

Traditional and Sustainable Life Practices of Southern Appalachian Women

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To my grandmother, Carrol Northrup, who educated me in the ways of my heritage, while supporting and encouraging me throughout my scholastic career.
“No one can ever take away what you know, baby.”

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“Maybe stories are just data with a soul...” – Brené Brown

ABSTRACT

This study examines the lives of seven Southern Appalachian women residing in the state of Tennessee who practice traditional or environmentally sustainable techniques as a part of their livelihood. Using abbreviated life history interviews I explore how participants use traditional and sustainable practices as a form of self-identification and agency. Detailed narrative accounts explore notions of ecofeminism, agency, and heritage, critically examining how participants identified themselves, their practice, and their place within the region through changing historical and social contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Appalachian women in the United States have a distinct disadvantage compared to U.S. women at large, due to socioeconomic factors, geographic isolation, and widespread misperceptions of the region. Additionally, women who choose to practice sustainable or traditional techniques, which are common in Appalachia, may be even less understood, often regarded as “old fashioned” or “backwards” by outsiders to the community. Traditional practices, which are more often than not also sustainable, include but are not limited to: hunting, fishing, or trapping game; growing, harvesting, or preserving food; making clothes, quilt, or food ware; cultivation of plants for housing, smoking, curing, or medicinal purposes; any type of folk art, including weaving, basket weaving, glass blowing, embroidery or knitting, painting; and reclaiming forest waste. These practices have historically been a vital source of survival for members of the region. With nation-wide “grass roots” sustainable movements becoming popular, it is pertinent to gain knowledge of women who have practiced these techniques before their more recent and renewed admiration.

My study addresses the questions: 1) How do women use their craft to identify with the culture of the region? 2) How (if at all) is “femininity” expressed through sustainable crafts? and 3) Can practicing sustainable techniques offer women in the region agency either through economic gains or the transmission of knowledge to other women? One objective of this research is to illuminate the heritage of women who perform “grass roots traditional” or “sustainable”

practices before the practices become so commercialized that their stories are lost. A qualitative, feminist approach to the study allows for an in-depth view of the lived experience of these women, potentially helping to demystify a rich cultural background embodied by individuals within the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Appalachia

The Appalachian region of the United States has two distinct, diverging identities. One romanticized version includes rich cultural heritage, folklore about its expansive forest – the largest temperate deciduous forest in the world, in fact – admiration of the natural beauty found in creeks, waterfalls, mountains, and hollows, and a tinge of mysticism regarding its pioneer inhabitants. The other, details impoverished, uneducated rural peoples, trapped by the very nature outsiders would admire, and dependent on government aid for a meager survival where the only entertainment is alcohol and amphetamines. In both narratives, the true realities of the people are lost, as is the natural environment they live in and its directive to either serve outsiders or be tamed and exploited by them.

The Appalachian region is defined geographically by the Appalachian Mountain Range that runs Northeast to South, and is one of the oldest mountain ranges on the Earth. Culturally speaking, Appalachia spans across ten states, and is defined by its history, plant and animal life, culture, and migrant ancestry (Marcadel 2014). Appalachia has been a region of certain political and

environmental interests. Once initiatives were enacted to have indigenous peoples removed, settlers soon discovered the plethora of natural commodities including timber, coal, metals and precious stones, land rich for agriculture, and more recently, natural gas. Between the 1870's and 1920's the railroad began winding its way through the mountains, and what could be considered the first environmental backlash arose from locals. This political stance perhaps did not initiate from care of the environment, but rather from the dislocation of peoples in the name of capitalist progress under the guise of "eminent domain." Arguably, environmental concerns did arise from coal and mineral stripping, beginning in the 1930's where water resources were polluted, acres and acres of timber stripped, and sometimes entire mountain tops were removed. In congruence with the War on Poverty, peoples protesting the degradation of their lands and destruction of their homes were, as is often the case to be explained later, labeled by outsiders as backward "hillbillies" their sit-ins and destruction of mining equipment deeming them violent individuals who desired to live in ruin and reject progress and modernity (Howell 2002:5-10). Indeed a recent definition of Appalachia by Trudy Marcadel in the Salem Press Encyclopedia (2014) describes it as such:

For many in the United States, Appalachia—Southern Appalachia, in particular—represents cultural and economic backwardness, poverty, and violence. In popular culture, the region and its inhabitants often bring up images of hillbillies and moonshiners. Most historians and activists today argue that the region has been particularly subject to stereotyping, misunderstanding, and economic and environmental depredation.

This biased view from outsiders towards Appalachian peoples did not simply arise due to their rejection of “progress.” Underlying historical issues apply as well. Stereotypical “hillbillies” were among the first non-indigenous inhabitants to the Appalachian region. Simply put, hillbillies are natives of the region living in, for lack of a better word, the hills (mountains) of Appalachia. The term “Billie” refers to individuals who had migrated to the U.S. in the early 1700’s. These self-proclaimed “Billie boys” were supporters of King William, who had defeated the Catholic King James II. “Redneck” is another term delegated to Southern Appalachians in reference to their Irish background. The Irish, who refused to recognize the Church of England as the official church of Ireland, wore red handkerchiefs around their neck in solidarity with other countrymen in protest (Adamson 1991). Though somewhat interchangeable, the hillbilly is by far the most recognized image representing the Appalachian Region. Irishmen were largely rejected in Northern migrant cities, in part due to the historic disparities between England and Ireland. They slowly made their way south, bringing their Irish culture, music, and food along with them.

Parallel to the contemporary hillbilly, the Irish were often regarded as lazy, illiterate, drunk, violent, and poor. Although there was a major influx of impoverished Irish people in the 1850’s, the potato famine that forced Irish families from their homeland was given little regard by outsiders to the region. One historical example is the nickname “paddy wagon,” a term used to describe a police van. The term originates from Irishmen being called “Paddy,” short for Patrick, a typical Irish name. Here, we see that Irish immigrants historically have

been associated with deviance, as they were arrested for crime or violence so frequently that police vans were named after them (Ignatiev 1995).

Contemporary qualitative documentaries¹, such as those of the "Snake Handlers" - a small, eccentric group of Pentecostal Christians who use live, venomous snakes native to the region during religious ceremonies – further this projection of abnormal, backwards behavior by natives in the region.

