and recording industry's marketing of Afro-racialism as well. Conveying a localized or regional provenance for the music, 1920s jazz bands such as The New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Ladd's Black Aces, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers, and 1920s jazz clubs like the Plantation in Chicago, marketed their music as not only black but authentically so. To listeners of the upper South and Midwest, these names carried an exotic appeal. Similarly enticing the Danish press in 1933, Armstrong toured and recorded on film as "Louis Armstrong and his Hot Harlem Band." To the Danes, Harlem carried that exotic appeal. Later, in 1947, Armstrong would sing for New York audiences "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?," again signifying the listeners' distance from an elsewhere, and transfiguring his music as a window into that elsewhere. This maneuver, common to the examples cited above, caters to the dissociative impulse Jameson describes in observers self-regarded as modern, presenting audiences with a romantic region *beyond* them, so that a certain symbolic distance—measured geographically and culturally—is continually maintained.

Self-affiliation with mythologized settings like the American South maintains this kind of geocultural distancing. Clearly, for Armstrong's audience of jazz-hungry New Yorkers, few regions carried such symbolic weight as the American South. Financially and technologically

underdeveloped, the South in general appeared to national audiences as a source of cultural verve and exotic charm, a site deeply invested in popular culture with both a romantic infatuation with premodernity, and with racist disdain. Many of the modern period's most compelling and beautiful sounds had emerged from the multi-ethnic southern milieu. Elaborate and sophisticated styles of black musical expression especially, such as "hot" rhythm<sup>93</sup> and ragged rhythm, influenced the South's formation as the geographical nexus of blues, jazz, the country blues, and western swing. All these revolutionary forms emerged in towns and cities from Texas and Oklahoma eastward through Appalachia, the cotton states, and the river Delta (Oliver 5-39; Bayles 24-30).

The resource-yielding peripheries of the national economy were doubly cornucopian insofar as they yielded both the raw materials of industry and of 'authentic' musical culture. Northern audiences' fascination with the plantation capers of blackface minstrelsy in the mid-nineteenth century is an earlier echo of this pattern of northern consumption of southern materials. Thus it is reasonable to conceive of the post-Civil War South as not only an internal resource colony, rich with mineral and agricultural potential as well as cheap labor, but as a musical resource base as well. Here, Gennari's historical description of jazz's early cultural status as "primitivist fodder" (465) for the 'true' modernist revolution in the arts is a telling sign of how the national mainstream economy routinely extracted economic and artistic labor, as if raw material for accumulation, from the American South under interwoven projects of racial and regional subordination.

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<sup>93</sup> "Hot rhythm" was an early colloquial term for the tremendously influential, bouncing rhythms common to twentieth-century black American musical styles, especially blues, jazz, and ragtime. Underscoring its musical complexity, D. K. Wilgus locates "hot rhythm" in "syncopations and polyrhythms characteristic of American Negro Music" (*Anglo-American* 433). For an in-depth discussion, see Ronald Radano's writings on "black rhythm."

Like the country music of Merle Travis, Armstrong's jazz is indirectly shaped in its production, circulation, and reception by ideologies about the racial essence of migrants. Regional appeals to the South in popular music would have been ambiguous with multiple social and cultural resonances carrying both positive and negative values. During and following the First World War, the South was powerfully changed by interregional contact, while this contact renewed throughout the interwar period a national interest in southern regionalism. The eastern and northern parts of the United States flooded with refugees in the first several decades of the twentieth century, as poor and working families displaced by economic depression, overproduction, underemployment, and bankruptcies, moved in vast migrations from south to north, and from rural to urban zones. Modern rail and automobile travel sped on and made more immediately visible the social differentiation of Americans from different backgrounds.

Acknowledging the fractured and contested nature of U.S. public life during the Depression, Carl Sandburg lamented in 1936:

Said the scorpion of hate: The poor hate the rich. The rich hate the poor. The south hates the north. The west hates the east. The workers hate their bosses. The bosses hate their workers. The country hates the towns. The towns hate the country. We are a house divided against itself. We are millions of hands raised against each other. We are united in but one aim—getting the dollar. And when we get the dollar we employ it to get more dollars. (480)

In this long single poetic line, Sandburg catalogues the many social fissures that boiled beneath modern public life. American modernity, by nature of its constituent processes of urbanization, economic stratification, and the scientific management of workers, bred powerful feelings of sectionalism within a presumably shared mass culture. Sandburg here also weaves together regional enmities—"The south hates the north. The west hates the east"—as the very twin of class enmity, and as part of a single, shared fabric of social alienation.

International immigration to the United States is a crucial and conspicuous historical force factoring in social change in the twentieth century. But as Sandburg's account of U.S. regional sectionalism indicates, modern America's crises of internal migration—typified by the Great Migration of six million black southerners and by the multiple waves of economic and ecological refugees fleeing Appalachia—also upended American public life, and sometimes enflamed ethnic divisions. As Wager, Obermiller, and Tucker note in the eye-opening anthology *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*:

Appalachians were only one of the identifiable groups among the millions of rural migrants: southern black and white sharecroppers, Mexican Americans from the southwestern states, and Puerto Ricans flooded American cities in hopes of a better life. [ . . . They] struggled to obtain housing, employment, and an education for their children and encountered various forms of prejudice and discrimination.  
(xiii)

Declining environmental sovereignty among rural people, who emigrated to where food and work (i.e., “the dollar”) were available, underlaid, more than is commonly supposed, modern alienation. As verified by the broad 1940s appeal of revivalist New Orleans jazz and country music, regionally-affiliated sounds courted the two sides of regional retrospection: the *Weltschmerz* of the homesick and the diverting, exotic gaze of northerners tired with a life of striving.

In a real sense, then, the popular commercial records which appeared in the twenties, thirties, and forties serve as a sonic record of U.S. internal migration. These recordings, like so many classics of American literary modernism—for example, *Sister Carrie*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Winesburg, Ohio*—document a nation on the move. The numerical weight of northern spending—leisure expeditions on jazz-throbbing steamers on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; sales of Jelly Roll Morton and Hank Williams records in Chicago and New York; ticket sales at Armstrong's concert hall performances; etc.—constitute fossilized evidence of the period's

widespread interest in the American South's varied and distinctive musicality. Sound recording companies during these decades plied demographic and social boundaries in their marketing efforts, their "commercial construction of racialized genres" (Manuel 418) reflecting racially segregated music markets and music genres oriented around local regions. In terms of major populations, jazz and blues "race" records of the 1920s were mainly marketed to black Americans concentrated in the greater Piedmont, while country "hillbilly" records were aimed at southern whites and Appalachians. Popular jazz and country of the 1940s, growing out of this nest of racism, deserve scholarly attention because they enrich our historical understanding of American modernity itself as a "house divided" (Sandburg 480). Further studies in the field of modernism could fruitfully examine sonic texts as cultural forms through which entertainment firms both monetize and reinforce the fractures, racial and otherwise, in American society; further work along these lines could help to contextualize the leverage and latitude of individual artists and artworks within such institutions as publishing houses, record labels, radio stations, and theaters.

By the 1940s, with regionalism remaining a major cultural impulse, a more nostalgic tone predominated much of mass culture and what has been termed "late modernism." The Depression tempered 1920s optimism and the more Promethean strains of high modernism. Mass culture after a decade of economic constriction and a second World War—as exemplified by such Hollywood films as *New Orleans* (1947), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and Disney's *Bambi* (1942) and *Song of the South* (1946)—turned inward, "fascinated by tales of the Deep South" (Nevers and Davrichewi) as a portal into the past. Post-Depression films such as these illustrate the bond between regionalism and retrospection in late modernist culture. They also suggest the racist character of so much of popular culture. Following decades of internal and

external migration upending American life, cascading global events—famines, genocidal Nazism, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—dealt further shocks against American ideologies of modernity and progress. Reason suggests that in a “house divided” (Sandburg 480), an art product’s *cohesion* acquires bolstered cultural value.

Northern audiences in particular sought in Armstrong’s New Orleans jazz revival a certain cultural legitimacy and artistic cohesion of artist and art. New Orleans enjoyed status as an exotic city following the notoriety of brass improvisers Buddy Bolden and Louis Armstrong. Fred Robbins and Ernest Anderson, producers of *Town Hall Concert*, promoted Armstrong’s performances there and at Carnegie Hall as “A Midnight Variety Concert,” evoking a familiar motif—the nocturnal reveries of smoke-filled Storyville jazz clubs—and a return to Armstrong’s earlier band format. What made Armstrong’s new band distinct was its small size, dynamism, and the prominent role its leader, Armstrong, played. Implicit in the concert’s draw was the promise of hearing a stripped-back, and more apparently “roots” incarnation of Armstrong—a sharp break from the “sclerosis” of dinosaur swing orchestras (Nevers and Davrichewi). Among the setlist included songs which announced their geographic departure from the national pop repertoire of swing jazz: “Dear Old Southland,” “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue,” “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” and “Muskrat Ramble.” That Louis’ postwar commercial persona is partially pastoralized,<sup>94</sup> despite his urban and the cosmopolitan mobility of his career, suggest how integral rural imagery was for modern audiences in locating certain forms of racial and cultural authenticity.

As the previous chapter showed, Armstrong’s legacy is embedded mainly in narratives of urban popular modernism, the Jazz Age, the Harlem Renaissance, and international jazz music.

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<sup>94</sup> The very same year, Armstrong had appeared in the film *New Orleans*.

Somewhat against the weight of this critical tradition, I advance here a competing interpretation which views Armstrong instead as a regional modernist and globalizer of a musical pluralism peculiar to the American South. This chapter proposes that geographic mobility and the regional differences it makes visible are defining features of Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* and integral to the commercial appeal it makes to national audiences in the 1940s. If Armstrong's New Orleans revivalist jazz appeared to offer escape from aspects of modern life, then among those aspects of modernity is its geographically flattening effect of overwriting of local custom with national and international projects of socioeconomic development: these projects include mass culture's challenge to local entertainment cultures such as New Orleans' early jazz scene, and highlight the profoundly ambivalent feelings of a country undergoing change. In a Jamesonian process of self-narration founded upon the experience of dissociation, modern self-superiority and feelings of modernist alienation could be acted out in imagined primitive locations which represent not so much a real location, but the past.

In *Town Hall Concert*, Armstrong evokes southern, pastoral environments to a primarily working and middle-class audience<sup>95</sup> who lived in the heart of U.S. industrial-financial modernity: New York City. New Orleans, a prominent hub for the African slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, still maintains an African cultural reputation, becoming a focal point for the U.S. national culture's ideas of primitiveness and authenticity long into the Jazz Age, the legendary setting of Buddy Bolden and young Louis Armstrong. Here one of Armstrong's roles is as a regional mediator whose performance emphasizes the contrast between the performance's setting, in a New York concert hall, and its pastoral and southern themes. The gulf separating Armstrong's urban setting and rural themes underscores Jameson's conception of

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<sup>95</sup> The lowest-priced seats at Armstrong's May 17th Town Hall Concert were \$2.40 (Nevers and Davrichewi)



modernism as a dissociative trope which concerns itself with the narration of some historical break.

It is an interesting development that, because he is linked so intimately with the original Dixieland sound, and because he influenced so many different kinds of jazz musicians (Jones and Chilton 33-9), Armstrong is not always readily seen as a regional artist. Perhaps the 'New Orleans jazz' seems too confining as a label for Armstrong's wide-ranging, transformative musical accomplishments. Respected jazz historian-musician Richard Hadlock, in his entry on the New Orleans revival in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (2000), paints an impressively detailed picture of the revival as it occurred variously in Chicago, New York, California, and Australia through the efforts of: various late 1930s outfits under Fats Waller, Louis Prima, and Wingy Malone, who were asked to record Dixieland music for Victor RCA records; perceptive big band leaders such as Bob Crosby and Tommy Dorsey who emulated traditional jazz styles; and numerous forgotten jazz players such as Bunk Johnson and the Dukes of Dixieland, a black New Orleans group who formed in 1948. Hadlock demonstrates that by 1939 New Orleans jazz was "making a solid comeback" (309) that would become a full-blown craze for traditional jazz by the 1950s. In this overview, however, Hadlock characterizes Armstrong as only a minor player in the revival itself:

The demand for Dixieland and New Orleans jazz from the late-forties on was sufficient to grab the attention of notable swing soloists. Some, like Jimmy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Buster Bailey, Jack Teagarden, Red Allen, Barney Bigard, and Edmond Hall, drew upon their formative years recalling the New Orleans sounds of the twenties. Others . . . had to teach themselves the old Dixieland routines. (314)

Assuredly, Armstrong did not single-handedly coordinate the popular revival of New Orleans jazz. As Armstrong himself recognized, the tide was turning, and a public appetite for the 'original jazz' was growing before he formed his own revivalist band in the All-Stars. Armstrong

did not invent a jazz revival, but rather responded to major forces which made such a thing practical. In a way, the decision was halfway made for him:

Ever since the film *New Orleans* [ . . . ] had featured Louis in traditionally instrumented small group settings, there had been rumors about him reclaiming, so to speak, his musical heritage. The time, and the portents, looked right. A New Orleans Revival was under way, bop was on the march, and boom days for swing outfits were definitely over. (Jones & Chilton 170)

But given the magnitude of Armstrong's influence, Hadlock's account in the authoritative *Oxford Companion to Jazz* unduly downplays his role in the 1940s revival of traditional jazz.

Armstrong's 1947 turn to small-group performance—when he was convinced to play a concert with a small band before a packed house of 1,500 New Yorkers—actually precedes the formation of The Dukes of Dixieland as a watershed moment Hadlock does not mention here.

Against Hadlock's account I mean to suggest that the *Town Hall Concert* performance is as good as any other instance to designate as the moment when the New Orleans revival became "official." With Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* marking the momentous formation of the All-Stars, a style of jazz that had reigned supreme twenty years earlier, in part through the sheer power of Armstrong's name recognition, once again became a dominant pop form.

Louis Armstrong's postwar shift to small performance marked the popular invention of a cohesive New Orleans jazz style, retrospectively trained on the deep South. This revivalist jazz mode, for which I argue *Town Hall Concert* (1947) represents a popular genesis, stands firmly apart from both the heavily Europeanized orchestral jazz music of swing giants like Paul Whiteman and from the radical musical heterodoxy of bebop jazz. Its popular appeal, this study argues, owes in part to the fluency of its regionalist appeal, in a nostalgic postwar cultural moment. Armstrong's example as a popular innovator in the previous decades as a musician who blended traditional melodic lines with improvised solos, encouraged an already-prevailing sense

of sonic experimentation among jazz musicians. “Without intending to do so,” Jim Merod writes, “Armstrong pointed a way out of the rabbit hole in which music in the first decades of the twentieth century was snugly enclosed, mostly as danceable entertainment, and only that, a diversion within the orderly world of labor’s anxiety and capital’s boredom” (168). The 1920s jazz revolution, in which Armstrong had played such a major role, only increased in pace. Other, younger artists were following Armstrong’s lead in expanding jazz music’s stylistic contours, until the music that grew from New Orleans jazz began to take many forms. Even swing jazz, in which Armstrong was increasingly immersed, was losing its chart dominance in part as a result of material shortages in shellac, in rubber, and in personnel, all owing to World War II. Swing’s heyday since 1930 was at last coming to its end.

This development pleased Armstrong, since by 1945 he was far himself from his New Orleans roots, playing jazz in concert halls among other stars like Cab Calloway and Benny Goodman. Records indicate that beginning in the 1940s, Louis began reacting sourly to what he viewed as jazz’s excesses, along with a rising sense of nostalgia for the musical culture of New Orleans from which jazz itself had derived. Jazz’s later historical developments, namely the formally progressive, avant-garde compositions of bebop jazz, and even the detailed ensemble arrangements played by swing orchestras, increasingly looked like artifice. Contemporary publicists declared that Armstrong “felt the occasional pang of regret for the small Chicago outfits of earlier years that in spirit could convey back to New Orleans and the very beginnings of jazz” (Nevers and Davrichewi). Often, such as in his 1954 memoir, Armstrong reminisced about youthful evenings singing on the banks of the Mississippi with his friends. Armstrong’s music therefore began, in the postwar years, to reflect this retrospective orientation and conscious effort to return to cultural roots. Armstrong had reason to believe that shifts in

consumer preferences were taking place which favored a more stripped-back, spontaneous sound. He increasingly booked small-group engagements after a wildly successful concert in February 1947 with a tiny Dixieland jazz outfit led by New Orleans clarinetist Edmond Hall. After appearing in the Hollywood film *New Orleans* (1946) along with other musicians including Billie Holiday, Armstrong agreed to tour once more in smaller ensembles on the dance hall circuit, leading to an ad hoc sold-out May 17 concert in New York which would dramatically alter his career.

It was fortunate for Armstrong that nostalgia works indirectly and often involves amnesia. Though in the postwar years Louis' "All Stars" band was playing music "entirely different from anything they played during the 20s" (Panassié 121), their emphasis on small group collective improvisation plausibly invoked the sounds of black New Orleans to northern audiences. The response was euphoric: "The public screamed for more; and in doing so signed the death-warrant of Louis' big band" (Nevers and Davrichewi). Given the greater cost for salary and transport imposed by maintaining the full band, and in light of Armstrong's commercial success with Dixieland bands, Armstrong's manager Joe Glaser was "delighted" by the prospect of financing only a small group to back the trumpeter (Nevers and Davrichewi). A show put on in very short notice, and recorded with overheating machines, the May 17, 1947 Town Hall Concert was an incredible success, giving Town Hall (in Fred Robbins' words) its "biggest SRO sell-out recent years on six days' notice" and receiving largely "ecstatic" reviews (Jones & Chilton 172). The momentous evening in fact led to the official formation of the six-piece "All Stars," in which Armstrong would perform for the rest of his life securing their commercial future as a band.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to acknowledge the significance of this shift to small-group performance in the postwar years, after Armstrong had played primarily in big bands since the early 1920s. Of course this decision reflected stark economic necessities: most of the big swing orchestras disbanded in the postwar years due to the economic recessions of 1945 and 1949. As national spending declined, and unemployment increased, musical opportunities shrank, and the dance halls and cabarets which the U.S. federal government increasingly taxed during the war shuttered, making the already onerous cost of maintaining a big band almost Herculean. Yet there too are questions of cultural authority in this postwar debate over jazz's future. Did it lay in the alien, vibrating futures posited by radio-unfriendly bebop artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonius Monk? Or rather in a renewal of swing jazz's past roots in the ragtime and Dixieland traditions of New Orleans, a scene where Armstrong towered?

Armstrong's commercial triumph in the mid-century, alongside the relative market failures of bebop jazz, are suggestive of whose vision of jazz was more broadly appealing to most Americans. The eclipse of the old Dixieland jazz outfits by larger, more professionalized swing bands led, over time, to a renewed valuation of the old style, and traditional jazz began to garner high-profile attention in the interwar years. A mounting ethnographic interest in distinguishing real jazz from fake jazz in the 1930s was led by Hugues Panassié, whose second jazz history, *The Real Jazz* (1942) criticized the popular playing of jazzmen like Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman and urged a return to 'pure' New Orleans style. Panassié and others "seemed to agree, Rousseau-like, that white musicians [ . . . ] had little chance of playing 'real' jazz," while the most authentic jazz music was being played by black New Orleans players (Hadlock 307). Jazz scholarship and research grew alongside record collecting during the Depression as more and more jazz societies formed themselves around the steady recovery of rare 1920s records. The

1930s and 1940s saw a mounting contest to locate authenticity in the jazz scene. Two influential works appeared in 1936 when French scholar Charles Delaunay published the first *Hot Discography* and English scholar Hilton R. Schleman published *Rhythm on Record*, a pioneering work of discography. These ideas proliferated throughout the next decade, with critic Rudi Blesh, in *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (1946), “reinforc[ing] Mezzrow and Panassié’s Noble Savage views and condemn[ing] Charlie Parker and other modernists as non-jazz musicians” (Hadlock 310). Years of ascendant interest in record collecting also prompted record labels, discovering renewed interest in traditional jazz, to revive discarded New Orleans stars, bringing Jelly Roll Morton out of retirement. The same forces likely led Panassié to organize his own recordings of “true” jazz in the Dixieland style.