Quantitative research offers dismal notions of poverty and addiction as well. For instance, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services (2013) reports 301 counties in the Appalachian region suffer from chronic poverty, data that is measured every five years. The Drug Enforcement Administration (2014) identified seven of the top ten most methamphetamine ridden states to be in Appalachia. According to Swank, Fahs, and Haywood (2011) the region is one of the least racially diverse in the entire nation, with less than 3% of the population in Central Appalachia reporting as African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, "42% of the region's population is rural, compared with 20% of the national population" (p.139).

These published studies reinforce preconceived notions of the region and dismiss the narrative stories of Appalachian people who may offer interesting and valuable knowledge that can be added to their sub-culture. Books such as "High Mountain Rising" (Straw and Blethen 2004) and "The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature" (Engelhardt 2003) do address folk life and traditional practices of the region, but exclude detailed

¹ Television Network *The National Geographic Channel* series show "Snake Salvation"

analysis of individual lived experiences of women. Whether this is a conscious decision to take an active political stance, or genuine interest in preserving what women in my interviews described as their heritage, I believe their stories and the analysis provided here will add to an existing body of knowledge about the Appalachian region of the U.S. The inclusion of life histories of women living in the region today, allows for their own voices to become part of the story of Appalachia.

Gender in Appalachia

Previous research on women in Appalachia has tended to involve qualitative case studies where gender roles are not analyzed fully. Indeed, without non-Appalachian comparison groups, longitudinal data, and the over-sampling of poor or working class respondents, the distinctiveness of gender in Appalachia cannot be fully measured or analyzed to determine whether Appalachian women have greater tendencies toward gender conservatism, which is usually the case for individuals falling into “subculture” categories (Swank, Fahs, and Haywood 2011).

Appalachian women have specific disadvantages compared to other women in the U.S. Gender bias disproportionately affects women in subcultures, who are typed as particularly gendered for one reason or another, almost always in a negative light. Often, Appalachian women are disregarded as “hillbillies” and frequently met with unfair expectations of either the hyper-sexualized Elley May

Clampet or Daisy Duke Stereotypes or typed as the exact opposite, poor, obese, completely desexualized “white trash,” by the rest of society (Massey 2007).

Stigma towards Appalachian women could also stem from common subcultural spiritual beliefs in Appalachia. Due to the historical exploitation of the region, many women have inadvertently become eco-feminists, adopting a spiritual philosophy of one-ness with nature, and actively resisting practices that tend to assume the separation of humans from the Earth (Engelhardt 2003).

Appalachian women have been illustrated mystically in literature written both by outsiders and by themselves; frequently described as having wild hair, muddy feet, being donned in flowers, moving silently and gracefully like a deer, and having the ability to domesticate and call to animals (Engelhardt 2003).

Supposedly, these women have respect for, yet dominion over the nature surrounding them; in-depth knowledge of plant life that provides medicinal treatment for ailments; an awareness of seasonal changes making them experts at gardening; and an understanding of “primitive” beliefs and oral traditions providing stories and folk beliefs that guide family’s spirituality (Engelhardt 2003).

A mixture of old European tradition, Native American Indian beliefs, and African American practices have all influenced folk lore respected by women in the region. For example, “Birth lore is an expansive category of folk belief and practice related to fertility, conception, abortion, pregnancy, birth, infancy, and the supernatural” (Abramson and Heskell 2006: NPR). The birth of a child is attended by all those in kinship with the woman, usually employing a midwife and takes place at home. Women in kinship often arrive in the later days of

pregnancy to help with household tasks, and stay for days after the birth (Abramson and Heskell 2006).

The present research aims to explore to what extent the women interviewed have accepted a gendered identity, what that identity means to them, and how their practices represent an extension of agency within their gendered selves. The stance I take on gender and “femininity” is best described by Barbara Risman (2004):

[W]e can empirically investigate the relationship between gendered selves and doing gender without accepting simplistic unidirectional arguments for inequality presumed to be either about identities or cultural ideology. It is quite possible, indeed likely, that socialized femininity does help explain why we do gender, but doing gender to meet others’ expectations, surely, over time, helps construct our gendered selves...How social change occurs is an empirical question, not an a priori theoretical assumption. It may be that individuals struggling to change their own identities (as in consciousness-raising groups of the early second-wave women’s movement) eventually bring their new selves to social interaction and create new cultural expectations (p.434).

Indeed some proclaimed feminists might critique the practices in which these women engage. By participating in so-called traditionally feminine activities, Appalachian women are even further disregarded by a patriarchal society that demands conformity to modernity (Massey 2007). While feminism could be expressed journalistically as women “getting out of the kitchen,” movements toward progressive society and jobs for women outside the home became an essential feminist thought. “This indeed happened in Western Society: modern chemistry, household technology, and pharmacy were proclaimed as women’s saviors, because they would ‘emancipate’ them from household drudgery” (Mies and Shiva 2014: 7). Improved technological

advances have made traditional female practices redundant; local, hand-made goods must now compete with manufactured merchandise, not only from an economic standpoint, but from “modern woman” ideologies as well.

Some women, however, particularly urban, middle-class women, find it difficult to perceive commonality both between their own liberation and the liberation of nature, and between themselves and “different” women in the world. This is because capitalist patriarchy or ‘modern’ civilization is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomized reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus, nature is subordinate to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on (Mies and Shiva 2014: 5).

Women’s work, historically and to this day remains undervalued and dismissed by most of the world. However, one could argue that while women have gained social and economic presence and power, there was a loss in value of “traditional” femininity. In the context of Appalachian women who have continued traditional or sustainable techniques, this begs the question as to how these women view, define, and value their own femininity.

Women in Appalachia have long been foundational supporters for their communities, transmitters of knowledge, and active in political and social movements within the region. Countless examples exist of women’s strong community bonds, kinship networks, and pivotal roles in environmental justice movements in the literature on Appalachian women. Contemporary examples in the literature include *Dorie: Woman of the Mountains* by Florence Cope Bush, or *Fair and Tender Ladies* by Lee Smith. These works illustrate the lived experiences of Appalachian women and their unmistakable contributions to the

region. Perhaps a less well-known or cited example of an Appalachian woman is found in Emma Gatewood, the woman responsible for “saving” the Appalachian Trail (Montgomery 2014). Even less mentioned are groundbreaking women’s organizations in the 1970’s including the Coal Employment Project, Southeast Women’s Employment Coalition, and Women and Employment, all of which demanded and undoubtedly brought equal opportunity employment to the region (Weiss 1993). Barbara Smith (1999), in her memoir recalling the life of her aunts and grandmothers, puts it like this:

One task for feminist historiography, which some scholars thankfully have already begun, is to elaborate how women engaged in socially necessary activities – wage labor, farming, commerce, and so on – embedded, indeed hidden, within a gendered division of labor that allocated different tasks and status to women and men. Less frequently explored, but equally important, is the entire landscape of culture, family, and community life, where the constraints, tensions, and intrigues of gender were central to all human activities and relationships... Gender is a profoundly material relationship, but its bargaining table is often in the kitchen. The historical agency of Appalachian women, especially working class women, is to be found as much in jokes, “old wives’ tales,” and fugitive actions as in the public events and records of conventional history. The paradoxical quest for Appalachian women’s history takes us beyond established historiography, beyond heroic constructs of the region, to a landscape of action and meaning so familiar that we routinely fail to recognize the significance (p. 9).

Here then is where traditional or sustainable techniques practiced by women are critical. Are such practices an extension of traditional views of women’s roles as nurturers in society or have they developed from practical needs that defy gender-typical stereotyping? It would seem imperative that researchers explore what traditional and sustainable techniques are, who is practicing these techniques, and their significance to the region.

Sustainable, Traditional, and Folk Practices

Sustainability is a word with varied meanings. Indeed if I say something is “sustainable” most people understand what I am saying; however, the true definition depends on one’s standpoint. The *Thesaurus of Sustainability* (Levine, Hughes, and Mather 2015) provides multiple definitions for what other authors determined to be critical aspects of sustainability: Intergenerational, Ecological, Social, Economic, Systemic, and Political. They also warn that no one discipline within these multiple definitions can take priority. Cited in the preface of their work is the *Webster’s New International Dictionary* (1986) definition: “Sustain: to cause to continue (as in existence or a certain state, or in force or intensity); to keep up, especially without interruption, diminution, flagging, etc.; to prolong” (p.2). Sustainability used in this research will be defined as the ability to create art or necessities from recycled, reclaimed, or raw materials while minimally compromising the environment from which materials were harvested. In support of this, I will use another definition provided by Levine, Hughes, and Mather (2015) quoting Muscoe Martin (1995):

The word sustainable has roots in the Latin language, meaning 'to hold up' or 'to support from below.' A community must be supported from below - by its inhabitants, present and future. Certain places, through the peculiar combination of physical, cultural, and, perhaps, spiritual characteristics, inspire people to care for their community. These are the places where sustainability has the best chance of taking hold.

Use of this definition may not heed the warning of allowing one discipline priority. I argue this point due to the ecological and environmental resistance movements historically being rooted in the Appalachian mountain region serving as evidence

to the region's "inhabitants, present and future". Howell (2002) describes it like this:

As in any human environment, dynamic interplay between nature and culture has been central to the experiences whereby Appalachian people have transformed physical space and resources into place and lifeways. But beyond this, southern Appalachia's very emergence as a distinctive region in the minds of other Americans depended on manipulation of nature and culture as symbolic constructs. As a resource extraction periphery of industrial America, later the site of extensive public lands and federal intervention, southern Appalachia is especially fertile ground for exploring the historical roots and cultural ramifications of persistent environmental problems. The discourse on Appalachian environmental history illustrates the crucial importance of cultural beliefs and values, reflected as much in outsider's attitudes about Appalachian people as in their own practices. Scientists, bureaucrats, developers, and reformers have defined and responded to environmental issues in disparate ways that reflect their own assumptions and agendas (p. 5).

While Wagner, cited by Howell (2002) notes:

The link between the residents' identities and the nature that surrounds them is manifested in multiple, complex ways we can only list here. That culture and nature are bound together is signified by the residents' emphasis on their perceptions of the environment's beauty; the residents' orienting themselves by the geological markers in their environment; the part nature plays in the history, folklore, and stories of the culture; the uses the culture has made of nature; the cultural knowledge of nature that the people carry; with the long genealogical history on the same land that many of the culture-bearers carry, help create the residents' identities (p. 127).

To incorporate the idea of sustainability with tradition in the region, Straw and Blethen (2004: 134-139) call sustainable techniques used by Appalachians as "folkways" in their book, but define them basically as practices rooted in tradition that change over time for survival or artistic expression. Most folkways stem from practicality. For instance, one needs a quilt to stay warm. However, an embroidered or patterned quilt can be regarded as artistic.

Like many forms of folk art, quilting is commonly a product of “aesthetic recycling” in which the reuse of otherwise discarded materials serves both creative and financial needs. Many older quilters remember the days when flour and feed sacks were used to piece quilts, and old socks and other worn-out clothing were unraveled for bating to make the quilts thicker (Straw and Blethen 2004:139).

While artistic or creative expression is inherently agentic, I find the argument for agency comes in other forms of traditional or sustainable practices as well, through the transmission of knowledge from one woman to another. Men and women have familial roles integrated with economics, whether for monetary gain or survival, and in most cases family networks have been key to preserving and passing down these traditions. As Tinker (1976:438) puts it, “[i]n addition to their important role in farming, women in subsistence economies traditionally have engaged in a variety of other economic activities – spinning fibers, weaving cloth, drawing water, tending market gardens, and processing and preserving foods gathered from communal property.” Women were held responsible for a variety of basic familial and communal needs, including even how to make moonshine, and how to perform those tasks had to be passed on. The types of practices most women engaged in were connected to nature, and often required the help of other female family or community members, providing not only time to work, but to talk, joke, and gossip as well. Food preservation, gardening, seed saving, knowledge of herbs and medicines, folk beliefs regarding the moon and seasons, as well as animal husbandry and child birthing were all traditionally women oriented activities, while “granny women” knew folklore, stories, songs, and familial lineage in their communities (Thompson and Moser 2006:144-147).