Armstrong, who received Panassié’s praise as an authentic jazz musician, and who regarded bebop as unmusical nonsense, deriding it as “Chinese music,” also saw in traditional New Orleans jazz a coherent identity for the agitated jazz scene.<sup>96</sup> *Armstrong had tired of the big band circuits and did clearly not consider bebop to be jazz, as he stated publicly* (Panassié 51). As if tempering jazz’s careening trajectories—into late swing jazz, Broadway theater, and gypsy jazz in the 1930s; into bebop or “modern jazz,” heavily arranged big band jazz, and early R&B in the 1940s—Armstrong in the postwar years famously returned to his New Orleans roots, invoking his home city as the origin of jazz itself. In Armstrong’s geospecific messaging, mass audiences could access the dimly-imagined culture of New Orleans, and accept it as an anchor for a jazz genre which had splintered into many modernist shards. They could at least imagine

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<sup>96</sup> Of course swing and bebop jazz exist on a shared continuum, and should not be treated as discrete categories of musical expression. Late swing especially, as exemplified by Coleman Hawkins, was already pioneering the basic techniques of bebop (see Scott DeVeaux’s *The Birth of Bebop for more*). Furthermore, *Armstrong himself had been a key influencer of bebop, with his virtuosic style of trumpet playing in the twenties, thirties, and forties sometimes employing great speed and virtuosity. Finally, these debates are exaggerated in the literature since it made business sense for recording and touring celebrities to garner publicity by clashing over musical tastes in interviews and writings.*

that they could hear southern gospel, plantation spirituals, brass and drum marches, rags, cakewalks, two-steps, the Delta blues, the French quadrille, the beguine dance song, and even West African folk principles, in Louis' "All Stars" band. Nevers and Davrichewi explain that

public taste and Armstrong's personal musical preferences now happily concurred. Audiences had been wearied by the long war years and by the increasing sclerosis of swing orchestras. Moreover, the eruption of the young, iconoclastic bebop movement [ . . . ] helped precipitate a mood of change.

Armstrong's strategy in these years was to capitalize on this "mood of change" to stage what now appears as a modernist resuscitation of a 1920s jazz form—a form associated with the deep South and the nation's past—in a nation dismayed by its more recent history: a second, larger world war, massive migrations, and a growing state bureaucracy. Indeed we might interpret *both* the advent of bebop jazz *and* Armstrong's New Orleans jazz revival as expressions of a shared aspiration for musical change, with one seeking change by progressing into a new stage, and the other seeking change through tradition and classical rebirth. Armstrong's revivalist jazz suggests a modernist attention to tradition and innovation that would be familiar even to modernists like Eliot who were more hostile to popular culture. Organizing his own aesthetic innovation under a retrospective program, Armstrong built a revivalist jazz style, in opposition to the bop avant-garde, around signifiers of New Orleans and the greater plantation South, itself symbolic of the national past.

Armstrong's appeal to authenticity in his 1940s music rested not only on his reputation, but as well upon the heightened presence in his performance of his home region. In contrast to the painfully immediate reality<sup>97</sup> of the physical South, the musical South conjured by Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* is diffuse: while Armstrong's presence evokes vaguely the

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<sup>97</sup> For black southerners, riverboats and Jim Crow South ultimately were something to escape. The migration of black artists to northern cities should be viewed retrospectively as an act of relocative agency (Kenney 87).

Storyville district of New Orleans, *Town Hall Concert* is rather more expressive of the region as a *Gestalt*. The vibrancy and widely captivating appeal of Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* incorporates the energies of the music which emerged in the river jazz culture of New Orleans and St. Louis—what Gerald Early calls “the Black Heartland.” Armstrong's creative musical expression is specific to the social and environmental history of modern New Orleans and the urban river delta, even as it takes part in the national imagination's trafficking in southern symbolism. Armstrong makes music a Mississippi itself, a meeting place and zone of cultural interchange—a site where modern ears find the pleasure of difference and defamiliarization, and where local musical practices remain legible. The stylistically rounded jazz idiom of *Town Hall Concert*, like the musical environment of New Orleans, reflects the mutual influence of multiple styles (including shouts, chants, ballads, blues, field hollers, work songs, spirituals, hymns, Caribbean and European dance tunes) and having been informally deemed “trad jazz,” remains what most people would call the original jazz sound.

Like Travis' *Folk Songs of the Hills*, Armstrong's record tells northerners (many of whom being, we must remember, themselves displaced southerners) tales of the south. An unlikely pair, the recordings resemble one another in their territorializing projects. Their regional performances speak to large displaced listenerships. They also rely in part on restrictive and disparaging identity archetypes derived from stereotypes about southern migrants, placing them in a lineage of American entertainment modes stemming from minstrel and vaudeville stages. Indeed, technological changes do not wholly explain the emergence of popular jazz and country from the blues; the other vital aspect of the modern pop song's history concerns performance style. The stage and studio charisma deployed by Armstrong and Travis are modern in the broader historical sense, reflecting the already-commodified nineteenth-century musical cultures



of blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville and medicine shows, and popular songs. As will be seen too in the case of Travis, it is *region* which provides a thematic context and performative apparatus for humanizing popular music, which by the 1940s had been thoroughly depersonalized. Jazz's global spread from its origins in the American South, its transformation into orchestral swing, Armstrong's own transition into larger concert halls, and the successive forms of mechanical reproduction which administered this jazz to audiences—radio broadcasting, shellac record discs, and cinema—had continued the processes of mechanization begun in the nineteenth century. By centralizing the performer as an authentic regional product, modernists like Armstrong humanize decreasingly human musical genres.

Given this, Armstrong's distinguished career traverses the fault lines of his era's racial politics. He is one of the earliest black performers to 'break through' the color barrier in pop music. From the beginning, Armstrong negotiated an inhibitive professional environment. Riverboat minstrel entertainment customs of the 1910s deep South conditioned Armstrong's musical output in important ways that be later echoed in Armstrong's film appearances.<sup>98</sup> "One of the greatest musicians our country has ever produced," Brothers writes, ". . . was trapped by racist ideology that was imposed not only through official government channels, but also through the marketplace" (Brothers 448). The writings of Armstrong's biographers and critics frequently relied on assertions of the trumpeter's racial essence and his territorial origin. While Pablo Picasso's sculptures were celebrated as artistic works of primitivist modernism, Armstrong (like his notable contemporary Duke Ellington) was celebrated as *himself* a primitivist performer (Merod; Gannari; Brothers; Stein). Essentialist cultural logic typifies the writings of such

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<sup>98</sup> Belittled by "savage imagery" (Brothers 448), Armstrong is the subject of racist stereotypes in cartoon films such as "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You." In live motion pictures, Armstrong appears as a chicken-thief in *Pennies From Heaven* (1936), as a street cleaner in *Every Day's a Holiday* (1937), and as a farmhand in *Sleepy Time Down South* (1942).

prominent Armstrong celebrants as Robert Goffin and Hugues Panassié, in whose work “what appear to be terms of praise in fact reduce playing jazz to purely kinetic, noncerebral, or nonrational activity” (Lemke 93). The powerful associations between race and culture which predominated in the interwar period always qualified Armstrong’s talent as compelling but unsophisticated: “Few white people who admired Armstrong in the 1930s were prepared to discover in him the kind of artistic discipline that we associate with Stravinsky, and even the Beatles” (Brothers 10-11). What they believed they saw was a gifted, nonrational entertainer.

On the contrary, Armstrong’s callbacks to Jim Crow-era jazz performance represented to many of his contemporaries an unforgivable accommodation to the demands of white audiences. Despite Armstrong’s popular successes in spite of the Jim Crow music scene, his iconic mode of revivalist jazz, and in particular his “performative engagement with American discourses of blackface minstrelsy,” subsequently faced censure for its “allegedly reactionary stance” (Stein). Scholarly biographers have at length documented in Armstrong’s distinctive performance style the “visual images, sonic signifiers and verbal depictions of black culture that nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy had bestowed on American popular culture” (Stein). By the midcentury Armstrong’s commitment to the cause of civil rights was questioned by progressive activists and jazz musicians uncomfortable with Armstrong’s mugging and stage-clowning, such as Dizzy Gillespie who in 1956 famously faulted Armstrong for his alleged “Uncle Tom-like subservience.” Both “the intensity of primitivist assumptions and Armstrong’s willingness to accommodate that kind of image” (Brothers 451)—Armstrong had special talent, after all, as a “self-conscious primitivist and great actor” (Appel 126)—have made such accusations easy.

Yet the picture is very complicated. While Armstrong was intensely racialized as a performer, assessed for his primitive authenticity, he also seized on this cultural vocabulary of

authenticity in a way that solidified his artistic agency within the U.S.' racially conditioned culture. Acknowledging the important role of plantation imagery and southern black signifiers in Armstrong's performance style (438), Brothers reaches the crucial dialectical perception that "Armstrong played the naïve Negro, as whites expected him to. But a genuine historical appreciation of his accomplishment exposes a formidable intellect totally absorbed in music" (10). Armstrong *interpreted* received elements of minstrel entertainment, rather than submit to them, and in many contemporary accounts, overcomes racist traps through his own form of radical openness (Merod 218). In adopting, and redeploying for his own ends, the discursive rudiments of southern American minstrelsy, Armstrong echoes a radical process of aesthetic agency Asiminia Ino Nikolopoulo ascribes to another Jazz Age performer, Josephine Baker. Nikolopoulo asserts that black spokespersons and performers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the public figures of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Baker herself, "simultaneously mastered the form and deformed the mastery of white hegemony" through strategic appropriations and modifications of Anglo-American culture (158). Armstrong remains "an anomalous creative willpower, absorbing strength and inspiration from an essentially hostile environment" (Merod 196). Since its inception, jazz music had been assessed among critics and audiences for its racial authenticity. In a maneuver that remains impressive in retrospect, Armstrong makes himself an author of that sought-after authentic quality.

The instrument best suited to accomplish Armstrong's revival of cultural coherence, and return to geographic roots, was not the trumpet, but instead the human personality. Callbacks to American minstrel entertainment would have conveyed both a nostalgic and southern-flavored experience to northern audiences. In the *Town Hall Concert*, Armstrong's frivolity and informality rupture the staid and sober atmosphere of the classical concert hall with a

romanticism all the more engrossing for its relaxedness. In “Back o’ Town Blues” for instance, Louis elicits a roar of laughter by barking “Shut up, boy!” into the microphone, thus silencing an unruly background singer whose responses have begun to intrude on his vocal lines. These stage tricks, which bring to life Armstrong’s “unique musical personality” (Bromberg) express an individual exuberance that is associated—in part through Armstrong’s own unique legacy—in general with the deep South and in particular the vital city of New Orleans. A remarkable quality of *Town Hall Concert* is that Armstrong appears sonically and visually central not only as bandleader, but as the band’s very stylistic center, imposing a compositional discipline and a personality upon the whole sound. Armstrong strategically courted minstrelsy, ensuring to a degree his mainstreaming in jazz’s first several decades.

Although Armstrong, like Travis, relies commercially upon often negatively raced and regionalized identities—each corresponding with the black southern migrant, and the white southern ‘hillbilly’ migrant—these identities nevertheless widely communicated an authenticity lacking in much popular music, and addressed regionally-specific ordeals imposed on southerners by modernization. Without trying to settle the evaluative debate over Armstrong’s politics, I instead emphasize how his 1940s stylistic shift has proven simultaneously legible as both a *regional turn* to New Orleans musical culture small-group polyphony and as a reactionary turn *to the past*. That Armstrong’s self-conscious association with the South ignited such dissensions within black society dramatizes the capacity of regional geography to structure the way midcentury Americans thought about past and the present, about history and time. When Armstrong sings “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” at Town Hall, crooning—

Miss them moss covered vines, the tall sugar pines,  
Where mockin’ birds used to sing.

—he enters a lineage of nostalgic American regional songs stretching from the black composer and minstrel performer James A. Bland’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” (ca. 1878)<sup>99</sup>—

There’s where the cotton and the corn and ‘tatoes grow,  
There’s where the birds warble sweet in the springtime,

—to Leadbelly’s influential 1940 blues composition “Cotton Fields”—

It was down in Louisiana, just a mile from Tex-Arkana,  
in them old cotton fields at home.

—which iconize homesickness through images of southern ecology and agriculture. Armstrong’s revivalist jazz, with the value it places in lyric memory, embodies the past-peering disposition of the southern blues traditions amid the region’s many historical dislocations. Meanwhile, the popular triumph of revivalist New Orleans jazz, its later institutionalization as art music, and Armstrong’s personal canonization as a central figure in modernism all indicate the potency of Armstrong’s regionalist project.

A critical emphasis on region broadens our appreciation of what has primarily been described as Armstrong’s international modernism. Though Armstrong took a position as an international good-will ambassador of the U.S. State Department in the 1960s, entrenching his reputation as the American global ambassador of culture, I advance a more specific appreciation of Armstrong as New Orleans’ global ambassador of culture. It turns out that Armstrong’s All-Star sextet were indeed able to approximate musical techniques Armstrong gleaned in his time in New Orleans jazz clubs and on Mississippi River steamers. The All-Stars’ disposition toward forms of creativity that had become outmoded by the mid-1940s—such as small-combo improvisation, hybrid musical styles, vaudeville-isms, and what Thomas Brothers has termed the

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<sup>99</sup> Armstrong recorded his own rendition of “Carry My Back to Ol’ Virginny” in 1937.

“fixed-and-variable model” of performance—not only informs their popular reconstruction of Dixieland jazz in 1947, but more significantly cements in the national public consciousness a particular definition of traditional American jazz.

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Merle Travis was pushed into recording Kentucky folk songs. This career pivot from “live radio” dance music, a style drawing from western swing and jazz, to solo performance of blues ballads as guitar minstrel was difficult for Travis to rationalize. He ultimately wrote and performed *Folk Songs of the Hills* not because he wanted to sing about coal camp life, but because Lee Gillette, Capitol Records A&R professional, believed that such music could be profitably produced. Though Travis had broadcasted the fingerpicking style he learned in Muhlenberg County, he was reluctant to sing and write folk songs in the blues ballad mode he also internalized there (Humphrey). The shift from a broadcast to a storage medium was likewise the idea of the record company, who hoped to duplicate Travis’ moderate successes as a live radio artist within the record disc market.<sup>100</sup>

By the 1940s the country record industry had elaborated a cultural rhetoric of authenticity, which Richard Peterson explores in *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (1999). The disruption of localized folk entertainment traditions involved both a profusion of exciting new forms of leisure and a sense of loss for what they replaced. Many country records, as reflected by the audio-visual performances of the *Grand Ole Opry* (1925-present), embody pastoralism, individualism, and masculinity, while obscuring their urban

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<sup>100</sup> It is a lasting irony that Travis’ radio song compositions (including “Sweet Temptation,” “So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed,” “Smoke, Smoke, Smoke,” “Divorce Me C.O.D.,” and “Fat Gal”) earned him most of his royalty payments, though they are largely forgotten now, while the Kentucky ballads which earned Travis almost nothing in 1947 (“Sixteen Tons,” “Nine Pound Hammer,” and “Dark as a Dungeon”) are now his most enduring works (Humphrey).

origins with rural signifiers. Commercial country music had three distinct ingredients: folk music, pop music, and modern mass media which provided the industry with the means of recording and transmitting sound. As popular music and mass media, two points in this trinity, exploded into new forms in the decades between 1925 and 1945, many listeners of commercial country reasonably began to fear the displacement and possible loss of country's third ingredient, folk music. After all, technological developments were ostensibly weakening popular country music's cultural proximity to folk traditions. With the advent of successive forms of mass media in the early decades of the century, when American music began to be played primarily by machines, rather than present human performers, music was depersonalized and severed from the act of performance. Increasingly, music became placeless, abstracted into a shared mass commodity to be transmitted independently of musicians.

This was true in Appalachia, for example, where the widespread adoption of home radio sets reshaped communal life within a generation as soap operas, music, and Sunday preaching achieved enormous popularity in the region. With the major arrival of mass culture mediums beginning in the 1920s there was a sharp decline in home musicmaking. Square dances and hoedowns, once common at Saturday night dance halls, became less so as more and more families could afford radios and record players. During the Great Depression, claims Appalachian commentator Harry M. Caudill, radio had had a "heightened effect" in the region's dispersed cabin homes, where electrically-transmitted songs, soaps, and sermons gained great popularity (213). Country music's "myth of rural innocence" (Ingram 82), materializing first in the 1920s hillbilly recording boom, lent a folk flavor to commercial records, projecting a sense of cultural legitimacy.

Capitol Records and other producers of regional music recordings therefore began to make more direct appeals based on regionalism and cultural authenticity, offering a simulated experience of authentic folk performance. In Archie Green's account, Capital Records in the mid-1940s was "a fledgling Hollywood firm, experimental and eager to explore novel trends not readily perceived in the East" (*OAM* 279). One of the major trends forming in postwar culture was a resurgent taste for regionalism in popular music. In an effort to expand their purchasing market,

Capitol deliberately aimed Travis' *Folk Songs of the Hills* not at his previous country-western fans, but rather at an enlarged 'Sandburg audience'—a group of consumers already committed to folksong on the stage or from recordings by then-popular performers: Richard Dyer-Bennett, Burl Ives, Frank Luther, John Jacob Niles, Susan Reed, Josh White. (Green *OAM* 280)

As a product intended for a newly emerging national folksong record market, Travis' album is innovative for its time. *Folk Songs of the Hills* is a significant pioneer of the concept album format, comprising one of a few early 1940s studio attempts at a record-packaging style which by the mid-1960s pervaded many popular music recording genres.

While rock concept albums of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), would surpass folk concept albums in both commercial success and popular memory, folk musicians in fact led the way by codifying this format twenty years earlier. Industry trends in the 1940s were pointing toward an audience interest in authentic music of the American countryside, as something distinct from an increasingly professionalized "country and western" music. The early folk concept albums made promises of coherence and completeness to potential buyers. Recording firms were also becoming increasingly adept at communicating a regional aesthetic in their disc sets. Green explains that shortly before the second world war, "the sound recording industry learned that it could reach new folksong



enthusiasts with race and hillbilly records by packaging three, four, or five-disc sets in stiff paper-board albums” (*OAM* 280). Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940), arguably the earliest recorded folk concept album, had demonstrated that audiences were receptive to long-form sound packages that sustain narratives, themes, and regional lore across their song cycles.

Victor Records’ hillbilly anthology *Smoky Mountain Ballads* (1941) and Capitol Records’ *Folk Songs of the Hills* (1947) should be viewed as successors to *Dust Bowl Ballads*, echoing Guthrie’s regional focus and working-class concerns while targeting “northern, intellectual auditors” (Green *OAM* 280) in a moment when folk music’s popularity was surging. As the initial installment in Capitol’s Americana series, Travis’ box set “was consciously aimed at an anticipated audience which might welcome an aural portrait of coal-mining life comparable to previous issues of sailor or cowboy lore by other firms” (Green *OAM* 280). This urban-focused strategy is clear in the album’s back cover text, transcribed here verbatim, in which Capitol makes a forthright claim to Travis’ authenticity as a producer of Kentucky folk music:

Merle Travis, now a famous recording and radio network star, returns to scenes of his boyhood in the Kentucky hills in presenting this album of authentic folk music . . . In the eight sides between these covers, Travis light-heartedly strums his guitar and sings the songs that have become traditional down in the coal mining country . . . Lyrics and music are quaint, earthy, extraordinary—reflecting both the joys and hardships of the hill folk and the philosophy that has evolved from their work and way of living. Most of the numbers—recorded for the first time—have been handed down for generations, and these the talented Travis interprets as only one born to the hills can . . . All songs comprise diverting, fascinating entertainment—and more, it is folk music that is as American as the Kentucky hills, themselves.

This manufacturer summary, which assures potential buyers of the album’s authenticity, appears fittingly upon a hand-painted backdrop of a worn wooden plank. The presentation of the music is almost ethnographic. Here Capitol employs familiar primitivist conceptions of Travis’ talent as raw, untutored artistic prowess. It is not professionally rehearsed but “quaint,” not studio-

produced but “earthy.” The songs, correspondingly, are presented as unique to Kentucky coal communities and expressive of their essential nature. They present a cultural curiosity; through them, a popular country music audience might access a genuine taste of American folk music. And in the minor details too, Capitol producers bend the truth about Travis’ songs. First, Travis never “strums” on the recordings, instead plucking the strings, or arpeggiating tonic chords as ringing flourishes to begin or end songs. Second, a full half of the songs included on *Folk Songs of the Hills* are newly composed by Travis, this could not possibly “have become traditional down in the coal mining country.” Though the record label claims that these songs are “of the hills,” half are originals Merle penned in his travels far from home.

But what does it mean for songs to be “of the hills”? Capitol Records’ presentation of Travis’ session recordings appeals to a primitivist commercial logic echoing the primitivist concerns of Jazz Age modernism. Here are a set of regional marketing discourses, co-elaborated by Travis and Gillette to target what Capitol Records perceived as a burgeoning mainstream market for authentic American folk music. A shared vocabulary of ethnic essentialism appears when Capitol assures purchasers that Travis’ songs “have been handed down for generations, and these the talented Travis interprets as only one born to the hills can.” Being “of the hills” implies an isolation from the world of modern comfort and striving, as well as a racial character. Marketed as a regional commodity, Travis’ “album of authentic folk music” stands ostensibly outside of (and thus remains uncontaminated by) the modern country music industry. Geography and spatial differentiation, as seen in the early reception of jazz, plays a part in the psychology of primitivist modernism: employing the metaphor of regional journeying, Sieglinde Lemke argues that “the desire to abandon civilization and its discontents leads the weary Westerner to embark on imaginary journeys” (28). Celebrated on the album’s reverse cover as “diverting, fascinating

entertainment,” *Folk Songs of the Hills* promises modern listeners precisely this kind of escapist journey. Its auditor is invited not merely to rural Kentucky, but to an even remoter setting within: a coal camp from “the scenes of [Travis’] boyhood.” Their creation of a Kentucky folk-pop record set distinguishes Gillette and Travis as cultural movers further intensifying country music’s marketing discourses of authenticity.

Despite the album’s general commercial failure, Capitol Records’ strategy to appeal to urbanites succeeded. *Folk Songs of the Hills* “registered its greatest sales in New York” (Green *OAM* 280) and educated folk music enthusiasts across the nation took notice of Travis. Alan Lomax promoted these recordings, playing the full album set on his 1948 Mutual Network radio series “Your Ballad Man.” Travis’ originals “Dark as a Dungeon” and “Sixteen Tons” gradually became a standard in American folksong repertoires. Under Capitol Record’s direction, Travis found himself at the vanguard of the popular folksong record industry at the moment of its mainstream commercial emergence. “This acceptance,” deems Green, “indicates how broadly defined the term *folksong* had become in the New Deal and postwar period” (*OAM* 291). Indeed, more and more, the “folk” label could be employed to music, especially rural, that appeared to stand outside of pop.

*Folk Songs of the Hills* succeeded (in the long term) in rendering forth a regional asset for national auditors. The authenticity claim made by Capitol Records, probably due to the sheer candor of Travis’ performance, was powerfully effective. In fact, Travis may have done too well to craft songs of apparently folk origin, leading to a series of intellectual property issues that left Travis without some of his composer royalties. There was to many ears something authentic about *Folk Songs of the Hills*. The commercial country record *Folk Songs of the Hills* could even be mistaken by scholars as traditional folk music. Folklorist Ben Botkin, who likened Travis’

spoken song introductions to a category of folk expression he had previously termed “folksay” (qtd. Green *OAM* 292) was so struck by *Folk Songs of the Hills* that he included Travis’ Hollywood-penned original “Dark as a Dungeon” in his folksong anthology *A Treasury of Southern Folklore* (1949). Botkin’s miscategorization of “Dark as a Dungeon” underscores Travis’ capacity to create something new that feels authentically old. Thus, in a feat of transculturation, Travis constructs a passable Kentucky folksong in a Hollywood electrical recording studio using a variety of folk and popular components.

Indeed, amidst the proliferation of country and western musical styles by 1947, Travis’ assertion of local authenticity, concurrent with Armstrong’s own revolt against new, complex jazz forms, can be similarly viewed as a work of late modernist retrospection in genre. Only the word “country” could encompass the immense heterogeneity of vernacular musical forms and styles organized under this label (D. Green 127). Twenty years prior, early hillbilly records had focused on traditional music of the Appalachian region, recording both sacred music, consisting of music from hymn books, psalmists, and church songbooks, and secular music consisting of banjo frolics, fiddle tunes, and music from tune books. They recorded many little-known players, preserving as they did so Dock Boggs’ modal drone-ballads and Fiddlin’ Jo Carson’s hot fiddle tunes. Yet by the late twenties and thirties, record labels were focusing on the “country blues” of Jimmie Rodgers, as well as the Carter Family, and later Hank Williams, the “Western” music of Texas swing players like Bob Wills, and the Tejano “Tex-Mex” music of a new generation of guitarist-singers such as Lydia Mendoza, who recorded Spanish language race records with Okeh Records and toured throughout the 1930s. Country music was institutionalized and further diversified in the 1930s and 1940s, with record labels widening the genre from Appalachian hillbilly music (a mixture of British-American fiddle tunes and old time ballads with African-

American blues ballads) to more diverse Southern traditions.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, due to the household influence of the 1920s phonograph and 1930s radio, northern entertainment such as Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley, exerted a steady influence<sup>102</sup> on southern folk musicians (Wolfe; D. Green 13-14).

An air of experiment thrived among country musicians, just as it did among jazz musicians. A taste for novelty thrived among audiences. In several studies D. K. Wilgus describes country music's early history as a maze of dead ends, wrong turns, and odd, poorly-thought-out attempts to exploit profitable niche markets. Hence the cacophonous roster of instruments one hears in early country music—consider the use of melodicas, trumpets, and accordions in Merle Travis' pre-1947 radio broadcast hits, instruments which, having been ruthlessly excised from the country record sound palette, are unthinkable in contemporary pop country. As Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox detail in *Old Roots, New Routes* (2008), American musical institutions were tied up in “linguistic struggles” as they managed the country genre in the early postwar period, with *Billboard* variously listing the genre as “Hillbilly and Foreign Record Hits,” “Western and Race,” “Western, Race, Polkas,” and “Folk (Country and Western)”:

Mainstream music trade coverage of country in the late 1940s and early 1950s evinced more confusion than clarity over just what was being described and what made it unique. (38)

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<sup>101</sup> The genre which became “country-western” in the 1940s was maturing in this period as the industry consolidated ownership and experimented with new technologies and ethnic musical traditions: Cajun and Creole records, Polka country records, and later Bluegrass appealed to various sections of displaced rural America. Shared national culture was also influencing southern musicians at large, diversifying the country music scene. The European violin, travelable by sea voyage, had been dominant in nineteenth-century Anglo-American folk music, yet with modernized transport systems in the twentieth century, it was joined by other Old World instruments, such as the concertina and guitar, enriching folk ensembles in the American south (D. Green 6, 9). Following the United States' annexation of Hawaii in 1898, interest in Pacific music, and especially the Hawaiian guitar, resulted in the 1930s creation of the steel slide guitar, an instrument providing a staple aural texture of early country (D. Green 12). With the increase in immigration from southern and eastern Europe, the mandolin joined the guitar, banjo, and fiddle in folk performance networks (D. Green 11).

<sup>102</sup> Merle Travis relates an anecdote of traveling to hear backcountry sharecropper play guitar, only to hear him perform a 1940 pop hit.

In contrast to the country genre's eclectic clusterings of regional styles, Capitol Records declares Travis' songs to be indigenous outpourings "traditional down in the coal mining country." And in contrast to these recordings, only Travis' voice and acoustic guitar however are audible on *Folk Songs of the Hills*. With regard to the corrective, localizing gesture it imposes on its genre, Travis' shift toward regional performance mirrors' Armstrong's concurrent revival of New Orleans jazz.

In another parallel to Armstrong, Travis finds his musical role within a national listening market preoccupied with the essential characteristics of regional populations which, in the course of twentieth-century capitalist development, were belatedly modernizing. Although *Folk Songs of the Hills* features local techniques and songs from central Kentucky, it nevertheless finds itself in an abstract context heavily laden with essence and symbol. Like *Town Hall Concert*, Travis' album finds its musical center in a figure marked popularly as regional and raced, once again challenging our presentist readings with outdated performative gestures relying apparently on stereotyped identities. I argue that features of *Folk Songs of the Hills* are congruent with the traditions of regionalism and local-color in the United States. Like other forms we might call regional modernism—regional novels, and later films and television programs—*Folk Songs of the Hills* represents worlds and peoples alternative to the culturally dominant, feeding what literary scholar Richard Brodhead calls a "socially based appetite for underdevelopment" (Brodhead 167).<sup>103</sup> A key starting point for this analysis is the Kentucky dialect Travis uses in *Folk Songs of the Hills*. Dialect, or "ethnically deformed speech," is arguably the crucial generic feature of regionalism (Brodhead 166). By representing curious dialects, local color novels of the

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<sup>103</sup> As Brodhead summarizes, regionalism "requires a setting outside the world of modern development, a zone of backwardness where locally vibrant folkways still prevail. Its characters are ethnologically colorful, personifications of the different humanity produced in such nonmodern cultural settings" (150).

nineteenth century—vehicles rather like the Mississippi leisure steamboats of the 1910s and 1920s—provided an exotic proximity to underdevelopment while maintaining a comfortable degree of removal. Brodhead surmises that dialect served to represent social differentiation along a cultural hierarchy in much nineteenth century regional literature. He suggests that “an audience that identified its own nonethnic status with its social superiority could nevertheless bring itself within hearing distance of the Stranger in the Land” (166).

Though to a lesser degree than the American literary regionalists Brodhead studies, Travis entered into a “steeply hierarchized plan of culture” (Brodhead 167) which categorized his creative output in particular ways. As Brodhead contends,

regionalism was a means to acknowledge plural Americas. Yet this fiction produced the foreign only to master it in imaginary terms . . . by writing the heterogloss [of dialect] into the status of variant on or deviant from a standard of well-bred educated speech (166-67).

While I am unconvinced that Travis’ intentions resembled the cultural program of mastery outlined above by Brodhead, it is evident that in the tight market conditions of the postwar recording industry, Travis’ accent, and the cultural marginality it conveyed, may have seemed a commercial asset, a seal of authentication for what was intended as an explicitly regional, even folkloristic, album. But a pessimistic reading of Travis’ dialect in *Folk Songs of the Hills* presents two major critical problems. First, it precludes the heartening possibility that, in a positive moment of self-actualization, these recording sessions allowed Travis to speak more naturally than his earlier radio recordings did. Second, it ignores the cultural capital of subaltern voices in regional storytelling traditions, overlooking the extractive mode of cultural production in part defining twentieth-century U.S. pop culture.

A double-edged sword, American regionalism not only worked in some eyes to justify the cultural subordination of less economically developed regions, but also “made the experience

of the socially marginalized into a literary asset, and so made marginality itself a positive authorial advantage” (Brodhead 150). I am suggesting that Capitol Records branding of *Folk Songs of the Hills* as regional folk attempted to play up Travis’ cultural marginality as precisely this kind of “positive authorial advantage.” The distance of Travis’ Appalachian dialect from American prestige speech was vital in communicating ethnographic legitimacy to Capitol’s sales pitch. *Folk Songs of the Hills*’ premise of recording “for the first time” a selection of “authentic folk music” assigns an ambivalent value to the primitivist performer as representative of simpler, near-forgotten world, and whose apparently essential qualities (such as talent, demeanor, dialect, and repertory) identify him with a remote hinterland. Accordingly, Capitol’s guarantee of “diverting, fascinating entertainment” speaks to the perennial interest of northern audiences in the cultural Other they saw in the inhabitants of Appalachia.<sup>104</sup> This interest had waxed and waned in popular culture since the mid-nineteenth century. It is an interest as old as the Hill Billy stereotype itself, a dangerous, feuding figure which emerged in American popular culture in the period after the Civil War and gradually overtook the heroic pioneer Daniel Boone as the nation’s idea of Appalachian identity. By the late nineteenth century, the Hill Billy stock character was a favorite cultural stereotype, tinged with adventurous romance, and thriving in local color writing which flourished in the Appalachian region.<sup>105</sup> Nineteenth century Americans, in particular those influenced by the National Parks complex and the wilderness thinking of Roosevelt, Muir, and Thoreau, marveled at the “barbarian virtues” (Stoll 18) they saw in

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<sup>104</sup> Numerous books have been written on the subject of Appalachian stereotypes; the subject needs no deep explanation here.

<sup>105</sup> American literary regionalism, a movement associated with such writers as Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor, also included such Appalachian authors as John Fox, Jr., Louise McNeil, George Cary Eggleston, Arthur Whitefield Spaulding, Emma Bell Miles, John Uri Lloyd, Jesse Stuart, Harriet Arnow, and Charles McKnight.



Appalachian life. As William Goodell Frost wrote of the Appalachian in 1898, “he is our contemporary ancestor!” (qtd. Stoll 18).

However in the early twentieth century, when unprecedented numbers of Appalachians migrated to surrounding lowlands for work in sawmills, steamboats, farms, and factories, the Hill Billy assumed its modern derogatory form: lazy, uneducated if not degenerate, chronically reliant on New Deal social welfare, and intoxicated. What this means, Stoll notes soberly, is that the comic “hillbilly” persona corresponds historically with environmental refugees of the second industrial revolution (23). “Racialization,” Stoll reminds,

has often gone along with ejection and enclosure, offering an intellectual tool for taking resources away from people said to be incapable of progress or change. This is what we find in the southern mountains. The knowledge that wood, coal, and other minerals existed there came first, soon followed by the technical capability and political organization necessary to extract them. Between the 1860s and 1900, metropolitans accused struggling households, many in tenuous legal possession of the land they farmed, of unfitness for the modern world. [ . . . ] Aspersions of stupidity, backwardness, primitivism, and volatility coincided with the seizure of the environment. (21)

Racial theories of degeneracy and primitiveness have lent ideological support for exploitative projects ranging from racial apartheid to settler colonialism. Racial categories which distinguished *black* and *white* emerged from the sixteenth-century Atlantic slave trade and the plantation systems of the Americas.<sup>106</sup> Theories of the backwardness of indigenous Americans, supposed unable to optimally cultivate their lands, accompanied the expulsive and exterminist national projects of North America, such as Andrew Jackson’s campaigns against the Cherokee of southern Appalachia, designed to clear open occupied lands for resource extraction and agricultural development for white settlers.<sup>107</sup> Dehumanization of the poor inhabitants of national

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<sup>106</sup> See Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) for a discussion of the historical hidevelopment of antiblack racial ideology.

<sup>107</sup> See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (2014).

resource zones is a familiar theme in U.S. mythologies of nationhood, as blackface minstrelsy so potently exhibited for nearly a century.

When considering theories of Appalachian degeneracy during Travis' lifetime, we should view the multiethnic migratory flows northward from Appalachia as a spark igniting wider ethnographic interest in the social category of the hillbilly. Regional and ethnic differences, which became heightened over the course of modernization due to migrations supported by rapid developments in transit and communication technologies, inspired numerous racial theories about the various ethnic groups inhabiting American villages, towns, and cities. Ideas about "highland degeneracy" became common among nineteenth-century social scientists and eugenicists (Stoll 20). As many of its inhabitants were displaced and compelled into the market wage system, the musically rich cultural region of Appalachia was made famous by its racialized "hillbilly" entertainers.

Defining and classifying American folk music was a primary objective of the folkloristic and ethnomusicological research of the interwar period. This research was carried out by institutions such as the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song (established in 1928) and by figures such as Carl Sandburg, compiler of the mainstay folk anthology *The American Songbag* (1924), and Alan Lomax, who in 1938 worked with a young research assistant Pete Seeger to trace folk song through commercial hillbilly records. When internationally renowned ballad hunter Cecil Sharp explored Appalachia for his ballad collections, he praised its smallholder agrarian economy. Its rent-free squatter cabins and common properties, its subsistence economy largely lacking in surplus production, appeared to him to be the enabling conditions for the region's rich oral culture. Sharp viewed the

mountaineer positively as alike to the English peasant before the Enclosure Acts (xxiii), as existing in an “ideal state of things” (xxv) free from wage-based life,

immune from that continuous grinding, mental pressure, due to the attempt to ‘make a living’ [ . . . ] commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown. (xxiv)

Like many musicologists of the interwar period, Sharp echoed nineteenth-century ideas about the virtues of frontier life as extolled by Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner.

The race was on to construct scholarly accounts of Appalachian primitiveness. An increasingly global ethnic demography of the United States in the first decades of the 1900s prompted renewed nativist discourses as “the ongoing invasion of Italians and Jews sent the guardians of Anglo-Saxon culture into anxious fits of racial conservation” (Stoll 18). Some thinkers, such as geographer Ellen Churchill Semple, believed that Appalachians represented the most biologically pure Anglo-Americans (Stoll 18). Increasingly, racial commentators turned to Appalachia as a hereditary outpost of old England, an idea buttressed by a persistent commonplace that the Appalachian dialect (a variant of American English) preserves an early modern English dialect (Stoll 19). A contemporary of Sharp, John C. Campbell wrote *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (1921), which established on social-scientific grounds the ancestral forces behind Appalachian individualism and reclusiveness. Mandel Sherman and Thomas R. Henry’s *Hollow Folk* (1933), a popular ethnography of Colvin Hollow, advances social and psychological theories about genetics and environment to explain mountaineers’ alleged biophysical and social peculiarities. Correlating the little hollow’s inadequate “mental growth” with a whiskey culture, linguistic deficits, free and easy living, asociality, and a makeshift economy, Sherman and Henry assemble an exquisite mélange of romantic characterizations and exotic discourses.

In the assessment of researchers like Sharp, Campbell, Sherman and Henry, and others, Appalachia faced cultural entropy and dissolution as a consequence of modern development in the region. With the American South appearing to modern eyes as a land of cheap labor, racist violence, and agriculture, poor southern whites served as evidence of a backwards society. And yet, as these examples show, ethnologists described them as inheritors of a valuable and endangered cultural wealth. Sherman and Henry predict the forgetting of “the remnants of the old English balladry” and lament that schools are replacing the Appalachian dialect with “modern English” (158). As Charles K. Wolfe explains, while ballads were being sung in American states “from Missouri to Maine,”

Kentucky and the other Appalachian states had a special appeal; the mountains and highlands, it was thought, acted as a giant cultural deep freeze, preserving these old songs and singing methods better than in other parts of the country. (5)

Not only did the Appalachian highlands contain enormous timber and soft coal reserves, but it attracted folklorists for its rich and apparently pure cultural resources. But these appeared to many to be on the verge of extinction, precisely due to resource extraction. “With the changes in mining wrought by industrialization during the last half century and before,” writes Wayland Hand, “much of the glamour and romance of mining has been lost” (qtd. A. Green *OAM* 16). Folklorist George Korson complains about how mining automation made work songs impossible in the mines—that, in a literal sense, the coal mining “machinery drowns out the human voice” (*CDF* 119).