These “old prophetesses” are “repositories of tribal lore – tradition and song, medical and religious learning. They are nurses, teachers of practical arts, the priestesses, and their wisdom commands the respect of all” (Engelhardt 2003:146). Christ (1978) states that how women are socialized gives them a specific connection to nature declaring, “[B]ecause of women’s unique position as mensturaunts, birth givers, and those who have traditionally cared for the young and the dying, women’s connection to the body, nature, and this world have been obvious” (p.114). Engelhardt (2003) notes much Appalachian literature reinforces ecofeminist beliefs held by women in the region by incorporating elements of nature as active participants in the women’s and community’s lives. In her chapter on Mary Murfree and Effie Smith, whom she notes as “[N]either, as far as I know, wrote theoretical essays or were political activists,” both incorporate sustainable living and alternative philosophies regarding the nature surrounding them in the books they narrated (p.105).

As we are in a present day revival of interest in folkways, importance in what Appalachian women have to offer has been renewed. Numerous craft centers, folk schools, and museums have sprung up throughout Appalachia, including the Appalachian Center for Craft in McMinnville, Tennessee and the Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee both of which are included in the county radius for my data collection. Indeed the region and its ways are becoming more mainstreamed, as the Internet provides connections to even those in the most remote hollows. Critical aspects of folk and traditional practices

could certainly become lost with the commercialization of the region and its peoples.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For my research, I employ a feminist approach to qualitative research design. I chose a feminist approach to my research for several reasons. According to Creswell (2013:29) the feminist research approach is "centered on women's diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations....The questions feminists pose relate to the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness. The aim of the ideological research is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position."

Narrative research of the life history variety offers the best way to gather rich qualitative data to address my research questions. Creswell (2013) notes narrative research collects stories about individual's lives and lived experiences, sheds light on an individual's self-perceived identity, and can occur within specific places or situations. Given the nature of my research questions, all of the above mentioned criteria apply. Appalachia is a specific place, and the women who participate in sustainable or traditional practices are in specific situations, possibly experiencing a compromised identity. Mies and Shiva (2014:57)

describe how colonized people can potentially internalize oppression by accepting devalued representations of their group by the dominant culture.

But the emotional and cognitive acceptance of the colonized is also necessary to stabilize such relationships. This means that not only the colonizers but also the colonized must accept the lifestyle of “those on top” as the only model for the good life. This process of acceptance of the values, lifestyle, and standard of living of “those on top” is invariably accompanied by a devaluation of one’s own: one’s own culture, work, technology, lifestyle, and often also philosophy of life and social institutions. In the beginning this devaluation is often violently enforced by the colonizers and then reinforced by propaganda, educational programs, a change of laws, and economic dependency, for example, through the debt trap. Finally, this devaluation is often accepted and internalized by the colonized as the ‘natural’ state of affairs. One of the most difficult problems for the colonized (countries, women, poor) is to develop their own identity (Mies and Shiva 2014: 57).

While Mies and Shiva are speaking specifically of colonialism, the history of the Appalachian region parallels other examples of Western colonialism. From the initial profiling of migrants to the region by outsiders, exploitation of natural resources, systematic exclusion from modernity, economic distress, and dependence on government subsidies, Appalachia has fallen into the realm of near Third World status and its culture and heritage remain continually denigrated by the majority of Americans (Askins, Johnson, and Lewis 1978).

Within this context, Appalachian women are often stereotyped, but little attention is given to how Appalachian woman regard themselves, particularly relative to their activities and livelihood. Falling into the category of “lost and forgotten,” Appalachian women may have remained invisible to the wider culture were it not for the renewed interest in “grass roots” or “folk art” traditions. A

qualitative interview design will potentially give these women a voice in defining their own work and identities, a critical aspect to a feminist approach.

Feminism is, among other things, a response to the fact that women either have been left out of or included in demeaning and disfiguring ways in what has been an almost exclusively male account of the world. So while part of what feminists want and demand for women is the right to move and to act in accordance with our own desire and insistence that we give our own accounts of these movements and actions...having the opportunity to talk about one's life, to give account of it, is integral to leading that life rather than being led through it (Lugones and Spelman 1983: 24).

I encouraged my interviewees to narrate stories of how they came to learn their techniques, how the techniques influenced the women personally, or changed over the course of their lives. I took an open-ended approach to the interview process, and allowed the women to show me around their homes, gardens, and crafting rooms at their own leisure. In so doing it was my hope not only to build rapport, but also to allow narratives to evolve naturally in the self-directed agency of those interviewed in the contexts of their working environments. Minister (1991) addresses the contradictions women face in speaking with authority in public contexts:

The myths about women's talk are tenacious: women talk more than men, don't talk about significant things, can't tell jokes, are weak and less capable speakers than men, and cannot speak logically. One may conclude that women's speech generally has been devalued for a very long time... When one lacks realistic gender models and when self-identity and social identity have been trimmed to a ladylike size... indeed a formidable double bind ties women's tongues in the oral history situation, posing a contradiction between expectations that they will seek out and name their meaningful life experience and that they will do so in a public context (p. 30).

The life history method promises to allow women to define their work on their own terms rather than from larger cultural representations that too often reflect androcentric views of women. Placing women in control of their own storytelling narrative can potentially alter conventional approaches to interviewing that frequently place the researcher at the center of control. As Minster (1991) notes, “[t]he male socio-communication subculture is assumed to be the norm for social science interviewing” (1991:30). The life history approach employed was appropriate as it allowed women to elaborate on their lived experiences in a context that was comfortable, familiar, and personal to their identity and creative process.

I conducted one-on-one abbreviated life history interviews with women who self-identified as practicing a sustainable or traditional technique. Because my home base was Murfreesboro, Tennessee, out of convenience I chose to interview women within a fifty-five county region that is designated as either Middle or the Upper Cumberland of Tennessee. Both of these regions are considered the southern edge of Appalachia, an area spanning the southern edge of Ohio, all of West Virginia, southeast Kentucky, western North Carolina, middle and eastern Tennessee, and the northern tips of Alabama and Georgia, as provided by Howell (2002: Preface x). My interest was in how these “barely Appalachian” women still identified with the culture of Appalachia as well as regionally within their own communities.

Recruitment and Data Collection

I employed several techniques of recruitment, including informal, word of mouth recruitment through an initial contact in the area, attending local heritage festivals and farmer's markets, contacting potential participants directly through contact information on websites such as the Appalachian Center for Craft or the Tennessee Arts Commission, as well as social media posts on multiple Facebook pages for local businesses in the area. For social media posts or email correspondence, I provided relevant information about my interests, my personal contact information, and basic details about the interview process. Several participants were recruited by the "snowball" method, where once an individual was interviewed, they would share contact information of other women they knew who were involved in sustainable practices.