It therefore stands to reason that Capitol Records, courting an emergent national folksong record market, was aware that Kentucky was their ideal, famous land of songs. Many researchers knew that, “going into the age of mass media and commercialization in the 1920s, Kentucky had a popular reputation as the premier hunting ground for old ballads” (Wolfe 5). And romantic

notions of Appalachians as “noble survivors of Elizabethan England, uncontaminated by the evils of the modern world” reinforced this perception (Wolfe 5). Kentucky schoolteacher Katherine Pettit collected seventeen song lyrics (twelve of which are British in origin) in “Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky” in *Journal of American Folklore* (1907). Hubert G Shearin’s *A Syllabus of Kentucky Folksongs* (1911) assembled 333 tunes. Wyman and Brockaway published *Lonesome Tunes* (1916) and *Twenty Mountain Songs* (1920). Josephine McGill published *Folk Songs of the Kentucky Mountains* (1917). Cecil Sharp, who had collected ballads in 1916 in Kentucky, published *English Folk Song in the Southern Appalachians* (1932). George Korson published *Minstrels of the Mine Patch* (1938) and *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (1943) with a United Mine Workers grant, and recorded miner ballads for the Library of Congress in the 1940s. In his books George Korson depicts at length the “bardic and minstrel arts” which, rather than urban commercial amusements, infused work and leisure at the coal camps he visited. Korson, who encountered blind balladeers, minstrel union organizers, and folk-medicine bards singing industrial lore, was struck by the multi-ethnic oral transmission and cultural exchange he saw at coal camps, where the coal industry had created extraordinary occupational folk groups.

I believe that the enduring popularity of Appalachian folksong to wider and wider audiences in the decade or two leading up to the mid-1940s sent a signal to the Capital and Victor record labels. As Capital approached Travis, they may have had in mind Jack Guthrie’s 1945 recording of his cousin Woody’s song “Oklahoma Hills” (a genial, very catchy recording) which spent six weeks at the top of the country and western chart, a regionally flavored radio hit:

Many months has [*sic*] come and gone  
since I wandered from my home  
in those Oklahoma hills where I was born.

Many a page of life has turned—  
many a lesson I have learned—  
while I feel like in those hills I still belong.

These contexts suggest that in his selection of Merle Travis as an up-and-coming country entertainer familiar with such occupational lore, Capitol Records “A & R man” Lee Gillette aimed to highlight the marginality of their artist within the national music scene. Tropes of a uniquely Appalachian primitivist modernism saturate Travis’ folk-pop album. Nationally stereotyped themes of substance dependency, criminality, and workplace exploitation, we will see in Chapter VI, reappear throughout *Folk Songs of the Hills*. Sometimes these themes complicate a simple morality, but generally they fit readily into common conceptions of the region. The album sometimes paints a commercially-friendly, romantic image of coal life consistent with ethnographic concepts of Appalachians as “noble survivors of Elizabethan England” (Wolfe 5), content with their simple lives, toiling hard in the mountains, yet blessedly far from what in truth had become ubiquitous by the postwar era: the striving, civilized world of business liberalism. (Yet, as I will show in Chapter VII, *Folk Songs of the Hills* at the same time levels profound critiques of extractivism in Appalachia.)

Like Armstrong, Travis adapts the cheerful vitality of the comic singer—a market product, I argue, of nineteenth century American minstrel entertainment—to twentieth-century broadcast and recording contexts. Not unlike the performance regimes on jazz riverboats that scripted Armstrong’s music with the romanticized life of a roustabout minstrel, the 1940s folk recording market was similarly invested in familiar vestiges of minstrelsy. Not simple minstrels, Armstrong and Travis rather adapt primitivist elements of minstrelsy associated by national audiences with the South. Just as in the case of Armstrong’s critical reception as a primitivist performer, the apparent effortlessness of the player matters. *Folk Songs of the Hills*’ disc jacket

eschews any artistic seriousness, noting on the contrary that Travis “light-heartedly strums his guitar and sings . . . as only one born to the hills can.” The point here is that it is the essence of the performer, as a bio-ethnic entity, that forms the basis of his musical talent. The picture implied by Capital Records here parallels the kind of primitivist geography informing Helga Crane’s imagined “syncopated jungle” (Larsen 54).

Armstrong and Travis’ musical performances are anchored in materiality, a person, a place, a thing: the trumpeter’s white handkerchief; the guitar’s fingerboard, inlaid with the lettering “MERLE TRAVIS” in pearl; the carbide headlamp Travis wears in his coal mining ‘soundies’; songs recreating coal whistle sounds and barbecue smells; lyrical invocations of local situations. As mediators between distinct cultural realms, and as intrepid musical travelers between regions, Armstrong and Travis imbued the detached, abstract form of the popular song with their own regional bearings. In doing so they at the same time integrate the strangeness of modernity into their regionally rooted art. Merle Travis, the magnetic force, the entertainer who “bounced about in cowboy films, western swing dance bands, and radio jamborees” (Green, Liner notes) is a tinkerer with sound. Few people today know that Travis came up with the idea for a solidbody electric guitar, sharing ideas with Les Paul in the mid- to late-forties. Indeed Travis personally designed a solid-body electric guitar prototype, built by Paul Bigsby in 1948. This unique instrument, never mass-produced, was the first electric guitar with six tuners on one side of the headstock (Travis’ personal contribution), a feature later emulated by Leo Fender on the iconic Stratocaster and Telecaster guitars. The audiophile Travis writes about his collection:

My own record collection, much of it on cylinders, contains what we call country music but actually dates back to shortly after the turn of the century. (My copy of the Sears Roebuck 1908 catalog advertises Columbia cylinder records at 18 cents each or \$2.15 per dozen!) I own an Edison “talking machine” in perfect playing condition . . . (“Foreword” ix)

With these gadgets in mind, there is reason to Travis' habit of calling himself a "country entertainer" ("Foreword" x), a label deviating sharply from 'folksinger.' Travis' pop songs deliver because of Travis' prowess with techniques of commercial distribution and electric recording, in addition to the more obvious factors of his picking and his mixture of original songwriting with folksong adaptation. In rusticated form, the pop ballads and blues numbers of *Folk Songs of the Hills* create for country music a credible mass idiom which is utterly modern but feels authentic and old. Merle Travis, the radio star, absorbs and reflects the new sounds of the thirties, and then in the midst of intense stylistic and technological heterogeneity, tries to become a conduit between worlds. In Green's estimation, "we savor his genius as a song composer and an innovative guitarist; he can also be credited for a sophisticated understanding of the country musician as a bridge between cultural domains" (Liner notes). Because he approximates a coherent regional experience in a deterritorialized form, Travis makes the listener feel somehow at home in Kentucky, whether or not they are there.

It may surprise readers to consider that Armstrong's and Travis' shifts toward a performance style coded as provincial would prove vital in their broader popularization in musical memory. But in the 1930s and 1940s it was perhaps their outward-facing southernness which most distinguished these musicians to contemporary audiences, both inside and outside the South. Consider it this way: what need would a young Travis have to present Kentucky to his neighbors in the coal camps? Or a young Armstrong to paint images of New Orleans in New Orleans honky tonks? To northern audiences, however, the conspicuously regional sounds of New Orleans and rural Kentucky were integral elements in the dialectic cultural interchange which took place between the centers and peripheries of industrial modernity in the United States. Indeed it makes sense that such regional assertions would be appropriate *only after*



modern transit and communications technology had brought mass culture to every far flung city, farm, and hollow. In mutual influence, innovative artists in the cultural peripheries of the South were also bringing their sounds to broadly dispersed, interested listeners. Like American regional literature, which responded to the displacement and dispersal of regional cultures, the deterritorializing projects of Armstrong and Travis achieve broad appeal because they cater to displaced listenerships even while accommodating culturally dominant value relations.

Regional modernists Travis and Armstrong convey an aesthetic of modernist displacement which foreground *placement* itself (that is, the notable placement of a performer within a local-communal context). Southernness cannot wholly define these musicians, whose personalities were urbane and their careers cosmopolitan. Yet, as an element of their compositions, repertoire, and performances, southernness plays a conspicuous role in their commercial viability among broad swathes of the listening public. Although Armstrong and Travis interact with different stock figures in American racial ideology, a similar discursive practice undergirds their marketability as pop entertainers. It is a practice of *othering* that demarcates artistic production by assigning artists and entertainers the values associated with their regional and racial identity. Those identities corresponding with the resource-producing peripheries (the Piedmont's plantations, Appalachian timber and coal camps, the oil and gas fields of Texas and Louisiana) indicate populations, betrayed by their attire, dialect, or rusticity as having arrived belatedly to modernity, that are supposed as inferior. Lacking control over their environment and resources, increasingly dependent on wages and federal assistance, poor southerners entered, traveling in search of work, the industrial cities of the North and Midwest.

Through their highly personal performances, Armstrong and Travis plug in to culturally significant identity forms related to the American South's diaspora in the twentieth century's

first half—black and white working migrants—thereby addressing the ideological concerns of a society strained not only with global but with sustained inter-regional contact. Armstrong’s *Town Hall Concert* and Travis’ *Folk Songs of the Hills*, I argue, commercially present an exotic or semi-exotic vernacular figure which, *via* the vibrancy of their personality, reaches for a humanistic authenticity. As it happens, cultural authenticity in the United States is largely based in categories like race and region. As examples of primitivist modernism, their (staged) distance from urban modernity holds the promise of a raw, simpler humanity as a treatment for the sterility of modern civilization. Recall that for Lemke, “primitivism functions as an antidote that frees, relieves, or invigorates the self” in a modern context (28). To saturate sound more totally with the human presence of the performer is to fill a void in modern life. For the modern listener, the vinyl record sitting in a crate at home represents the spiritual opposite of the factory machine one faces daily at work; the vinyl record turntable (and powerfully so for listeners of Travis’ *Folk Songs of the Hills*) is a machine that *talks* to one.

## CHAPTER VII

### CASE STUDY: TRAVIS AND ARMSTRONG—TECHNIQUE

Chapter V outlined how *Town Hall Concert* (1947), viewed in its context, marked an important shift in Louis Armstrong's career, and a moment during and after which Armstrong publicly asserted, in opposition to both emerging bebop and declining swing, a regional style and a region-specific performance identity. As we saw, there are factors that should make us view the Dixieland revivalism of Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars as a popular appeal to modernist retrospection. These factors include: songs concerned with the deep South during a markedly nationalist historical moment of postwar Americanism; vaudeville-derived stage antics embedded within modern, depersonalized music storage media; Armstrong's certainty of his own aesthetic authenticity as a jazz performer and a representative of New Orleans. All these things worked together. Armstrong's authentically New Orleans sound had much to do with the commercial success of the Dixieland jazz revival, pointing to the forceful effects of regional affiliation on popular authorship. In the end, *Town Hall Concert* reveals the extent to which northern audiences hungered for the extracted cultural assets of New Orleans and the greater Old South it tended to represent in those years.

My goal now in this 'close listening' of Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert* is to describe it as notable contribution to American regional modernism by exploring two live-recorded tracks in particular: "Back o' Town Blues" and "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?" I find that these songs demonstrate Armstrong's anthological impulse to localize jazz in and around New Orleans and the Mississippi River. Presenting "a small group of brilliant soloists" (Panassié 27)—each introduced by name by Fred Robbins, master of ceremonies, before the

performance begins—*Town Hall Concert* bears the distinct musical fingerprints of New Orleans performance in ways that depart from established national pop norms that had taken hold during the big band era. As an emplacement, a mapping of American jazz, a celebration of a culturally significant location, and an accommodation to national touristic expectations, it also distinguishes Armstrong as a modernist unabashedly committed to the messy project of cultural remembering.

Armstrong composed “Back o’ Town Blues” in 1923 with Panamanian jazz composer Luis Russell. Relative to much of Armstrong’s output, it had not been a significant hit. By the mid-forties, this song was ripe for recovery; an innocuous 1923 instrumental recording of the tune by The Cotton Pickers was (and remains) the best-preserved rendition committed to vinyl in the early jazz period. A simple blues song, “Back o’ Town Blues” predates the big band swing era, its 12-bar blues harmonic structure identifying it with southern blues and the New Orleans jazz sound in contrast to more rigid, ensemble-based Chicago jazz. Armstrong, who had begun incorporating the tune (with lyrics restored) into his repertory again during his 1946 flirtations with New Orleans jazz, recognized that the song had a rightful place in his impromptu “comeback” performance with the All-Stars at Town Hall.

“Back o’ Town Blues”—a raucous callback to a traditional Dixieland jazz improvisation—is a localizing gesture, a lyrical and chordal celebration of New Orleans’ seedy underbelly. The “back of town” was the colloquial name for a section of New Orleans including Storyville, known also as the “Battlefield,” and as the “colored red-light district.” This tough part of town offered visitors plenty of opportunities for illicit recreation at liquor lounges, gambling houses, and bordellos, while its vaudeville theaters, saloons, and dance halls were home to the best dance music being played in the city at the time. Adjacent to South Rampart Street, a

commercial corridor of legal African American businesses, the “back of town” was an important hotbed for the development of jazz itself: here is where monumental jazz figures—each with their own communal epithet—Charles “Buddy” Bolden; Ferdinand “Jelly Roll Morton” La Menthe; Edward “Kid” Ory; Louis “Pops/Satchmo” Armstrong—helped cultivate, in bordellos, honky tonks, and dance halls, a revolutionary musical ecosystem.

It all begins before the applause for the previous number, “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love,” has subsided. A swaggering 4/4 rhythm bursts alive, a slow New Orleans march, the trombone and clarinet rising in mutual counterpoint as Armstrong delivers a sparkling but faithful trumpet rehearsal of the tune’s melody. Armstrong’s “gifts as a melodist” have been widely appraised by biographers and commenters (Jones & Chilton 31). Here, they truly stand out. The band having executed one blues turnaround, Pops (ever the bandleader) commands under crashing cymbals, “now take us down to New Orleans fellas.” The All-Stars obey, and over a subdued rhythm section, Armstrong sings all three verses with graceful lilt:

I had a woman  
livin’ way back o’ town.  
Yeah she treated me right,  
never let me down.  
But I wasn’t satisfied—  
I had to run around.

Now she’s gone and left me,  
I’m worried as can be.  
Oh, I’ve searched this world all over,  
wonderin’ where she could be.  
I must ask her to forgive me.  
Maybe she’ll come back to me.

I’m lonesome and blue,  
and I’ve learned a thing or two.  
Oh, fellas here’s a tip  
I’m gonna pass on down to you:  
don’t mistreat your woman,  
cause it’s gonna bounce right back on you.

“Back o’ Town Blues” narrates a lyrical theme common to the blues: a love complaint, in this case lamenting the loss of “a woman, livin’ way back o’ town” after the speaker’s infidelity to her. The obliqueness of Armstrong and Russell’s lyrics, which omit salacious details from the story, operate upon audience inference. Possible implications of the song’s first three end-rhyme (“livin’ way back o’ town”; “she treated me right, never let me down”; “I had to run around”) point to an in-group and an out-group. While these phrases tell a more or less straightforward story, they also hint at unrevealed inside meanings less apparent to northern, middle class auditors who find themselves socially and temporally removed from New Orleans “back of town” culture of the teens and twenties. Is the unnamed “woman, livin’ way back o’ town” a prostitute, a girlfriend, or both? Is “never let me down” a sexual euphemism? What was it like to “run around” Storyville in Armstrong’s formative years? The open nature of these questions only focuses more curiosity in the singer himself, who playfully extends the word “run” into a swirling melodic ornament, which will later resolve into his static realization to “never mistreat your woman.” Armstrong (a talented migrant come North) appears himself as a living, breathing artifact of that world whose return to traditional form, he announces, will “take us down to New Orleans.” This casual, clipped tour of underground New Orleans offers a compellingly limited view into a cultural location that had not only been mythologized in the popular imagination by such films of *New Orleans* (1947), but which had become a scholar’s topic in Hugues Pannassie’s *The Real Jazz* (1942).

Taken as a whole, the song is transportive, in much more than a lyrical sense. Embracing a plan of orchestration which had become culturally marginal in the big band era, Armstrong and the All-Stars deliberately reenact the band-makeup common to 1910s jazz clubs in New Orleans’ “back of town”: a small frontline of brass, and a tiny rhythm section (Panassié). While

Armstrong intones about the infidelity blues, the All-Stars do what only a Dixieland small combo can do: maximize the audible presence of New Orleans vernacular, simulating a 1910s Storyville gig. The musical spontaneity of this soundscape is matched by the All Stars' vocal spontaneity. Again and again they playfully interrupt Armstrong's singing with vocal interjections. Far from subservient supporters to Armstrong, the All-Stars toss out improvisational metacommentary on the lyrics during Armstrong's second verse:

Oh, I've searched this world all over,  
wonderin' where she could be.

[*All-Stars*] She ain't gon' come back. She  
ain't gon' come back here!

I must ask her to forgive me,  
maybe she'll come back to me

[*All-Stars*] She's comin' on back. She told  
me she's comin' back.

[*Armstrong*] She ain't come back yet, boy.

This moment is representative of the spontaneous on-stage discourse that takes place *during* songs throughout all of *Town Hall Concert*. To the audience's plain delight, the band is free to shout and interrupt Armstrong, turning the stage situation into a relaxed sort of variety show that would appear, to the eyes of 1910s steamer band managers, that the inmates were running the asylum. But Armstrong is free as well to respond coarsely to the All-Stars. When the shouts and hoots become obnoxious in the third verse, Armstrong puts his foot down:

I'm lonesome and blue,  
and I've learned a thing or two.  
Oh fellas here's a tip . . .

[*All-Stars*] Yeah!

. . . I'm gonna pass on down to you.

[*Armstrong*] Shut up, boy!

Never mistreat your woman  
cause it's gonna bounce right back on you.

It is especially humorous that Armstrong blunders the song's last line ("Never mistreat your woman . . .") by beginning to sing an earlier fragment ("I must ask her to forgive me . . .") before clumsily correcting it. We are certainly not in the "front of town": the unprofessionalism of it all—a mischievous sort of sabotage between members of the band—celebrates trouble-making in a way that is faithful to the song's inspiration, New Orleans' "back of town."

Armstrong gives the sold-out Town Hall audience an inside view of a raucous, casual creative process that accentuates the vernacularism of New Orleans jazz. A competitive edge to the music recalls the truck-bed musical duels on New Orleans' streets during Armstrong's youth. Dislodged from the well-worn tracks of popular swing jazz, Armstrong and his All-Stars can be credited for creating democratic sound environments on-stage and on-record. My phrase 'democratic sonic environments' is meant to suggest the All-Stars' emulation of the musical pluralism of New Orleans' improvisational vernacular jazz, as well as to make an argument about the sometimes-unruly aural texture of their performances. We might describe the Dixieland band makeup—four or five players mutually improvising a shared musical progression—in various ways, based on different critical frameworks. In an extended interview on art and politics published as *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014), Cornell West describes this (metaphorically and literally musical) process by which the unevenness of different personalities works itself to foster and protect collective "political will":

To use jazz metaphors, what we need would be the expression and articulation of different tempos and different vibrations and different actions and different witnesses, so it's antiphonal; it's call-and-response, and in the call-and-response, there are Ella Baker-like voices tied to various kinds of deep democratic witnesses that have to do with everyday people organizing themselves. And then you've got the Martin-like voices that are charismatic, which are very much tied to a certain kind of messianic leadership, which must be called into question . . . And yet they are part of this jazz combo. (106)



In this viewpoint, the jazz group is a collective defined by its own competing inner energies. We could conceptualize the Dixieland band as a populist vanguard giving aesthetic priority to folk jazz groups, rather than more highly trained, capital-intensive big band recording labels; or as a structure of black aesthetic resistance within performance settings determined by the tastes of those at the top of the racial caste system; or as a well-honed instrument of cultural recovery which celebrates a vernacular jazz homeland; or as a form within the touristic genre of regionalism which stakes its claim on making accessible a marginal cultural zone filled with charismatic commoners. But in bare terms, Armstrong's revivalist jazz as I have been discussing it actually works in ways that protects musical autonomy. In contrast to the dependence of large swing orchestras on a handful of managers, hit songwriters, and financiers, Louis Armstrong and the All-Star Band could range across much more diverse tones and tempi, while keeping each of the several members audibly present as individual respondents who make up a collective sound through their spontaneous variations and departures from one another. By preserving the two key ingredients, instrumental improvisation and a very small ensemble, the Dixieland band becomes a small *agora* for interjecting voices.

The idea of democratic sound environments is also meant to imply the earnest inclusion of the audience in the musical proceedings. The All-Stars' spontaneous aesthetic subversions are not based in any idea of the artist's hyper-individual autonomy, but in fact its opposite—the embedding of the performer in a folk context. The All-Stars find in the “back of town” a localized aesthetic grounding that preserves the collective nature of New Orleans' music. New Orleans' traditions of musical pluralism did not include merely the proclivity for free small-group experimentation. They also included a robust tradition of musical apprenticeship and collective entertainment. Reconstruction-era New Orleans was a richly varied intercultural site,

the home of “a self-confident cadre of Afro-Creoles philosophically toughened by French egalitarianism and Reconstruction warfare” who built in the United States “an alternative politico-cultural tradition” (Powell 397). As one part of this tradition<sup>108</sup>, the city of Armstrong’s birth had developed an energetic class of musician-teachers dating back to the mid-1800s. The omnipresence of music as part of work and play in day-to-day life in New Orleans made the city a distinctive cultural center where collective influence, imitation, and instruction flourished. In such settings, a musician is not a social outcast but, on the contrary, exists in a state of constant exchange with audiences themselves often composed of other musicians. Living in a hotbed for syncopated musical entertainment, early-century New Orleans audiences were full of cultured listeners and often played active roles in the city’s informal performances (Panassié 6, 15). In the overall scheme of things, this meant that “as a place where the musical side of the African diaspora was organized and shaped, New Orleans really has no equivalent in the U.S.” (Brothers 449). On the level of music, this has made Dixieland one of the most audience-friendly (and thereby enduring and globally popular) styles of twentieth century music. The danceable accessibility, humor, and vaudeville antics of *Town Hall Concert* seem to open up channels of pleasure to the widest possible audience. Armstrong’s vocal style, “a markedly individual compound of kidding, creative paraphrasing, showmanship, blues inflections and unerring swing” (Jones & Chilton 36) added the appeal of a variety show to the effect of his immense musical talent. Unlike a bebop concert-goer, a *Town Hall* attendee does not need to put in listening effort in order to appreciate what they are hearing.

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<sup>108</sup> Institutions such as Xavier University, established in 1917, comprised “a robust network of schools, self-help organizations, even a poetry journal and a philharmonic society.” A civic culture of musical pedagogy, in both public and private settings, germinated in antebellum New Orleans and thrived by 1900 (Powell 394).

Especially today, given the influence and longevity of the Dixieland sound, it is hard to imagine how a song like “Back o’ Town Blues” might have defied jazz listener expectations. That joyous cacophony reaches twenty-first-century ears as a familiar sound, and as a cultural mainstay we immediately associate with New Orleans. Yet I argue that Armstrong’s public return to Dixieland jazz in *Town Hall Concert* defies much of that which 1940s mainstream jazz audiences were accustomed. It is important to remember here that these sounds were not often readily accessible to most American jazz listeners of the early 1940s, a time when old and new styles of jazz coexisted in the cultural space Dixieland once dominated. Traditional jazz had reached its nadir by the start of World War II.<sup>109</sup> The wartime period’s smash hit jazz recordings, with which even the most casual listeners were familiar, were arrangements of standards and tended to be highly orchestrated affairs, whether they tended to follow a swing jazz vein—Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” (1939); Duke Ellington’s “Cotton Tail” (1940); Frank Sinatra’s “I Only Have Eyes for You” (1945); the Andrews Sisters’ “Lullaby of Broadway” (1944); Billy Strayhorn’s “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1941)—or fell into the more varied emerging pop jazz scene

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<sup>109</sup> As early as the late 1920s, the New Orleans style of small-combo improvised counterpoint had faded in commercial importance, with the modern sounds of large ensemble soloists Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, and Armstrong himself displacing the dixieland jazz norms of spontaneous, small-group counterpoint. With the worst austerities of the Great Depression, the dominant jazz medium had shifted from plentiful phonograph records to radio broadcasts of ballroom ensembles, while the center of production migrated rapidly to Chicago. Many white jazz players in the North who had been “swept up by imported New Orleans music” had learned how to play jazz in the 1920s and landed more and more of the industry jobs and recording contracts (Hadlock 307). Swing giants such as the Paul Whiteman Orchestra established an easy-listening format as the industry norm and certainly the most profitable form of jazz yet. Pushed aside by the smoother, shinier sounds of the big bands, New Orleans traditional jazz was widely forgotten, appearing to 1930s audiences in Chicago, New York, and London as an unsophisticated, even old-fashioned, rural music. Accordingly, most of the major New Orleans jazz giants fell on hard times during the 1930s. Kid Ory, the famous trombonist-bandleader who in 1919 brought New Orleans jazz to California, retired from music to run a chicken farm. New Orleans jazz legend Buddy Bolden died alone in 1931 at Louisiana State Insane Asylum. By 1933, major New Orleans bandleaders like King Oliver (who died bankrupt in 1938) and Jelly Roll Morton (who was unsuccessfully fighting to secure royalty payments) were out of work and “had virtually disappeared” (Hadlock 307). The jazz establishment’s shift away from the classic dixieland style, toward a more professionalized cohort of swing bands, explains in part why Armstrong spent most of the 1930s soloing in front of large ensembles. With the institutionalization and professionalization of jazz during the 1920s and 1930s, the rougher edges of traditional jazz performances had gradually been smoothed over, pill-like, replacing brass and wind cacophony with a more digestible sound. And with the Depression, dixieland was “quite dead” in the musical *Zeitgeist* (Hadlock 307).

of subdued lounge-flavored recordings of jazz standards—Ella Fitzgerald’s “Cabin the Sky” (1940); Dinah Shore’s “Mood Indigo” (1941); Billie Holiday’s “Georgia on My Mind” (1941); the Nat King Cole trio’s “Embraceable You” (1944). Instrumental improvisation, which had been a primary feature of the early jazz of New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago, had become increasingly marginalized, as this short list of forties hits illustrates. Compare, for instance, the radical differences in rhythm and feeling between Judy Garland’s chart-topping 1942 recording of “On the Sunny Side of the Street” and Armstrong’s rendition in the 1947 Town Hall Concert: whereas Garland’s performance isolates her own voice as it intones clearly (yet bloodlessly) over a drifting orchestral cadence, Armstrong’s rowdy live version instead places the jazz instruments up front in the mix, pleasantly chaotic where Garland’s is pleasantly gentle.

Like other major jazz musicians of the mid-forties, Armstrong and his All-Stars were reasserting improvisation as a fundamental idiom of jazz expression. Of course, bebop iconoclasts and traditional revivalists viewed each other, on some level, as opponents in the 1940s jazz scene’s contest to locate authentic jazz. All of them imagined they were playing “the real thing.” Yet with all their differences, the ‘mouldy fig’ traditional players like Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Kid Ory, and Red Nichols and the cool young boppers like Charlie Parker, Mary Lou Williams, Sonny Rollins, and Miles Davis participated in a shared effort to break popular jazz out of static compositions and mainstream styles. Making a splash, the frenetic early bebop recordings—Dizzy Gillespie’s “Salt Peanuts” (1941); Thelonius Monk’s “Round Midnight” (1944); Charlie Parker’s “Anthropology” (1946) and “Yardbird Suite” (1946)—as well as Django Reinhardt’s exciting new gypsy jazz, itself built around virtuosic guitar improvisation, shared this spirit of liberating instrumentalists. Like these others, Armstrong and His All-Stars reveled in the musical excitement and aesthetic subversiveness of instrumental improvisation.

Yet as I argue here, Armstrong's approach stands apart from these other 1940s jazz forms not only because of its cultural allegiances to traditional New Orleans jazz, but also because of its anthological program of cultural recovery. Unlike the boppers, whose search for greater aesthetic autonomy often led them to abandon the melody of jazz standards in favor of a more sublime kind of musical daring, Armstrong's is a communally-oriented jazz. Whereas emerging virtuosos like Monk and Reinhardt practiced *new forms of musicianship* which divided and challenged their audiences, Armstrong's revivalist maneuver in 1947 made accessible, like never before, familiar forms of musicianship by using of *new technologies of recording*. In *Town Hall Concert* Armstrong performs a number of 1920s jazz tunes, like "Back o' Town Blues," bringing them into cultural locations they could never have reached in their original incarnation. And by this I do not mean only that jazz had attained wider acceptance by the U.S. listening public (as explored in Chapter VI).

My evidence for this claim is surprisingly mundane: as a practical matter, what had changed fundamentally between 1925 and 1945 were recording technologies, in particular the ability to record live performances with drums. The first jazz records were made on entirely mechanical, acoustic phonographs. A stylus, vibrated by loud instruments such as tubas and trombones, incised onto a moving medium (such as a wax disc) an analogue of the sonic waves. Percussion posed its own set of problems in this technological era; a drummer who was really 'jamming' would inevitably bump the recording stylus, effectively ruining a song take.

Thus in the early years of recording, before the widespread adoption of electrical microphones, a beaten drumhead simply would not do. Jazz bands typically had to limit their percussion to cymbals and woodblocks. This meant that recordings of traditional jazz could not capture the complete, unrestrained sound of a live Dixieland ensemble typical in those days. Yet

by 1947, recording technologies had advanced to the point that such live performances, with their characteristic blend of brass and wind tones with prominent, often bombastic drums, could be preserved for the first time with reasonable fidelity. A new kit of musical devices (such as electrical microphones; electromechanical recorders; shellac and polyvinyl recording discs; signal amplifiers; sound mixers; loudspeakers; and signal filters) as well as a new class of musical professional (the sound engineer) cannot be overlooked as physical prerequisites for the New Orleans jazz revival as Armstrong executed it.

Despite the nostalgic tone of so much of Armstrong's postwar musical career, I argue on these grounds that *Town Hall Concert* was not, for its popular audience, a familiar rehashing of Dixieland jazz. On the contrary, the performance offered something which was in high demand but was relatively scarce: electrical recordings of traditional jazz bands, complete with drums. Here Armstrong's modernist preoccupation with "the technologies of cultural memory and forgetting" (Scandura & Thurston 11) truly shine. Mechanical applications of electricity, which had provided a system update to sound recording between 1925 and 1945, had made newly feasible the prospect of capturing the auditory experience of a full traditional jazz band without the studio tricks designed to soften the band's percussive force. Decisive changes in sound storage had opened up a new territories for crisper sonic recording, which permitted not only the mechanical storage (and broader commercialization) of traditional New Orleans jazz, but opened it up to projects of cultural chronicling as never before. Armstrong may well have been aware of the sad irony that Dixieland's heyday may have come too early—that in the 1910s and early 1920s, during the height of its popularity, there was no way to record the live, percussive New Orleans concerts which were so extensively written about and discussed—that Dixieland was abandoned by the international jazz recording markets just as electrical recording (in the late

twenties and thirties) would have ensured its viability as a recordable, storable kind of music. It can be inferred that, since *Town Hall Concert* so robustly capitalizes on this opportunity, Armstrong knew well the distinct technical requirements of stage and studio.

*Town Hall Concert*, billed as a return to Armstrong's musical roots, would have sounded familiar for live audience members who had seen these types of small-group jazz acts before. After all, Armstrong was openly revivifying a jazz idiom of earlier decades. But for album-listeners, a much broader and more varied population, the experience of listening to *Town Hall Concert* differed notably from the experience of listening to original 1920s (drumless) Dixieland recordings made by Armstrong and others. As a high-fidelity commercial recording of a concert hall performance, *Town Hall Concert* represents one of the first authoritative recordings of the traditional New Orleans jazz sound which preserves the lively, spontaneous efforts of a small group, recorded as is.

And how important that booming bass drum is for "Back o' Town Blues" with its steady 4/4 blues drive! Nicknamed "Big Sid," All-Star drummer Sidney Catlett drums on this tune with a power that prefigures rock and roll. For a night of nostalgic jamming, *Town Hall Concert* sounds ahead of its time. Armstrong's abandonment of larger ensembles in the spring of 1947 to work with "a small group of brilliant soloists" (Panassié 27) appears highly prescient, in retrospect. The special qualities of small groups would come to fuller and fuller fruition in the popular music of during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Armstrong perceived that the new forms of electric sound recording enabled certain kinds of small group performances, and is very much vindicated by the remarkable success of small bands during the magnetic (and later digital) sound recording eras. In R&B, folk, and rock, and other genres, various groups from Peter, Paul, and Mary to Kool & the Gang to Iron Maiden have since demonstrated popular taste for the

displays of character, intimacy, and authenticity that big bands, long since dissolved, tended to lack. Charisma emanates independently from each instrument. This effect of a ‘live’ atmosphere (in contrast to a studio atmosphere) is a crucial ingredient of the All-Star’s “back o’ town” sound and the appeal of *Town Hall Concert* as a taste of New Orleans. Armstrong’s leading trumpet and voice, maintaining the “Back o’ Town Blues” melody, are not followed in an orderly manner: instead we hear the temerity of Michael “Peanuts” Hucko’s clarinet and tenor saxophone, of Jack Teagarden’s trombone, of Dick Cary’s piano, as they interweave Armstrong’s melodies, sometimes with aggression and sometimes with aloofness.

The concert’s penultimate number, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” slows down the tempo and provides for our purposes a musical foil to “Back o’ Town Blues.” A recent title from Armstrong’s 1936-1946 “Hollywood phase” (Nevers and Davrichewi), “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” was composed by Louis Alter and Eddie DeLange, and was first heard in the film *New Orleans* (1947), where it was performed by Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. Now a classic of mid-century Hollywood music, the tune has become a sort of civic anthem for New Orleans, being performed by a wide range of musicians, such as by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band for their post-Hurricane Katrina benefit album, *Our New Orleans, 2005*. As part of a feature-length film soundtrack, “Do You Know What It Means” is perhaps the most subdued song of the evening, and as such it presents a more mainstream and conventionally respectable approach to jazz music-making. Here, the All-Stars do not shout over Armstrong’s lyrics, which resound in slow, open tones:

Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans  
and miss it each night and day?  
I know I’m not wrong. The feeling’s getting stronger  
the longer I stay away.

Miss them moss covered vines, the tall sugar pines



where mockin' birds used to sing,  
and I'd like to see that lazy Mississippi  
go hurryin' into spring.

These opening verses, accompanied only by a muted rhythm section (Dick Cary's piano; Bob Haggart's upright bass; George Wettling's drums) fill the sonic spaces left empty by the front line of horns and winds. A gentle, lounge-like quality prevails, with Armstrong taking center stage. A heightened effect of isolation results. Defining these verses are images of removal and departure that reinforce Armstrong's semi-autobiographical line in "Back o' Town Blues that "I've searched this world all over." Beginning with the earnest question of the song's title, this opening passage ends with the Mississippi River itself, that conduit of human movement. Far from celebrating mobility, the lyrical voice here describes homesickness as a chronic and deepening disorder, lamenting that "the feeling's getting stronger / The longer I stay away." With its affinity for a socially- and environmentally-coded past and its dissociation from a hegemonic national culture, this form of regionalism reflects an aesthetic of displacement and a re-territorializing impulse common to regionalism of the old South (broadly conceived to include blackface minstrelsy, travel writing, literary regionalism, the country music industry, and television programming in the vein of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show*). Alfred Appel, Jr., recognizes a similar aesthetic of displacement in his Armstrong's hit 1931 recording of the plantation song "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," an archetypal minstrel tune:

[Armstrong's] soulful rhetorical turns convincingly beget vernacular images of harmony and felicity that, however racist and false they now appear, conceivably brought comfort to Negroes who had participated in the Great Migration but had not found a Promised Land in the industrialized North. 'When It's Sleepy Time Down South' and the more racially compromised 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginny' (recorded in 1937 by Armstrong and the Mills Brothers) are, on one level, Norman Rockwell for Negroes afflicted by disappointment and urban anxieties. (127)

“Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?” appears as another echo of these earlier tunes, though of a later, more sanitized lyrical era. I believe that Appel’s claim that Armstrong’s “dramatic sincerity as a vocalist overrides the varying offensiveness of his consistently dubious or deplorable racial/racist material” (126) is equally apt here, where Armstrong again is in the compromised position of working with racially problematic material not written by himself but which nonetheless carries autobiographical resonance for displaced southerners. “Racial material,” Appel states, can turn out to be as multifaceted and perplexing as a Cubist painting” (128); plantation themes like those implied in “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” exist within a spacious post-Depression context of popular, pastoral art which carried different meanings for specific audiences.

Hence, as a grammatical interrogative, the song’s title, “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?” asks the auditor, *are you too away from home?* The disruptions and disturbances punctuating the lyrics suggest, rather than a hopeful escape from urban anxiety by returning to the plantation, a resignation and acceptance of change. The speaker’s displacement is matched by disturbances in the old South itself: the mockingbirds have stopped singing, and the “lazy Mississippi” goes paradoxically “hurrying” towards its next stage—symbols pictorializing the northern migrations in which Armstrong participated during the interwar period.

In the bridge section, the All-Stars enact their own disruptions with changes in chordal composition and instrumental color. With reserve, the horns begin to probe, then penetrate the quietude of the song’s first half, as Armstrong sings the new melodic theme:

Oh the Mardi Gras, the memories  
of creole tunes that fill the air.

I dream of oleanders in June  
and I'm wishin' that I was there.

All the elements of a New Orleans tour that northerners might expect are accounted for here: a celebration of simpler and happier times, a mythical image of the cultivated plantation south that with a simplicity we might expect from white songwriters Alter and DeLange. While largely free of the black stereotyping common to 1930s jazz (Appel 96), the lyrics here fall squarely in line with idyllic representations of the South common to the widely popular minstrel shows, vaudeville variety shows, and steamboat magazines of the Jazz Age. This romantic picture depicts a very different sort of place than the “back of town.” Whereas “Back o’ Town Blues” alludes to a specific urban location, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” embodies a more retrospective form of regionalism, complete with stock images. Here, New Orleans city gardens and the delta countryside are extolled as unforgettable: smooth internal rhymes (“what it means” and “New Orleans”; “covered vines” and “sugar pines”; “stronger” and “longer”; “like to see” and “Mississippi”; “tunes” and “June”) invoke a harmonious and organic depiction of the city that suggests a sense of self-containment and the happy accordance of integrated parts.