Participation was voluntary and all participants signed informed consent forms agreeing to be audio recorded. Additionally some participants agreed to be photographed. All of the women agreed to be identified by their first name and the county in which they resided. As a southerner and a woman who practices some sustainable and traditional techniques, I could be considered an "insider" to this sub-group in some ways. However, as an academic entering the homes of people who, historically, have been ostracized and criticized, I am an "outsider." I feel honored and privileged by the welcoming, sincere attitude of the women with whom I spoke, and am grateful for the many gracious offerings of food, hospitality, and gifts they presented along with their time and interviews.

All participants were at least eighteen years of age. I originally had hopes of interviewing women across multiple generations. However, the age of participants was overwhelmingly middle-aged, falling between forty-one and sixty-six. I do not feel this restriction invalidates my findings but rather provided a certain authenticity. All of the women in this age group appeared to practice their techniques out of choice rather than out of necessity.

I conducted a total of seven, in-depth, interviews over the summer of 2016. The summer season was a crucial period in data collection, as all of the women were active in some sort of planting, harvesting, or food preservation process. All of the interviews took place inside the women's homes. All participants were white and female. All seven interviews were audio recorded and interviews ranged in length from one to two hours, the average interview lasting about 90 minutes. All but two participants additionally agreed to be photographed.

Data Analysis

Data from the audio recordings were first transcribed and then audited for accuracy. I read the transcriptions along with my field notes, and in order to better contextualize them I organized the transcripts with any photographs I took during my visit. Transcripts, photographs, and notes were then carefully analyzed for patterns or emergent themes. Once common or divergent themes were identified, I coded them into the following categories: heritage, agency, environment, and gender. Regarding the environment, aspects of ecofeminism

were discussed, and many women had both spiritual and political beliefs about the nature and their craft. Another interesting emergent theme in the data addressed the notion of 'the craft' as an intimate object of symbolic meaning. Finally, the notion of stigma attached to the region and culture and their practices did arise although it was not particularly an overarching theme.

To better understand exactly what the women I interviewed were attempting to express, I employed the technique of "co-creation of meaning" during my interviews. I listened intently to respondents' answers, and was careful to ask about points made or specific word choices when I was unsure of the meaning. I attempted not to progress too quickly from question to question, but rather let the conversation flow as naturally as possible from point to point.

Finally, it is important I address my own position within the research and my personal affinity for the practices or techniques I am researching. As a researcher, I had some authoritative power. In order to balance this power I attempted to disclose some personal information during the "small talk" before interviews formally commenced, as well as making comments during the interview that helped to build rapport. I attempted to "bracket" my own potentially romanticized notions about these women and their crafts, while collecting data in an attempt to observe impartially and listen reflexively (Hesse-Biber 2014:201-210).

FINDINGS

My research revealed how women within the southern Appalachian region of Tennessee perceive themselves as independent actors. All participants noted feeling, at least to some degree, a sense of heritage in practicing their craft, described how their craft was an extension of personal agency, discussed personal beliefs about the local or global environment, and shared ideas about their gender identity. The following sections elaborate on themes and the relation to or divergence from the literature. It should also be noted all of the women interviewed participated in some form of food preservation while other crafts were considered “hobbies” and usually did not provide the women with substantial monetary gain. Some of the women lived almost entirely through sustainable practices, such as not having electricity and “living off the land.” These varying degrees of traditional or sustainable practices revealed divergence in practices and crafts represented, while still confirming a number of common themes including heritage, agency, environment, and gender.

Heritage

Personal, Regional, Human

Aspects of cultural heritage were expressed in several ways for the women interviewed. Every participant mentioned personal heritage, as the craft they perform was taught to them, usually by another family member, and almost always female. Barbara, of Wilson County, Tennessee, learned basket weaving

from her sister, who had learned it from a great-uncle. Barbara took up basket weaving while her sister, Brenda, who taught her the skill, was in the hospital with terminal cancer. When asked if she thought these activities were important to her heritage she responded:

[T]he basket weaving and the preservation of food... it keeps my family in my thoughts. Anytime I am weaving baskets and I come up with an exceptional one, I think, 'Brenda would have loved that one.' When I am preserving food I think about my grandmother sitting on the porch snapping beans. I have pictures in my mind of her hands, always busy.

Two women had taken classes to learn their craft. Sherry, of Rutherford County, Tennessee, mentioned learning how to "hand piece" quilts from her grandmother, but learned different quilting techniques from a local instructor. She notes, "She hand pieced it, she is in that generation. I think maybe my generation and especially younger are going to do everything by a machine." However this transition from old-fashioned to modern in the ways of quilt making still brought Sherry close to her family.

I have great memories of my grandmother telling stories about quilting. I have helped my aunt, who is 80, get started on some quilts that she has put together for her great-grandkids. That is fun to help her, encourage her, because she hand pieces them, so when she is finished I get them from her and bring them to my friend to quilt them.

Another woman, Laura, originally from Florida but now resides in Putnam County, Tennessee, learned pottery from taking lessons. She described the heritage aspect a bit differently.

I do know that it [clay] is indigenous to this region and Putnam County has supported pottery for many, many years ... In that way it is nice to see the clay traditions continue, certainly. I think in other ways, for my personal heritage, being a transplant, I have been able to find a way to bring old Florida into my decorative treatments and into the actual shapes of the

pieces that I make. It is very beach driven, very riverbank-y. That is sweet too, as a transplant I can take this aesthetic that is very important to me and apply it to this art that is very indigenous to the area.

Laura's example transcended personal heritage to regional. While not many women mentioned feeling this was a particularly *Appalachian* craft, the idea that their techniques might be regionally specific were described in so many words. Barb of Macon County, Tennessee, put it like this:

[C]oming to America to begin with then coming out here it was all about being on the frontier. You were in a place where deep independence was necessary. You needed to be able to take care of yourself, you needed to be able to provide yourself with almost anything ... Yes, the cheese making, canning, gardening, sewing, almost all the things we do very much relate to my image of what this area of the country means ...