What is most interesting about the song is this formal consistency between instrumentation and lyrical conceit. Overall, “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?” aligns less with traditional New Orleans jazz and more with 1940s pop jazz, a genre entwined with Hollywood film industry and the Broadway musical complex. The subdued sounds of the All-Star instrumentalists—their restraint in keeping tight the band’s valves, containing many of its counter-energies—reinforce the sense of distance from New Orleans posited by the song lyrics. This more-or-less generic style of orchestration, common to the post-war jazz charts, parallels the song’s sanguine Hollywood lyrics to express a glowing, outsider

view of New Orleans. No free soloing occurs here; instead, there are only “memories / of creole tunes that fill the air.” After Armstrong sings the final verse, a re-phrasing of the first verse, he plays through the lead melody on his trumpet and the song ends. These departures from New Orleans jazz—from “the Mardi Gras, the memories”—serve to dramatize the song’s delicate elegy. This is an elegy of physical removal, but one that also carries special significance in the context of the regional turn I have been describing in Armstrong’s career, suggesting Armstrong’s own dismay at jazz’s declining connection to its sociocultural roots. The soothing, gentle movements of the song clarify what makes the original Dixieland sound unique. While “Back o’ Town Blues” is a kind of anthological recovery of primary Dixieland materials, “Do You Know What It Means” (a fresh release in 1947) exists at a state of remove, a secondary source that approaches New Orleans not from within but from without. Completing the arc of dissociation, the song comments on the migration of southerners like Armstrong and its parallel, the migration of jazz culture away from New Orleans traditions. The song therefore takes on a special significance in *Town Hall Concert* as a sort of lyrical thesis for the evening.

Like much of *Town Hall Concert*, the two songs considered in this chapter derive their energy from their opposed internal forces of uniformity and variety. Whether in the unrestrained, improvisational “Back o’ Town Blues” or in the more deliberately arranged, mainstream-oriented “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?” a continual tension exists between on one hand, polyphony and polyrhythm, and on the other hand, a containing musical structure. Balancing the imperatives of popular accessibility with those of their own artistic authorship, Armstrong and the All-Stars made room for improvisation, a sonic marker of New Orleans jazz, but still emphasized the importance of a shared, standard, common melody in the band’s sound. Armstrong reminded his All Stars often that they were obligated to transmit the

song's actual melody, to establish it plainly for audiences, before breaking into melodic paraphrase. He picked up this habit from King Oliver, his first real boss in the music industry, who is credited with the maxim: "If a cat can swing a lead and play a melody, that's what counts." As Armstrong told Barry Ulanov in an April 1945 interview for *Metronome*:

You know what King Oliver said to me? "You gotta play that lead sometimes. Play the melody, play the lead and learn." And that's what I like to hear, sometimes, anyway. Some of that fantastic stuff, when they tear out from the first note and you ask yourself, "What the hell's he playing?"—that's not for me. Personally, I wouldn't play that kinda horn if I played a hundred years; you don't have to worry about me stealing those riffs. (qtd. Jones & Chilton 35)

A direct rebuke to the boppers, Armstrong's statement reminds us that melody is, after all, satisfying to listen to, and that the tension between rigid song melodies and improvisational melodic deviation is itself artistically productive. *Town Hall Concert* illustrates this: the northern crooner song "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?" is infiltrated by soft improvised stirrings by Teagarden's trombone and Wettling's switching between "straight" and "swing" rhythm, while even in the instrumental chaos of "Back o' Town Blues," Armstrong's insistent trumpet melody (with only minor embellishments) ensures that all this chaos is contained by the song's melodic and chordal structure—what professional King Oliver had called "the lead."

The polyphonic, polyrhythmic attributes of New Orleans jazz attest to this dialectical kind of group creativity emerging from the interplay of composition and improvisation—what Brothers terms the "fixed and variable model" (7-9) of musical expression. The "fixed and variable" model of musical expression is an ensemble approach that emerged in the southern American black traditions of spirituals and the blues. In the mid-1920s, Brothers argues, Armstrong "intensified the audible presence of his African heritage" by inventing a blues- and spiritual-styled jazz idiom based in "fixed and variable" musical practice that possessed especial

cultural resonance in his regional touring circuits in the United States (7). “Fixed and variable” musical practice works through collective actions of unity (fixed sounds) and difference (variable sounds) by alternating between playing in unison, breaking away in improvisation, and switching roles through call and response.

While Thomas Brothers has contextualized Armstrong’s “fixed and variable” musical idiom in his performances from 1926 to 1928, I wish to point even further back in Armstrong’s career to emphasize his river days as another revealing biographical context for his revivalist approach. Only recently have scholars begun to closely examine the enduring effect, for example, of Armstrong’s formative years on Mississippi riverboats on his musical career. It was indeed during this “underground jazz” period in the late 1910s, before the breakout 1923 recordings by King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, and Armstrong himself, that Armstrong would develop professionally as an entertainer on the slow-moving leisure steamboats. Armstrong was one of many black musicians who had found limited work in ten-to-twelve-piece dance bands passenger steamers on the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. In a revealing work of historical criticism, *Jazz on the River* (2005), William Howland Kenney traces the causes and effects of the riverboat jazz scene which dominated American inland tourism until 1935, explaining how the riverboat economy actually enabled many black Americans to ultimately escape the Jim Crow south.<sup>110</sup> Companies such as Streckfus Steamers, who employed Armstrong, commodified the

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<sup>110</sup> Around time of World War I, the demand for roustabout labor had dropped precipitously. Riverboat jazz provided a way out of levee work for the musically talented roustabout workers on the Mississippi River (Kenney 10). The connected river systems of the American heartland hosted transformative cultural interchange among black musicians in the South and Midwest. Kenney concludes that the mixture of musical methods and styles issuing from St. Louis and New Orleans “provided the most influential example of a process in which black levee workers created intercity circuits of musical exchange along inland waterways after the Civil War. [ . . . ] Once embarked, these musicians earnestly pursued the many skills of dance band professionals, using their time on the rivers to mix folk music with show business, earning enough money to move further north and making contacts within a growing network of jazz and hot dance band musicians” (10-11).

music of the ‘roustabouts’ who provided both manpower and entertainment on the levees which were built to facilitate the transport of goods on the inland waterways.

With liberal usage of minstrel show tropes, steamboat companies sought to establish for white leisure-class passengers a perception of black musical authenticity in their small dance bands. “The authenticity of black riverboat jazz,” Kenney believes, “in the end stemmed from its popular association with roustabout levee culture as well as its musical excitement” (9). Indeed, riverboat music would ultimately shape the public’s idea of ‘real jazz’ itself. Riverboat music by black bands

became an important touchstone by which white critics and jazz writers established the ‘authenticity’ of African American jazz. . . . Even white riverboat musicians concurred that the best riverboat jazz orchestras were the black ones. (Kenney 9)

Yet in a contradiction, riverboat jazz was never the free expression of black players themselves. In fact it was a powerfully inhibited form of jazz performance. The steamboat experience was in essence “a commercialized reworking of Tom Sawyer, Becky, and Huck Finn” meant to alleviate the national and racial anxieties of the American bourgeoisie (Kenney 6-7). Steamer companies printed passenger magazines featuring passages from Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and guides aboard-ship would point out supposed locations from those stories. Riverboat jazz

communicated an aesthetic of release, a taking of leave, a separating from the past, an exploratory aesthetic and an optimistic plunge into the future that ultimately revealed both the confinement and the potential in the Jim Crow music scene in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. (Kenney 11)

That is, riverboat excursions enabled passengers to tour the Twainesque South from a comfortable distance which revealed the region while it simultaneously insulated them from its powerful racial and political tensions (Kenney 6). A vicious form of the Jim Crow social order

dominated on the steamers and rigorously segregated black crew from white passengers, even as it presented black musical talent as an exotic exhibition. “The white riverboat system” Kenney explains, “treated black roustabouts brutally and, at the same time, romanticized them and their lifestyle as indomitable and playful, emphasizing musicality and hiding the physical and emotional cruelty meted out to them” (9-10). On riverboats, black musicians were strictly segregated from white passengers. That they supplied much of the musical talent tourists sought did not translate into workplace autonomy or respect. They were frequently designated as “fillers” or “one-nighters” and denied stable working contracts. In cities and towns of the river valley, black musicians were routinely denied access to hotels, restaurants, and bathrooms. Rarely did they own their instrument (Armstrong did not in his early years), instead renting them from band leaders.

Steamboat entertainment logic aligned with the leisure habits of middle-class and upper-class listeners. Black riverboat music, to many white crews and passengers, was all the more charming for being unfamiliar. A puzzling and enigmatic sound decorated with racial stereotyping and minstrel trappings, riverboat jazz simultaneously communicated danger and excitement. Posters like those made by Streckfus Steamers reveal how the South’s regional legacies of forced plantation entertainment continued to pervade minstrelsy and early commercial jazz far into the twentieth century, accommodating the white mainstream’s antiblack racism as well as their vicarious desire for “racial ventriloquism and imaginary racechange” (Stein). As the image of a minstrel character on Streckfus’ poster illustrates, primitivism was an expected ingredient in a touristic experience of the South and what seemed its peculiar inhabitants. That elusive, primitive, invigorating quality was expected, constructed, and delivered on the riverboats, concealing the modern qualities of jazz music itself with a crude,



racist narrative which permitted modern audiences to suppose that they observed premodern performers.

The steamboat's Jim Crow social order structured Armstrong's musical style just as these conditions of racial apartheid structured public absorption of his music. Of course, Armstrong's skills on the cornet and trumpet surpassed the stylistic confines of steamer bands; if his early 1920s recordings are any indication, he likely had to significantly dampen his techniques. Probably even more so than the younger Merle Travis, edging into the 1930s radio barn dance scene, Armstrong had to adhere to a restrictive performance regimen under the direction of band managers and producers. Yet Armstrong's modernist tendency toward incorporation and fusion enables him to productively absorb the principles of riverboat entertainment into his vibrant and exploratory aesthetic. As such a strictly controlled commercial form, riverboat jazz was tamer and more melodic than the Dixieland group improvisation emerging in New Orleans dance halls. Such music represented "a partially tamed adaptation of New Orleans jazz," in that it suppressed those elements of New Orleans jazz which conflicted with the romantic, nineteenth-century experience Streckfus Steamers aimed to convey to passengers (Kenney 81). Overtly sexual lyrics, excessively fast or slow tempi, and open polyphony were suppressed on ships in favor of a more comforting, if still semi-alien, sound. Yet as highly danceable music, riverboat jazz gave the often monotonous journeys on the slow Mississippi River gaiety and hilarity, especially since passengers on the mile-wide river often could not see much of the shorelines. Riverboat jazz was, in hindsight, a "carefully rehearsed black jazz . . . [that] offered just the right amount and kind of movement, a level of stimulation calibrated to carry steamboat traditions into the twentieth century" (Kenney 9). Armstrong, capable of deploying both of these idioms—accessible and touristic riverboat jazz and clamoring, improvisational New Orleans jazz—

invents not a localized but a *regional style* which, even beyond modernism's investments in primitivism, distinguishes itself as modernist through its dogged negotiation of tradition with progress.

Dramatically opposed on the jazz spectrum to bebop—a consciously art-forward *music for musicians* with the aims of seriousness and accreditation—Armstrong's 1940s revivalist jazz prioritizes its shared language with the general public, embracing popular taste by integrating Dixieland jazz with the leisurely sounds of the Mississippi River paddleboats. This very quality—Armstrong's injunction to “play the line” in adherence to what boppers viewed as the tyranny of melody—distinguishes Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars as the *folk entertainers* of the jazz scene. Armstrong prioritizes accessibility as a feature of *Town Hall Concert* in a nod to a form of jazz marked as conspicuously ‘authentic’ (if old-fashioned) in the popular imagination.

Therefore, even in the Hollywood song “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?,” conveys an aesthetic philosophy reminiscent of modern New Orleans as Armstrong for a long time knew it. In New Orleans there contended on one hand centralized power and racial apartheid and on the other hand fierce expressions of democracy, populism, and cultural openness.<sup>111</sup> Commercial markets reflected the Jim Crow racial capitalism of the 1910s South: stringent rules governed who owned venues, who got recording and touring contracts, who was employed at a given venue, where and to whom a musician could perform, and where one could purchase a given record. Armstrong would later describe the “head whippings” he would receive

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<sup>111</sup> While “a booming metropolis that kept free black artisans gainfully employed” (Powell 394), New Orleans also remained a violently racist city, and the originating site of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) case, which legitimized post-Reconstruction segregation laws in southern states. New Orleans after all is owed to its material and cultural abundance to a brutal export economy based around the cash crops cotton and sugar, the nearby flatlands' salt and sulphur mines, and increasingly during the twentieth century, bounteous crude petroleum. A “petro-state” and “a place of “unrestrained exploitation” (Powell 400; 399), the city served as the center of operations for Louisiana's oil oligarchy, which had famously defeated the local Knights of Labor in the 1880s, and exercised control over much of the region's governance.

in the street by passing whites, and the exclusion of his bands from business establishments while on tours in New Orleans and the Mississippi River. Even in Storyville's jazz clubs, the codes of conduct restricting interracial socializing were only somewhat eased. Since racial segregation in performance and marketing profoundly shaped musical life, musical entertainment was constricted by society-wide racial discrimination.

Yet at the same time musical entertainment provided social spaces less racially constricted than most day-to-day life situations, meaning that it nonetheless functioned as a vector of cultural interchange across strictly policed racial boundaries. The authorial and performative duties (including roles, risks, and rewards) of early jazz players in this civic economy were varied, depending on many circumstances, and it was a fundamental requirement of black jazz players in the early years to recognize and adhere to those circumstances—what was fixed and immovable, and where there was room to vary.

Armstrong exemplifies this duality between authoritarianism and democracy, and I believe these intensities lie at the heart of the development of his traditional jazz. In a hierarchical society of racist law, sharecropping and tenant farming, and urban poverty, the 'hot rhythm' of a New Orleans jazz band voices affective demands for freedom and artistic sovereignty. How to safeguard individual identity while participating in shared networks of expression and meaning are serious questions for modern subjects and in particular for African American artists in the Jim Crow South. Discerning musicians like Armstrong thereby maintained expressive environments where, even without formal autonomy, they suspended the routinized restrictions of an apartheid entertainment economy.

In Armstrong's polyphonic Dixieland jazz was thus created emancipatory expressive settings. The band suspends the routine restrictions of an apartheid entertainment economy

through its formal arrangement of instruments, an arrangement that safeguards the stylistic autonomy of participating musicians, yet delivers melodies and local stock images familiar to a broad audience. For Pops, who had spent years playing themes arranged for steamboat bands and for big bands, the priority was the holistic effect of the song. This meant that playing ‘the lead’ or the basic melody, which was innately tied to a song’s authenticity, allowed his 1940s revivalist music to blend artistic progress with nostalgia. As a glowing review of *Town Hall Concert* by Robert Sylvester raved: “He did just about everything [ . . . ] no less than 27 straight songs, ranging from early jazz to modern film tunes” (qtd. Chilton & Jones 172). Armstrong and his All-Stars, playing a great variety of songs from the twenties, thirties, and forties, were indeed creating something new under the guise of remembering something old. As the critic Panassié would remark nearly three decades after *Town Hall Concert*, “these New Orleans musicians were full of new ideas, for their music, although just as authentic, was entirely different from anything they played during the ‘20s” (Panassié 121). The many affective registers of *Town Hall Concert*—its opposing forces of melancholy and ebullience, its narrative and musical conventions—reveal an adaptive and broadly appealing style honed by Armstrong over years of performance in hot bands and on steamers. Armstrong’s attention to the fixed melody in full during each performance of a song, represented for Panassié one reason why his music achieves for listeners a holistic pleasantness: because he plays “fundamental notes,” and not an endless parade of “altered notes,” his music “is full of melody” (51). This particular recording, I hope to have shown, deserves continued study not only as a major contribution to American jazz, but for the artistic resourcefulness and the public plausibility of its cultural recovery.

As I demonstrated, though Armstrong is typically associated by modernist scholars with international modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, his own brand of musical modernism can

also be understood through its affiliations with (and departures from) New Orleans modernity. *Town Hall Concert* is worth studying as a work of regional modernism in light of its massive success and its attunement to shifting trends both in public taste and in art circles. While the band's concerted effort to invoke an earlier style of New Orleans jazz responded to public taste for that music and to the nation's ongoing fascination with the deep South, it also reflected Armstrong's own dissatisfaction with the 1940s professional jazz scene. Armstrong himself made it plain to jazz impresario Joe Glaser that at that in the months leading to *Town Hall Concert* he felt "nostalgic for his past" (Nevers and Davrichewi). And it falls well within the well-documented profile of Armstrong's personality—frank, self-assured, strident—to desire, given the schisms in the 1940s jazz scene, to "set the record straight" on what exactly the original jazz was.

Armstrong's setlist at Town Hall (including "Dear Old Southland," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," "Muskrat Ramble," and "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?") asserts themes of southern rurality which conspicuously departed from the Chicago- and New York-centered jazz complexes in which he circulated. As these titles suggest, *Town Hall Concert* presents a thematically coherent, technically and commercially competent response to ongoing debates about 'real jazz.' Armstrong's temperament (and certainly his sense of regional pride) ought to be viewed as major factors in in this response. After all, Armstrong was well aware that the "original jazz" was a concept virtually synonymous with the Dixieland style of early-century New Orleans jazz—a style popularized by Jelly Roll Morton, Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, and himself. The transatlantic jazz commentariat had long viewed New Orleans as jazz's birthplace. They had only recall, after all, that in the 1910s the new word 'jass' had been used around the world to describe the peculiar sounds coming out of New Orleans. In all likelihood, these facts

lent credibility to Armstrong's case in the 1940s debates on authenticity in jazz. Given these bare facts Armstrong must surely have felt some sense of a personal role in this renewed appreciation for traditional jazz. Because Armstrong clearly took a side in the debates which raged across the 1940s jazz scene, elaborating a decisively *regional* conception of jazz centered on the unique musical qualities of New Orleans, I find that thinking of Armstrong's contributions in nationalist terms (as an American popular modernist), is no more apt than thinking of them in regional terms. Meanwhile, positioning *Town Hall Concert* as an artifact of southern musical culture presented to northern audiences demonstrates how mainstream—who American is more famous than Louis Armstrong?—the extractive mode of cultural production has been in American popular culture.

Armstrong's vision of jazz's future, plumbed from jazz's past, catered to modernist narratives of dissociation that would have carried different values among northerners and southerners, among bourgeois and working class listeners, among urban and rural Americans, those on the move and those still 'back home.' involved a return to exciting small-group performances that were less predictable than larger ensemble performances. But to an extraordinary range of people in the multicultural postwar era, Armstrong's regional idiom carried resonance. In sum, *Town Hall Concert* stands out for three major reasons: first, for its significant contribution to a distinctive regional-cultural phenomenon, the Dixieland jazz revival; second, as a notable turning point for Armstrong's career; and third, for what it signals about how postwar American audiences understood New Orleans, the deep South, and themselves. Armstrong's monumentally influential return to his roots in May 1947 will continue to be felt in the way Americans of the twentieth century (and of our own century) relate to music—as a fountainhead of folk authenticity; as a portal to the past, to distant locations, to symbolic regions,

or to the true heart and soul of a performer. Above all, for the purposes of this dissertation, *Town Hall Concert* points to the extractive mode of cultural production, still in force during the 1940s, which encouraged a view of regional musical forms as assets sought by the larger nation.

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This “close listening” makes a case for considering Travis as an important regional modernist of the postwar era, and *Folk Songs of the Hills* as a significant contribution to popular music in the regional vein. Travis’ modernist LP *Folk Songs of the Hills* denotes a popular transculturation of the industrial ballad form, and an aesthetic redirection of electrical energy. Representing the site of extraction through songs set in a coal camp, and sharing candid views on mining labor, Travis’ speaks to audiences interested in coal lore and folksongs and accommodates a broader national puzzlement with Appalachia (a puzzlement that was discussed in Chapters III and VI). All these factors mark *Folk Songs of the Hills* both as an Appalachian cultural asset extracted for America, and as an aesthetic exploration of the particular way Appalachia modernized.