Some women also expressed broader views on the idea of heritage. While familial and regional connections were important, to some women, the crafts they practiced had very early human origins and they felt they were continuing a tradition on the broader scale of humanity. Laura said simply,

I think that this is the most elemental craft, even above fibers I think this is the craft that came first. The is dirt (laughs) and maybe it was an accident, you know, someone threw a wet piece of dirt into the fire, then came back in the morning like, 'Wow, that got hard.' It's the most primal, elemental form of our media and I feel sure that it will continue.

Coree, of Macon County, Tennessee mentioned on three separate occasions that her family's lifestyle mirrored the way most people lived not so very long ago.

[I]t wasn't that long ago that this was not unusual. You could be a farmer and live close to the land and grow your food and even have another occupation. But this was just part of the deal that you grew your food and you were involved in your livelihood or you were close to someone doing this work. It was just a fabric of society. It has been a problem over the last seventy-five years that we have taken this apart. It's important that we begin to put it back together. I think it's part of all [of] our heritage, in the

South, very much so, but all over the world. We are not that far away from it.

Barb had similar feelings.

I feel like it is an important part of everyone's heritage; because even as far back as you are able to trace your family they have been city dwellers; ultimately as biological human beings we were sustainable and we are not anymore. My husband and I were discussing this last night and we questioned why anyone would knowingly choose to not be sustainable ... It is more about passing on human heritage rather than our specific heritage.

Stigma

The idea of social stigma about the region or the traditional and sustainable crafts the women practiced was also alluded to by a number of participants. As supported by the literature, ideas that the type of lifestyle the women participated in was abnormal did arise. While the women themselves did not seem to buy into the opinion there was something "wrong" with their way of life, the topic was brought up by a few women. Barb thought this idea was particularly perpetuated by modern practices, especially through advertising, saying:

[P]eople in this region were and still are made to feel like they are less than human if they do their dishes by hand. If they don't have perfectly white whites. All of these things are making them feel very, very bad about themselves. To prove they are not less than human they pulled themselves out of this life and moved into more modern ways of life.

Lachelle, of Putnam County, Tennessee described notions of class awareness.

[I] think it is something to be proud of rather than embarrassed by. I will admit this; we took growing food in the garden so much for granted. Like I said, we didn't buy food from the store. That was seen as, almost a class

conscious thing. If you could afford to buy food from the store that meant you were wealthy. You didn't have to rely on a garden.

My research indicates while variations of the definition of heritage existed, the concept was still a significant aspect for all the women who practiced a craft.

Agency

Creativity, Teaching, and Independence

The narrative style of interviewing I used allowed women to describe personal agency spontaneously when discussing their crafts. I asked the women a simple question, "Can you tell me what you like about your practice?" From this question, various facets of agency were expressed, including personal creativity, teaching their craft to others, and independence or self-sustainability. Indeed it seemed the women were proud of their abilities, and this pride influenced other parts of their daily lives. Additionally, none of the women relied on their practice as a significant source of income; however, certain women living more "off the grid" lifestyles did express that the way they lived saved money because they ran their own electric grid from solar panels, didn't buy many groceries, or used locally sourced water. Women who performed their skills more as hobbies stated their crafts "paid for its self" because they did sell their work and profits from sales were used to purchase more materials.

As previously mentioned, all of the women participated in some form of food preservation. When I asked Deborah, of Rutherford County, Tennessee what she liked about canning the variety of foods she mentioned, she stated

simply, "I have done this; I have done this by myself." Creative expression was chief to many women, particularly those who practiced more tactile crafts. When asked what she enjoyed about making pottery Laura said,

I love writing, and I am good at it, and it is a sure way to make a living; but it is not tactile. You use a different part of your brain I think ... The way I decorate pieces with the textures and even the different shapes themselves, it's not that I am trying to make them look primitive, it's that I am trying to evoke, I guess an ancient time ... I can say those things a thousand times better in clay than I can in words.

Barbara explained her basket weaving like this, "When I get finished with it, it is something I created ...It is a relaxing time, I enjoy making them and I enjoy the people that buy my baskets; because, I guess they compliment you." Sherry also cited creativity as an important part of quilt making. "It is sort of like you are creating something. You see a picture of a quilt that is just so beautiful, so I would like to see if I could create that ... It is like putting together a piece of art or something."

All of the women interviewed also conveyed they hoped their craft or practice would continue after they retire from it. When asked if they would retire from it, a few jokingly said things like, "When I die, you mean?" All defined their craft as a tradition in one way or another and felt it was important to pass on their skills. Barbara, Laura, Coree, and Barb have all led formal workshops to teach their craft; Lachelle, Sherry, and Debora have taught others in informal ways, such as having women come to their homes during a "canning day" or "seed day." A few women disclosed hoping for daughters-in-law or granddaughters to take an interest in their craft as well. In either case, "passing on" their skills was

important to all the women asked. Coree felt she had an obligation to her community to help others learn sustainable practices.

Community is crucial as well. We have people of different ages and different interests around us, so we are figuring out what we can do as we grow older to continue to give and receive from the community and do what we do best. There is no retiring from this. What I see more and more farmers doing is teaching. Sharing that information to come and be a part of it. That is extremely valuable, extremely important. We lost that for a couple generations, so it is important to put that back in. To give mentorship in a really meaningful way back to the community.

Barb had similar sentiments,

I have taught a lot of people different things along the way like seed saving. I have taught a couple of cheese classes and I would like to expand on that at some point, maybe this fall ... I teach the skills that I know as often as I possibly can. Most of the skills that we teach we prefer to teach them without any direct form of payment because we feel it is so important to pass these things on. It is much more important to pass them on than to make money off them.

For Lachelle, being self-sufficient was a form of independence.

I like the self-sufficiency aspect. I feel like I could, if I had to, I could grow it, cook it, preserve it, and I could probably get by pretty well. We might be vegetarians (laughs); we have the chickens for eggs, but we could probably do it. We save our seeds, which I think is also important in terms of being self-sustaining but also is a political statement. So [many] of our seeds now are controlled by corporate giants.

Lachelle's example brings up another important facet of agency several of the women mentioned. Independence was not only an individual act, but a political and social stance as well.

Societal Breakdown

While some sentiments about the possibility of social chaos were more important to some women than others, Barbara, who has a garden, cans or dries

various types of food each season, and preserves fresh fish provided by her husband, put it humbly, “Well, what if the trucks quit running, then what would you do?” Barb, whose family is electricity, water, and sewage independent, while speaking about the idea of human heritage, led into the social aspect of sustainability.