While under considerable pressure to conform to Capitol Records’ and Lee Gillette’s vision for the album, the singer was also free to compile folksongs of his choice, and in the manner of his choice. For Travis, this meant careful arrangement and rewriting of traditionally shared materials. Archie Green considers Travis “a folksong purist in his careful attention to origin and transmission,” admitting that “in fifteen years of talking to country musicians I have met few persons as perceptive as Travis on the thorny problem of composition / recomposition” (*OAM* 308-09). As I will show, *Folk Songs of the Hills* demonstrates that Travis was not only familiar with the industrial lore of Kentucky coal miners, but had firsthand experience of their compositional and stylistic methods. Local performances and informal lessons had enmeshed the

country entertainer in central Appalachian musical tradition.<sup>112</sup> Yet at the same time, Travis' professionalization in the 1930s radio scene enabled him to modernize Kentucky folk performance traditions for his commercial record. And fittingly, in its arrangement of tracks, the album track-list places original Travis "folk" compositions and his versions of traditional folk songs in an envelope scheme, with two original tracks opening the album, four traditional pieces forming the album's core, and two more original tracks ending it. Travis' compositions camouflage themselves among the traditional folk songs.

A calculated pastoral effect dominates *Folk Songs of the Hills*. Compared to the glossy, urbane styles in 1930s and 1940s country music, *Folk Songs of the Hills* stands out for its organic sonic character. Under Capitol Record's direction, Travis presents himself as a coal camp native, who relates miner life in a manner that assumes an Everyman voice, occasionally embittered but flowing over with vitality. Travis' rendition of the traditional folksong "Nine Pound Hammer" is a cheerful comment on the difficulty of mine work, finding humor in an old-time ballad convention, the contradiction between dialoguing voices ("Roll on, buddy, pull your load of coal. / How can I pull, when the wheels won't go?"). This and other tunes like "Over by Number Nine" and "John Henry" dramatize scenes of work with rustic sounds and backcountry characters. Eschewing clownishness, Travis still revels in local pastime and country frivolity, thereby drawing on older traditions of Southern minstrelsy and musical showmanship which have been well documented (Comentale 83). This speaking voice asserts proletarian wit while involving the listener in Travis' folk memories, almost as a friend, through direct speech and laughter. "That's All," a paean to rustic simplicity, extolls the rural virtue of unschooled wisdom.

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<sup>112</sup> Travis had learned "I am a Pilgrim" from Mose Rager, who himself had learned it from a black prisoner in Elkton, Kentucky; he picked up the jazzy "That's All" from black Ohioan revivalists while busking as a young man in Cincinnati.



“I Am a Pilgrim,” a song about being poor, dirty, unwhole, and rootless, extolls Christian mercy for the abject. Other songs court novelty song status. “Over by Number Nine” may be best termed a coal frolic, a hot guitar piece featuring Travis’ vocal imitations of mining camp sounds. Other lyrically-simple and celebratory numbers on *Folk Songs of the Hills* include “Muskrat,” a traditional animal song Travis aims explicitly at children. In “Muskrat” Travis is sure to play up Appalachian verbalism; he pronounces “guitar” as a trochee, not an iamb, deviating from the broader American speech, and makes a perfect rhyme possible only in his regional dialect when he pairs “hard” and “tired.”

Primary among Travis’ folk operations is the technique of self-interruption in order to supply commentary on the songs, a strategy which acquaints the listener with Travis’ speaking voice. This informal rapping—what folklorist Ben Botkin has termed “folksay”—is variously expository and comic, blending the innovative approaches of radio country with an older form of folk narration. Travis, within and between songs, tells tales, discusses coal camp and railroad lore, and describes personal memories. Because folk groups (and their vernacular cultures) are sustained through oral learning and performance imitation, their audience by necessity plays a crucial role (Toelken 137). Travis’ jokes, riddles, games, and gestures—such as making his guitar talk like a muskrat—perform a prosthetic function insofar as they reflect a “live context” (Toelken 22, 33) on a storage medium where *there is no live context* to be reflected. Travis’ highlighting of the specific and distinct, rather than the widely shared, is also, paradoxically, a gesture of humane invitation to listeners. Coal miner ballads, vocal imitations of mine whistles and coal lifts, and personal narratives emerge from “high context” (Toelken 55) occupational folk groups which formed temporary, semi-isolated microcultures in backcountry worksites.

Each folk group has esoteric dynamics, vocabulary, and relations (Toelken 57), so their expressions can be ultra-local and mean nothing to outsiders of a group (Green *OAM* 170).

And while folk groups are “high context,” the larger society is “low context,” suggesting that Travis’ unique folk-pop constructions, with their allusions to the Kentucky geography (Harlan, Hazard, and Ebenezer) treat their “low context” mass audience as if they were “high context,” inviting them to experience the occupational lore of coal camps with intimacy. Travis’ verbal introduction of each individual song, while saturating *Folk Songs of the Hills* with personal meaning, also establishes a decidedly retrospective tone. It is Travis’ frequent use of past tense that is striking.<sup>113</sup> Travis, as Capitol perhaps urged him to, achieves in his performance a non-studio tonality that could be appreciated by what the record label astutely recognized as an emerging national folk listening market.

This pop-folk strategy results in an album that seems extremely unfriendly for radio, retail, and hospitality settings. *Folk Songs of the Hills* provides a disjointed listening experience in which Travis gives a sample of the song, often the titular chorus line, and then *forces* the listener, in a notably un-pop maneuver, to wait through a spoken introduction before the song properly begins. These additional requirements on the listener’s attention to absorb verbal information alongside the lyrics themselves suspend the album’s own musicality in favor of direct testimony. Travis assumes the explicit role of mediator between the music and listener, suspending the libidinal release of rhythm and melody after “teasing” the audience with a fragment of it. Here *Folk Songs of the Hills*, with its self-interruptions, its spoken interludes

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<sup>113</sup> Travis introduces the endearing traditional English ballad “Barbara Allen” as a song “as old as the hills,” while songs such as “John Bolin,” “Lost John,” “John Henry,” portray legendary figures of the past. As the disc set reverse label promises, Travis gives the impression that he is recalling tunes. Introducing “I Am a Pilgrim,” Travis reminisces how he “learned a lot of them old songs” from miners; introducing “Muskrat,” Travis narrates a childhood story of a miner with a talking guitar who traveled to Kentucky from Virginia, stating he will “sort of show you how he done it.”

prioritizing narrative and context at the expense of a continuous musicality, stands in contrast to the radio-oriented pop country of its day, epitomized by the unhindered (and thus predictable), steady snap of Hank Williams' songs. *Folk Songs of the Hills* preserves the memories and feelings of the performer as an essential part of the music. In this manner Travis turns the abstract, modernist form of the pop-country record decisively toward ballad traditions and a narration of the specific coal-mining cultures of central Kentucky. Travis unites the selectivity of the folk performer, which is the tendency to correct and rationalize past versions of songs in a selective process (Toelken 43), with the diverse stylistic absorbency of pop country. The dialectic of absorption and selection he traverses characterizes Travis as an exemplary practitioner of musical modernism.

*Folk Songs of the Hills* also stands out instrumentally in ways that appeared to eschew standard pop-country studio procedures in favor of the folksong tradition. Travis set aside his hollow-body electric guitar when he entered to studio to record *Folk Songs of the Hills* with only an acoustic guitar, a thumbpick, and his voice. This spare sound departs from the rich orchestration of popular country during the 1930s and 40s, when the country music recording industry explored stylistic directions that distanced it from the more folk-oriented sounds of the 1920s hillbilly recordings. Top country hits of the 1940s included electrified, densely instrumented numbers that borrowed elements of 1930s jazz and swing: hear for instance the clarinet-, trumpet-, and accordion-laden "Jingle, Jangle, Jingle" (1942) by Gene Autry and "Pistol Packin' Mama" (1943) by Al Dexter, both songs fitting snugly into Bing Crosby's big band easy-listening repertoire a year later. And pop country had even found a proto-rock and roll expressivity in Hank Williams' "Move it On Over" (1947). Capitol meant to market this box set of records as a truly 'back home' experience, pointing out on the reverse cover the lack of

percussion, ensemble accompaniment, and electrification—increasingly prominent elements of the country sound.

However, this geographically detached, pop-country song format—which Travis himself had been tirelessly developing as a composer and performer in the thirties and early forties—is not discarded in search of unpolluted Kentucky traditions. Travis instead gladly configures it into his Kentucky coal mining songs. Travis’ radio barn dance background can be heard even in the purportedly ‘down home’ *Folk Songs of the Hills*. Originals and folksongs alike, each piece conveys a strong sense of song form.<sup>114</sup> In *Folks Songs of the Hills* Travis relies upon the innate strengths of the pop song form—a form with a calculated duration, satisfying the listener without overstaying its welcome with excessive repetitions. While Travis’ instincts for the popular song form are on obvious display in his newly-penned “Sixteen Tons” and “Dark as a Dungeon,” they also enable him to craft shortened, snappier redesigns of traditional folk songs. In his rendition of the Scottish ballad “Barbara Allen,” for example, Travis undercuts the narrative’s sorrowful theme (unrequited love, causing death) by bouncing it upon a decidedly buoyant rhythm. In “Barbara Allen,” a contrast between Travis steady 2/2 (or “cut-time”) rhythm and the metrically-loose, unaccompanied, “high lonesome” style of traditional Appalachian ballad singing<sup>115</sup> convincingly illustrates Travis’ internalization, from his radio broadcast days, of a studio logic which prioritizes mass accessibility and appeal. Although Travis’ compositions on *Folk Songs of the Hills* have a decidedly regional scope, addressing the locally specific activities of coal

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<sup>114</sup> Songs on *Folks Songs of the Hills* feature song structures made with brief introductory overtures, verses, refrains, instrumental bridges, and sophisticated outros; melodic lines underlaid with supporting harmonic layers; rehearsed solos providing instrumental breaks; a liberal use of volume dynamics; and artful fluctuations in tempo, especially the *ritard* technique in song outros.

<sup>115</sup> Traditional Appalachian ballad songs are associated with the unaccompanied “high, lonesome” style. This vocal style leaves the singer “freed from the steady rhythm of a guitar and able to vary meter to suit the dramatic needs of the song” (Wolfe 10).

extraction in Kentucky, Travis modifies Kentucky performance styles according to his pop sensibilities.

Diverse styles<sup>116</sup> influence the album's conventions of form and harmony. To a greater degree than Capital chose to publicly acknowledge, Travis' chord progressions suggested a refined sense of jazz-inspired harmony, reflecting the rich tones of country blues, radio western swing, and the popular tunes standardized by the Tin Pan Alley complex and taken up by Kentucky folk musicians after the close of the nineteenth century (Wolfe 14). To a greater degree than other expressive country modes such as 'hot fiddle' style, or emergent 1940s Scruggs-style bluegrass banjo, I find that Travis' tunes feature a surpassing tonal variety. A remarkable quality of Travis picking is the dazzling multilayered texture which compensates for the sparseness implied by soloist performance. His six strings imitate a band in ways that accommodate the universal appeal of danceability and the particular market imperatives of syncopation in twentieth century American pop music. Orchestrating the guitar's various registers, Travis' Muhlenberg County guitar style fills brief instrumental breaks with thumping pizzicato bass, middle-range accompanying chords, and treble melodies, each at intervals taking the position of sonic dominance. Travis' version of "John Henry," for instance, features a rich harmonic complexity incorporating jazzy diminished chords and a rhythmic vigor based on syncopated melody.

*Folk Songs of the Hills*, given these factors, does not capture and isolate Kentucky folk music, but instead rewrites it in a pop format. Not only these formal features, but the ambiguous status of Travis' album within the folk-pop musical spectrum, and its confused reception by

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<sup>116</sup> These influences on *Folk Songs of the Hills* include: the blues, which provides Travis with string bends and slide, as well as 'blue-note' scales; western swing, from which Travis derives a rhythmic basis; jazz and pop, from which Travis harvests chord and song forms; the industrial blues balladry of convict and free laborers he grew up with; and British broadside balladry, which provides a mode of public documentation.

learned listeners, illustrate the inventiveness of Travis and Capitol Records' hybridist project. The entire album possesses a sleek accessibility and energy which Wolfe associates with folk music's liberation into the pop song form.<sup>117</sup> Travis' recordings, made in Los Angeles, indicate a professional musician who, far from being a rural recluse, was on the cutting edge of distinct aesthetic emergences.

With "Dark as a Dungeon," Travis composes a poignant lyrical ballad about the melancholy and danger of coal mining labor. It begins, characteristically, with a brief refrain and then a spoken introduction:

[SUNG] It's as dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.

[SPOKEN] I never will forget one time when I was on a little visit down home in Ebenezer, Kentucky. I was a-talkin' to an old man that had known me ever since the day I was born, and an old friend of the family. He said, "Son, you don't know how lucky you are to have a nice job like you've got and don't have to dig out a livin' from under these old hills and hollers like me and your pappy used to." When I asked him why he never had left and tried some other kind of work, he said, "Nawsir, you just won't do that. If ever you get this old coal dust in your blood, you're just gonna be a plain old coal miner as long as you live." He went on to say, "It's a habit [*chuckle*] sorta like chewin' tobaccer."

Travis then sings, as if he were that "old man," a warning to anyone considering a mining occupation:

Come and listen you fellers, so young and so fine,  
and seek not your fortune in the dark, dreary mines.  
It will form as a habit and seep in your soul,  
'til the stream of your blood is as black as the coal.

It's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew,  
where danger is double and pleasures are few,

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<sup>117</sup> Varieties of note durations—i.e., quarter notes, half notes, whole notes, and "syncopated fill figures" (Chappell 122) paired with string slides provide a melodic and tonal propulsion to Merle Travis' tunes. And there is weight to Travis' picking hand: he strikes with force, sounding out double bass notes on two strings), and slamming three to five the strings on offbeats to sound out percussive chords. A professional control, reflecting Travis' studio and stage experience, is evident in the snappy, crisp, bass notes, with their "pronounced attack" (Chappell 120) producing a Nashville-friendly sound.

where the rain never falls and the sun never shines,  
it's dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.

It's a-many a man I have seen in my day,  
who lived just to labor his whole life away.  
Like a fiend with his dope and a drunkard his wine,  
a man will have lust for the lure of the mines.

The reason to avoid mine work is not, as listeners might expect, the work itself. Instead it is the “lust[ful]” compulsion to *keep* working the mine—the “lure of the mines”—that serves as Travis’ rationale. These verses’ images of enthrallment and dependence, especially the “dungeon,” the “fiend,” and the “drunkard,” strikingly interlock to argue about the addictiveness of coal mining. These’ images lend connotations of sinfulness to the idea of working one’s “whole life away,” a sinfulness that is censured by the anastrophic, quasi-Biblical injunction to “seek not your fortune” in a coal mine.

Despite the rhyming, romantic qualities of Travis’ ballad, its metaphorical association of coal mining and “chewin’ tobaccer,” “dope,” and “wine” performs a kind of documentary function that is supported by historical evidence. Substance addiction was an acknowledged part of coal patch life, a subject not only of coal community ethnographers who discovered that it was a commonplace among workers but a favorite topic of camp musicians themselves. Harry M. Caudill describes the abuse of heroin, cocaine, morphine, and alcohol as a common means by which hard-working miners, hammerers, and shakers attained bodily oblivion after long shifts (NCC 93+). George Korson’s Appalachian field recordings of 1938-1940 reveal extensive coal-patch traditions of saloon humor and balladry. In the industrial folk ballad “Blue Monday,” for instance, collected in Pennsylvania 1940, the chorus lines repeat:

I’ll have no more Blue Monday,  
Blue Monday after pay.  
Your shots are bad and your buddy is mad  
and the shaft will work all day.

I'll have no more Blue Mondays  
to make my hair turn gray.  
I'll join the white ribbon, and then I'll be givin'  
me wife the whole of me pay.

Miner ballads like this one poke fun at the wasteful cycle of weekday working and weekday binge drinking that trapped many miners. Other miner ballads Korson encountered and field-recorded, like “Drill Man Blues,” recorded in West Virginia in 1940, describe more soberly the way even miners with silicosis, or “miner’s asthma,” felt emotionally attached to their occupations:

I can hear my hammer rollin'  
as I lay down for my sleep,  
for drilling is the job I love  
and this I will repeat.

Mining life was deeply habitual, as Travis knew. “Dark as a Dungeon” comments on the broader market compulsion that determined the lives of farmers-turned-coal miners like Merle’s father Robert Travis. As Travis confided in a 1961 interview, his own father had “lust for the lure of the mines” that he sometimes regretted:

My dad raised tobaccer, and ah—. My brother, my oldest brother Taylor, he moved to M Co and got a job in the mines. So he went back to Rosewood and told dad, said “Pappy, you’re crazy raisin’ this tobaccer.” Said “you can go down to the mines and really make some money.” So dad, ah—spent the rest of his days after goin’ to the mines in Browder, Kentucky—and then of course eventually in Beech Creek, where he worked sixteen years. Ah—Dad always said, “I wish I’d’a stayed on the farm,” you know. But I think he kinda liked coal minin.’

For many working-class Appalachians in the twentieth century, a series of ecological upheavals had combined with changes in land ownership to reduce the economic independence of backcountry families. As Steven Stoll documents powerfully in his recent work of regional economics, *Ramp Hollow: the Ordeal of Appalachia*, a perfect storm of social and environmental forces, including the closure of commons and ejection of squatters, the commercial liquidation of



hardwood resources and collapse of forest economies, and new kinds of land manipulation, conspired between the 1870s and the 1930s to instate a powerful new energy regime that left Appalachians with “an astonishing lack of control over their environment” (262).<sup>118</sup> Small-scale household farming declined as commonly held properties were consolidated and the “squatter’s rights” which had permitted settler families to live rent-free during the previous centuries was legally annulled (Sherman & Henry 175). In a long turn of the region’s historical cycles of dispossession, Appalachian settlers whose ancestors had, generations earlier, violently displaced indigenous Appalachians increasingly found themselves cut off from their own means of living. Concurrently, a new concept of mineral rights was introduced to Appalachia as thousands of illiterate mountain landowners signed coercive contracts, selling their lands for, on average, fifty cents per acre (Caudill *NCC* 74, 306; Caudill *MLD* 59). Social decline in the region had everything to do with the coal extraction economy, Korson believes:

Thousands of these old-line American families underwent a social revolution as their traditional folkways yielded to company discipline. Particularly ironic was the fact that among them were many mountaineers who had formerly owned the coal they now dug for a bare existence. (*CDF* 37)

This incorporation of “the Atlantic peasantry” (Stoll 174) into global capitalism eliminated local control of resources, and deprived the region’s working poor of subsistence, while wages—and money-based living—served as the great net that caught the freefalling families that had been cut off from a “failing ecological base” (220).

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<sup>118</sup> The destruction of the great Appalachian forest resulted in “declining returns from subsistence and exchange” (Stoll 132) and eroded household autonomy by depriving many mountaineers of their “means of subsistence” (169-171; 265). At the same time that massive deforestation, rail construction, and coal extraction privatized and dismantled mountain habitats, these industrial projects also brought larger and larger labor populations of African-Americans and European-Americans into the southern mountains. The region’s ever-diminishing wild game populations (especially larger animals like the bears, wolves, and elk native to Appalachia) left behind only small animals (birds, opossums, raccoons, squirrels, and rabbits) as a common resource on which wage-earners could partly subsist.