[C]all it by any popular name you will, but we see a strong potential for some manner of social breakdown. Whether it is environmentally, which is incredibly possible with climate change ...Preparation of some manner of social, environmental, or some other manner of disaster-oriented social breakdown.

While the idea of societal upheaval may seem radical, some of the women held political views justifying their idea of what it meant to be independent. Lachelle said it like this,

I fear that. I mean, I’m not a Prepper [such as a “Dooms Day” prepper, someone readying for societal breakdown]. I like the feeling of self-sufficiency, I feel good about that. It is better for the environment. But I have to say I just don’t like corporations having that sort of control. You put a population on their knees if you control the food and water ... I think it is important people take back that knowledge; they have the ability to grow things and make things and survive without having to run to the store or ask permission to grow a particular crop because someone else owns the seed.

Industrial Food Chain

One participant articulated that the benefits of food independence or other sustainable technique was that they did not have to rely on social institutions for survival, not only in the chance of society collapsing, but also from a political, almost anarchic view point. Barb talked at length about getting away from big box

stores and locally sourcing food, but one statement in particular stuck out, exposing her opinion on governmental regulations regarding food.

I can't sell cheese because that is illegal. Technically it is illegal for the person I buy milk from to sell me milk, that is why I haven't told you her name or where she is ...I mean seriously, can they [the government] tell me what water I can put in my mouth? It is my choice. I don't force anyone to drink my water.... I won't give anyone water that's not filtered, even though I don't think it would hurt them. (Barb and her family collect rainwater for all their household water needs, including drinking.)

Lachelle had similar sentiments.

[D]id you see where Bayer, the German company Bayer, is trying to buy out Monsanto? ...Which will create one of the largest seed companies in the world. That is just way too much power for a corporation to have over what I want to eat.

Lachelle later mentioned troubles with her own garden.

[O]ne thing that has irritated me lately is they, you probably saw when you drove in the fields of corn coming up; they alternate corn with soybeans. They use Round Up Ready stuff, so they are Monsanto soybeans. They use that corn; it's a hybrid. Corn easily cross-pollinates. I mean you could be miles away and cross-pollinate corn. Our corn gets cross pollinated with theirs, so I can't save that seed ... The corn ends up being different than what we plant, it's not what we planted ... and they [Monsanto] could sue us if we saved those seeds.

Environment

Natural Cycles

Food independence was one skill that crossed boundaries with tradition and environmental concerns. All the women gardened and felt the garden was good for the environment. Not simply in the “plants make air” way, but also by attracting bees and other pollinators as well as reducing their carbon foot prints.

A couple women who farmed organically mentioned the natural cycles of their

gardens and enjoyed being a part of that cycle. Coree said this, “[I]f you are doing good organic growing, you are feeding the soil. The soil becomes healthy and full of life, the more able it is to retain the moisture that is there. It won’t dry out so badly. It needs that life.” Lachelle stated one of the key reasons she gardens is because it is good for pollinating insects and also reduces her “food miles” on the global environment, later in the interview even stated that if she had to use pesticides or non-organic fertilizer, she most likely would quit gardening all together.

Once you achieve balance, it isn’t as hard as you think. With the chemicals you throw everything out of whack. You kill the good bugs and the bad bugs, you put the birds in danger, pollinators, bees – that is a whole other issue there ... I think it is better for our water, we switched over our soap. We have a septic system so I figure eventually everything that goes into that septic system is going down into that creek down there. That creek leads into a cave and the cave goes down into a water table, so I know where all of my stuff is going. Everything that drains off the garden is no chemical, there are no detergents. I am careful about that.

Barb did talk about her garden, but the natural cycle she witnessed most frequently was in her cheese making. “I enjoy very much watching the milk go through its changes. From the very first change of coagulation all the way to nine months later slicing open a Parmesan cheese ... It is a miraculous process I get to take part in every week.”

Spirituality and Connectedness

While discussing traits of their craft they enjoy, most of the women commented that their craft provided them with a sense of “groundedness” or “connectedness” to the Earth around them. While describing taking part in natural

cycles, spirituality was brought up. Being “close” to the land did not simply mean in physical proximity but also psychologically. Coree mentioned several times living sustainably was “core” to her values or beliefs, and then later elaborated that point when asked “Why do you feel this is important?”

I think it puts us, in some ways, in our place as humans. There is no question where we belong. It is hard to talk about but it is vital, personally, to me, to my health. I feel there is a great vitality available to us, in it that is not available in places more disconnected. In terms of our physical bodies, and our senses. It does something to your senses to be in the natural world; to hear birds, to see animals and trees, to see all the tiny things that are alive on the ground. It makes your senses awake, which I think is just part of being human ... [I] think deep inside us all there is an attraction to that, and it is vital to our health, internal and external. I could talk about that for a long time (laughs).

Lachelle spoke on “connectedness” on two separate occasions in her interview.

One thing gardening has done for me, this is a spiritual aspect ... [Y]ou work with the seasons, you have to get into the rhythm of nature, the sun, the rain, all these things that are out of your control. For me, it is fulfilling in that way. It is my church. I can go out for a walk and it slows you down, it makes you appreciative, of nature, of what is provided to you, of what She provides.

Later on Lachelle mentioned that she gardens barefoot; when asked why, she responded,

[T]here is nothing between you and the earth. You are much more aware of where you are walking and what you are walking on when you are barefoot. The grass, the textures, you feel everything. It is a sensual part of nature.

Barb spoke of her bond to the Earth also, saying,

Spiritually we feel closer to the Earth when we are living this way, closer to God in whatever form you choose to think of God ... Psychologically, right along with spiritually, the feeling of connectedness with everything around us. The increased awareness of everything we consider to be incredibly pertinent.

Laura described one of her favorite clay pieces to make, “face jugs,” which are crocks that portray a humanoid face. While these pots are local to the Appalachian region motivated by old folk lore, Laura had a different inspiration behind making hers.

To me they remind me of, you know how you see faces in wood grain? If you look at a tree or something and think, ‘Oh, wow, there is a face. I see eyes and a mouth or a mouth and a nose.’ Something like that is what these remind me of in part because I use dark clay with a brown glaze so it tends to resemble wood. But to me it’s also, well I actually call mine ‘wood spirit’ pots as opposed to ‘face jugs’ because that is what they look like to me.