And coal companies who employed many of these workers built their own sorts of dungeons. Travis knew well, having grown up in Depression-era Kentucky coal camps, the “oppressive and degrading” methods of “company discipline” in such worksites: wage deductions, scrip wages, checkweighman fraud, anti-union ‘yellow-dog’ employment contracts; ethnic isolation of workers; and carceral architecture such as walls, electric fences, barbed wire, armed guards, and tippie-mounted spotlights (Korson *CDF* 37+). These dungeon-like mines block out the environmental commons, as represented by the chorus’ refreshing ecological images “dew,” “rain,” and “sun.” “Dark as a Dungeon,” with its warning that “If ever you get this old coal dust in your blood, you’re just gonna [*sic*] be a plain old coal miner as long as you live” mourns an experience common to Appalachia. Over the course of a generation or two, a broad swathe of the region’s inhabitants transformed from a deedless squatter class, with ample rights to common resource bases, to industrial proletarians totally dependent on coal companies. Imagine huge convict labor gangs, orphan trains, and unemployed, starving refugees. Picture mass graves and widespread drug abuse, and there is the ‘dungeon’ represented by Appalachian coal-fields.

If mining is the text of “Dark as a Dungeon,” then electricity is its subtext. In a third and final verse, Travis uses the electrical signal of Capitol Records Hollywood studio to make more dramatically visible to postwar American consumers the hidden cost of cheap energy:

I hope when I’m gone and the ages shall roll,  
my body will blacken and turn into coal.  
Then I’ll look from the door of my heavenly home  
and pity the miner a-diggin’ my bones.

As the final verse shows, interplaying themes of light and dark, freedom and enclosure, are not the only themes by which Travis depicts mine dungeons. Travis breaks it down into life and death terms. Here, appeals to human transformation and the eternity of the soul, potentially

transcendent ideas, serve only to reveal the infinite futurity of coal mining. By the song's end, the singer predicts, in a moment of foresight that pulses in a dactylic meter, that his "*body will blacken and turn into coal*" [my emphasis]. Here the speaker acknowledges his status as object converted into surplus value, an elegy for the market commodification of all life. Comfortable and bright domestic spaces ("the door of my heavenly home") contrast, like a warm and well-lit American home, with the "dark" and "damp" mines of Kentucky. Travis affiliates himself with the site of production, not the site of cultured consumption. Furthermore, "Dark as a Dungeon" sadly anticipates an infinitude of pitiable work. Nothing, this verse suggests, can be expected to change for the miner, even though "the ages shall roll." In this capacity, the song's sense of imprisonment and addiction indicts the harmful addiction of modern society to plentiful, cheap energy. This confluence of contexts—heroin, morphine, and alcohol dependence in the mining ranks; the ensnaring treadmill of hazardous, low-wage work; coal-patch traditions of saloon balladry; "company discipline"; the miner's subordination to coal-powered energy regimes—suggest the acumen of "Dark as a Dungeon" as a work of elegiac regionalism.

Like "Dark as a Dungeon," the better-known "Sixteen Tons" carries a two-fold connection to Kentucky mining communities, *both* critically representing mining life *and* enacting folk practices of Appalachian coal mining groups. An original minor-key blues ballad, "Sixteen Tons" relates the brutal economic dependency of Kentucky coal miners, as experienced by Travis' father and brothers. Its famous refrain, "I owe my soul to the company store" was a favorite saying of Merle's father, who used it half-jokingly when talking about the family finances. The debut recording of Travis' original song, made in Hollywood's Capitol Studios, on Aug 8, 1946, begins:

[SUNG] You load sixteen tons and what do you get?  
Another day older and deeper in debt.

Saint Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go;  
I owe my soul to the company store.

[SPOKEN] Yessir, there's a-many a Kentucky coal miner that pretty near owes his soul to the company store. He gets so far in debt to the coal company he's a-workin' fer that he goes on fer years without being paid one red cent in real honest-to-goodness money. But he can always go to the company store and draw flickers or scrip—you know, that's little brass coins that you can't spend nowhere only at the company store. So they add that against his account and every day he gets a little farther in debt. [*chuckle*] That sounds pretty bad, but even that's got a brighter side to it.

Travis' ameliorative statement here—that the coal miner's situation of indebtedness “sounds pretty bad but even that's got a brighter side to it”—smooths over the ballad's potentially radical message. The song lyrics, however, do not mince words. “Sixteen Tons” indicts the coal companies' capacity to extort employees into debt using now-illegal methods of company wage evasion. It likens the miner's extraction of coal from the ground to the company's extraction of value from the miner's work. Whereas the thematic focus on addiction in “Dark as a Dungeon” draws upon miner saloon ballads, the working-class critique of the bosses in “Sixteen Tons” draws upon a more militant strain of labor ballads that was circulating in Appalachian mining communities. These class-conscious songs include John W. Brown's well known 1913 *United Mine Workers' Journal* (UMWJ) ballad “Mining Royalties,” which demands remuneration of value stolen from the mining class (Korson *CDF* 128). Many of the ballads Korson recorded in Appalachia, such as “Strike, Boys, Strike!,” “Pick Coal Rhythm,” and “Harlan County Blues,” forwarded pro-worker, anticapitalist sentiments. Korson categorized these as “ballads of discontent” (*Coal Dust* 23). The lyrics of “Sixteen Tons” hints that Merle and Robert Travis may have known a version of “The Company Store,” which appeared in the *UMWJ* on May 23, 1895:

The lot of the miner,  
At best is quite hard,  
We work for good money,  
Get paid with a card;

[ . . . ]  
Monop'ly keeps grasping  
For more and still more;  
They will soon own the earth,  
Through the company store. (qtd. Korson *CD* 78)

This anti-monopolist miner ballad may have been one of many class-conscious ballads in the Kentucky miner tradition as Merle Travis understood it, influencing “Sixteen Tons” and its titular refrain (“I owe my soul to the company store”). This repeating chorus narrates how workers themselves are, like the earth, mined of value. Travis’ suggestive colloquialism “deeper in debt” implies the deepening mine shaft, a zone where more abundant production does not mean more abundant wages, but only more abundant debt. Interestingly, Travis’ dour song does not choose to depict any “bright side” to mining, its tough, embittered voice instead describing, from within, a system of capitalist domination which leaves the speaker in a state of spiritual debt.

There is only the vital energy of the miner-voice and the guitar—the compositional clarity and poignant demeanor of the blues mode—to propel the song and offer Travis’ listeners a glimpse of brightness. The first song verse continues Travis’ complaint:

Now, some people say a man’s made out of mud,  
but a poor man’s made out of muscle and blood.  
Muscle and blood, skin and bones,  
a mind that’s weak, and a back that’s strong.

This first verse explores a perennial theme in modernism, the technological division of labor, and in doing so employs irony, a fundamental modernist technique. Reversing the Biblical creation story, in which “the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground” (*KJB* Genesis 2:7), Travis sings that “a poor man” is not incarnated “mud” but plain old “muscle and blood.” Travis’ critical view of workers as people with weak minds and strong backs corresponds with changes

in Appalachian life resulting from the industrial division of labor.<sup>119</sup> As James F. Knapp discusses in *Literary Modernism and the Transformation of Work* (1988), the rationalization of work in the industrial period saw work divided into two kinds: knowing and making. This division “exclude[ed] the subordinated classes from the possession of knowledge,” and designated “practical work” as “the proper task for men of decision or of sheer muscle” (2). Here the worker cannot see the whole, but instead does “segmentary and repetitive gestures” as satirized by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (Jameson 156). Travis’ embittered view here of miners as sub-spiritual agents, mere “muscle and blood, skin and bones,” critiques capitalist expropriation in ways that resound with the song’s chorus line (“I owe my soul to the company store”) and its Faustian crisis of soul ownership. Travis’ demonic images of capitalist domination reveal the miner’s spirit itself as yet another form of private property within a system of wage servitude, adding political depth to *Folk Songs of the Hills*’ sometimes anodyne exploration of mine camp life.

“Sixteen Tons” channels traditional Kentucky ballad song elements, not only in instrument and voice, but in lyric and theme. Travis’ characterization of the song’s central singer or speaker leverages the ‘bad man’ ballad trope, familiar in such popular American ballads as “Casey Jones,” “John Hardy,” “Stagger Lee,” “Railroad Bill,” “Tom Dooley,” “Pretty Polly,” and “Jesse James.” Travis even reworks a line from “John Henry” when his speaker of “Sixteen Tons,” on the day of his birth, “walked to the mine.”

Well, I was born one mornin’ when the sun didn’t shine.  
I picked up my shovel and I walked to the mine.  
I loaded sixteen tons of Number Nine coal  
and the straw-boss hollered, “Well, bless my soul.”

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<sup>119</sup> The concepts of ‘rationalization’ and the ‘division of labor’ denote major historical developments in the U.S. economy including Max Weber’s ‘rationalization theory,’ which outlined a process of reconfiguring traditional workers and craftspeople into factory hands, and Taylorism, a popular name for the scientific management of workers.

Assuming the outsider voice of these bad men, “Sixteen Tons” opens a shared interchange between folk music and country music. It also courts the prejudicial expectations of the larger American society. Appalachian stereotypes of violence and lower social intelligence are woven into the third verse,

Well, I was born one mornin', it was drizzlin' rain.  
Fightin' and trouble is my middle name.  
I was raised in the bottoms by a mama hound.  
I'm mean as a dog, but I'm as gentle as a lamb.

and the fourth verse:

Well, if you see me a-comin' you better step aside.  
A lotta men didn't and a lotta men died.  
I got one fist of iron, another of steel;  
and if the right one don't get you, boy, the left one will.

As an underdeveloped region, relative to the larger nation, Appalachia has always inspired intensity of characterization. This intensity is present in the lyrical speaker of “Sixteen Tons,” a larger-than-life miner caricature. Here too Travis distinguishes himself as a popular entertainer as well as a folk entertainer. Country record labels as early as the Depression years were putting forward country stars by selling not only songs but the personality of singers. National audiences even beyond the South, the hillbilly record industry discovered, were interested in this music. As a result, the Carter Family, Fiddlin' John Carson, and Jimmie Rodgers became household names with the advent of modern commercial music on records and radio. As Wolfe writes of the Depression era: “the age of songs was ending; the age of singers was about to begin” (18).

Travis here is a bitter singer, his tough and even threatening voice contrasting with his smiling portrait on the album's cover. The song's stereotypical ‘bad man’ extravagance likely

inspired Johnny Cash, who made hay with such themes and himself played covers of both “Dark as a Dungeon” and “Sixteen Tons.” As Jack Temple Kirby writes:

In terms of American perception of the South, the significance of country music’s commercialization is that it pressed out to national boundaries a pervasive image of the visceral white southerner. He was languid, innocent of caprice and wisdom in handling money, moonstruck, and often drunk. Cash’s word was extravagant. (90)

Country music’s cultural role is clarified within the context of internal migration to cities between 1920 and 1960 and the “commodity construction” of urban working-class identity (Pecknold 45). These ‘bad man’ characters carried weight in folk and pop contexts in the twenties, thirties, and forties, a period during which an uprooted, mobile workforce of poor Appalachians left home. In a social freefall, these unskilled rural southerners found themselves in a national economy offering mostly mechanized industrial jobs. “Sixteen Tons” bad narrator points to an understanding of the miner’s role as a conduit fueling industrial modernity, so focused is its depiction of the miner’s role as the battered instrument of extraction, the point of fiery contact between modernity and premodernity. In short, Travis humanizes the ‘bad man.’<sup>120</sup>

As “Dark as a Dungeon” and “Sixteen Tons” demonstrate, *Folk Songs of the Hills* achieves a hybrid form which accommodates expectations of folk groups while aiming for a mass audience. *Folk Songs of the Hills* stands out as a work of popular modernism which bridges folksong traditions of central Appalachia with emerging national market genres of country and

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<sup>120</sup> *Folk Songs of the Hills*, with its preoccupation with back-breaking labor (which kills the “John Henry” heroic character, vexes the narrator of “Nine Pound Hammer,” and is warned against in “Sixteen Tons” and “Dark as a Dungeon”), rejects the triumphant masculinity of the “cowboy” singer that dominated 1940s country music. “This nine pound hammer, it’s a little too heavy,” Travis sings, “for my size, buddy, for my size.” These ballads emphasize the hardness of limits (such as those on bodily strength, earthly existence, and economic health) in the immediate working life of a folk group. “Sixteen Tons” and “Dark as a Dungeon” especially reject simple ideals of masculine individual freedom so important in commercial country music. Travis continually evokes the human cost of cheap coal energy, though not in a simple or one-dimensional way. This ironic mode emphasizes human vulnerability, locating the coal industries’ methods of extractive accumulation as a source of working-class discontent, but its condemnation of these industrial abuses always carries the ambivalence of a musician who depended on the mining wages of his family members.



folk music. Memory of less mechanized life in broad segments of the American listening public explains some of the appeal of *Folk Songs of the Hills*, an album based in local specificity and stock characterization. As in the case of Armstrong's minstrel-flavored "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" we have to widen our critical judgment to acknowledge where caricatures of southerners would have operated very differently for different listeners. Scandura and Thurston theorize that, because of the social disruptions resulting from internal and external migration in the U.S., "modern American culture may be read as embedded in an economy of repression and melancholy in which difference and difficulty must be incorporated for the foundation to hold" (7). This modernist agenda to incorporate difference is evident in the way "Sixteen Tons" participates in the nation's shared discourses about Appalachians. Travis' representations of underdevelopment and the Appalachian diaspora in *Folk Songs of the Hills* show how, to quote Scandura and Thurston's formulation on American modernism,

Debates about Americanization, assimilation, and nativism continually negotiated the boundary of 'foreignness,' through a complex economy of embodiment and cultural memory with consumer capitalism as the determining glue. (7)

This analysis of Travis hopes to identify another point in place and time—specifically, Travis' box set of 'down home' folk records—where "modern America was reconstructed through a simultaneous remembering and forgetting of the Other within" (Scandura & Thurston 7).

Throughout *Folks Songs of the Hills* Travis appears as both a primitive entertainer and untutored folklorist<sup>121</sup> employed under the ethnographic program signaled by Capitol Records' packaging. In his spoken reminiscences, Travis enacts cultural remembering in the confessional mode. At the same time, his affirmative, magnetic stylings and cheerful nostalgia—the prevailing character of the album, indomitable even as his lyrics describe the injuries sustained by the coal miners—

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<sup>121</sup> Introducing "John Henry" and "Possom Up a Simmon Tree," for instance, Travis stipulates his version of a given tune is only one regional variant among many.

perform their own kind of cultural forgetting. We cannot state once and for all what these rememberings and forgettings meant to listeners. But Archie Green, in considering the lasting interest of Travis' folk materials to collectors and enthusiasts, speculates that Travis' folksy regionalism caters to widespread anxieties regarding social and professional identity:

With bewildering technological change and tidal shifts in global markets the order of the day, distinctions between blue and white collar wearers and their lore may fade. Yet, we cling to antique work customs or beliefs to cope with modernity's toll. (Liner notes)

Like Armstrong, Travis distinguishes himself in 1947 not as a modernist in the sense of High Modernism, with its art vanguard and universalization of the artist, but as a modernist of a later, less rarified sort. Travis' regionalism has roots in 1930s modernism, when there was "a definite resurgence of 'matter of fact,' accessible documentary pioneered in the U.S. by Mark Twain and Jacob Riis" (Vials xxx). Like Hank Williams' brand of country music, Travis' shared with 1930s modernism—embodied in the Popular front movement (1935-1939), socialist realism, and the Depression-era vogue for public documentary (see Stott)—a taste for commonness and coarseness. *Folk Songs of the Hills*, itself a "technolog[y] of cultural memory and forgetting" (Scandura & Thurston 11), shows us a popular radio performer conducting a symbolic return 'down home' and issuing a longform solo study of mining life and lore. These are strategies which optimistically confront the commercialization and mechanization of Kentucky folk music, not to drive traditional musical forms into extinction but to launch them into a novel commercial form.

Rather than try to evaluate Travis' authenticity as an American folk entertainer, one of Archie Green's primary goals, I have tried to show how his folk-pop album transforms both its Kentucky folk materials and the national country-pop *modus operandi* through creative incorporations. For this a dialectic approach is needed. Mass culture does not instigate a simple,

unidirectional displacement of vernacular cultures. While country music has been described by scholars as a register of regional detachment—Comentale, for instance, depicts “country radio as a technological manifestation of regional death and dispersion” (76)—it is important to remember that even though things like radio and records edged out many folk traditions of music making, they did not do so entirely. And furthermore, these devices have also made folk and folk-inspired music widely beloved and demanded. Although popular music may “eventually obliterate” folk music, it nevertheless fosters “multilayered interaction” that “inevitably enriches and expands our musical vocabulary” (Lornell 6). Archie Green’s optimistic and useful concept of “poplore” (*OAM* 14) helps listeners to remember that the folk processes of imitation, creation, and inspiration do not end with the rise of popular music. Of course ideas about purity and contamination were prevalent in Appalachian folksong collectors (notably, Cecil Sharp and George Korson). But Merle Travis, singing Muhlenberg songs in Hollywood, casts doubt on George Korson’s ethnographic theory that “removing the need for self-amusement, [has] deprived the miner of his urge toward self-expression” (Korson *MMP* 5). This form of “contamination anxiety”<sup>122</sup> is as limiting in folkloristics as it is in literary studies. Often what we term ‘folksong’ is already indebted to American commercial music in the forms of sheet music “author songs”, “hillbilly” songster records, vaudeville shows, variety shows, circuses, stage music, and radio barn dances.

Travis’ deployment of the Appalachian folk ballad as a robust pop song form shows *Folk Songs of the Hills* as a notable modernization of Kentucky tradition. But more interestingly, Travis simultaneously Kentuckifies pop country. Despite his folk credentials, Travis’ immense

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<sup>122</sup> The idea of “contamination anxiety,” as a theme of modernist culture and the field of modernism, is elaborated by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Indiana UP, 1986.

cultural influence as a shaper of modern country, even if it is yet to be fully recovered as such, hinges on his ability to synthesize American musical traditions associated not only with Muhlenberg County's multiethnic musical styles, but with the menagerie of 1930s and 40s pop country genres he encountered on the live radio circuits. As Archie Green guessed in a Winter 1971 issue of *JEMF Quarterly*,

Merle Travis' Capitol offering did appeal to Sandburg's bookish auditors, to Guthrie's radical followers, and to the Carsons' gospel fans. In a sense *Folk Songs of the Hills*, so aptly titled, anticipated the audience contour of the "folksong revival" of the 1950s and 1960s. (121)

Interfacing with the public in a broadly appealing manner, Travis hones a popular compositional style in which no single influence dominates but which transmits a sonic environment with luxuriant diversity of influence and feeling. Travis evokes a forest of emotive lyricism, direct, neighborly narration, mean-spirited monologues, African American industrial blues ballads and Anglo-American waltzes, jazz-based chords, and ragged syncopation. *Folk Songs of the Hills'* cultural importance lies not in its preservation, in the face of modern change, of culturally pure materials, but rather in its attempt to mediate between cultural domains. Contrary to the claims made on its packaging, *Folks Songs of the Hills* is not unadulterated southern culture in its pure extract form. Yet as an asset of Appalachian culture absorbed into the national cultural metabolism, the album—especially when brought into comparison with Louis Armstrong's *Town Hall Concert*—demonstrates the power of region to modern U.S. audiences of music. Travis does not record his album as a bulwark against the tide of pop modernity, as an archive of preserved Kentucky coal miner songs. Rather, the album reveals Travis' tenacious effort to shape the tide of pop modernity so that it incorporates some signature of that folk culture within its new, alien forms.

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