Later on in the interview she pointed out that incorporating physical pieces of nature into her work was important to her, and she often used tree bark to make textures or molds and also pressed leaves or shells into her clay to create images.

Reducing Personal Impact on the Environment

My initial interest in traditional practices and the environment led me to ask the women directly “Do you think what you do is good for the environment?” although comments on environmental awareness were often brought up before the formal question was asked. While Barb, Lachelle, and Coree live sustainable lifestyles, their answers to the question might be expected. But for the other women who practiced more tactile specific crafts, being environmentally conscious was also a personal issue. Sherry mentioned that while quilting wasn’t the most environmentally friendly activity due to the use of new, cotton based materials, she did imply that not being wasteful of the materials was important to

her. She frequently donates her quilting scraps to her church, where they are sent to Mexico for women to use to make clothing and she also makes clothes out of repurposed t-shirts to send overseas.

There is a place called Healing Hands International in Nashville [Tennessee] and they get t-shirts donated to them from companies who don't need them anymore ... So to be economical we wanted to find a way to use that. They can't be used here in the United States anymore because they have writing or [logos] on them, that's why they are donated ... But they make dresses, skirts, it's amazing what all they use, almost every piece of the t-shirt ... 'How can we use this, how can we not throw this away?' People in Africa or Haiti or Central America ... they have nothing.

Laura had a similar report. While clay is a finite resource, Stoneware in particular is highly sustainable and eco-friendly. Stoneware products like she makes can last over several generations, and when they do degrade, they leave only the dirt of which they are made. Additionally, she stated, "[if] you are using stoneware then you are not using disposable products like Styrofoam," and the clay can be reconstituted infinitely so there is "very little waste."

Barb mentioned that she and her family are by no means "perfectly" sustainable but everything they do is a work in progress. For example, initially Barb was purchasing freeze-dried cultures to make her cheese, but she could not perpetuate them. She has since switched to a live culture that she can grow herself. "Environmentally it is about being as low impact on the Earth as we can. The sustainable practices are by very nature lower impact; they produce fewer wastes and the wastes are reused in a more natural way, so it becomes a very natural cycle." Similar to Sherry, Lachelle also tries to "upcycle" or "aesthetically recycle" by turning old clothes into quilts, re-using canning equipment, and using

food waste as compost. Deborah shared similar sentiments. She felt her gardening was environmentally friendly, and said in canning food there is little to no waste involved. "When you peel your own tomatoes, the peels don't go in the trash, they go out in the yard ... You reuse the rings and the jars year after year ... other than the energy it takes to cook, but if you have a pressure canner it is better." She also mentioned she uses re-usable items, like tumblers, rather than buying water bottles.

It is evident all the women I interviewed were environmentally conscious, for personal or practical reasons. Although none of the women used the term eco-feminism, their practices incorporated all of the characteristics of ecofeminism mentioned, including political and spiritual. Eco-feminism is not divided by gender; actually it is just the opposite; to imply women and men are more or less connected to nature implies human experience is fundamentally different based on sex. This ideology is not supported in ecofeminism, but the literature does recognize men and women are socialized differently regarding nature.

Gender

Gender Roles and Traditional Femininity

Gender or gender identity was a central interest in this research. I expected that the women I interviewed would participate to some degree in "traditional" female roles in the techniques they practice, which was supported by

the literature and in my findings. While gender roles were not overtly expressed, they were certainly implied; however, many women suggested that gender roles represented a complementary balance between themselves and their male spouses, and also was something they enjoyed. When asked if they knew any men who performed the same practice, all the women answered with a 'yes.' Barbara's sister learned how to make baskets from their great-uncle, who made them from White Oak trees, and would cut his own saplings. Sherry said although she didn't know any male quilters personally, often on quilting shows or in quilting magazines she would see quilts made by men. Laura has taken and taught pottery classes with men, although most of the potters she knows locally are women. She did note differences in the types of pottery-making men performed. She described in detail a type of pottery firing called Anagama, where a live fire has to be stoked for seven days before the pieces are finished. She went on to say it is, "[T]estosterone firing. This is really, really a macho kind of firing. I am happy with my little space and electric kiln." She then described a male local potter and personal friend who performs a firing method called Raku.

Raku is another one of those macho, testosterone firing techniques ... It's like being a fire fighter, you have to wear a Nomex outfit [fire proof clothing] to keep your body from burning. You have a huge helmet with a shield and these supposed fireproof gloves and big, metal tongs, and you hold the piece – which hopefully isn't too heavy (laughs) – into the firebox.

Later when talking about classes she taught she mentioned there weren't many men and laughingly stated, "Maybe since they couldn't stoke wood for seven days they didn't want to be a part of it."

Barbara mentioned performing gender specific tasks, but stated that this could be due to her generation, as she was the oldest woman I interviewed, but said she has never been told a specific task was “her job.”

Now in past times this would have been women’s work and mowing and stuff like that would be men’s work. I guess to some degree it still is, because the way we were raised, our parents, well this is what we do. He will always help me if I need help, but most of the time I am like, ‘Get out of here, leave me alone.’ (laughs) I enjoy doing these things. I certainly enjoy canning and my baskets, I am proud of them.

Debora had a more direct answer.

At this house we have very gender specific roles. Because that is the way I was raised and that was the way he [her husband] was raised. But we have been married 27 years and we are still happy. So I’m not sure it’s a bad idea. He keeps the grass cut, I keep the house clean. It is probably just a generational thing, but I don’t know if it’s a bad thing.

Coree gave a detailed example of men who perform traditional or sustainable techniques, and how she personally observed gender differences.

I know a lot of men who do that (laughs) but it is interesting because they do it a little differently. They have a slightly different orientation to these things. My favorite example is down here, in this little place we live, it’s a pretty deep hollow. So there is not a lot of light ... When we first moved here there was a big line of Cedar trees smack down the center of the property ... We knew we had to take out some of them, and oh it hurt my heart to cut down a tree ... I was always pushing to keep those trees, keep that tree. My husband just had this, ‘No, we are going to cut them down. We have to cut them down.’ ... So he cut down those trees, and it was hard. Then that year, a whole line of day lilies sprung up, right where those trees had been cut down, because the light came in. So the light came in and the flowers came up (laughs). So I learned a lot. I was having some grumps about men, and men, them wanting to cut down everything. (laughs) You know men, (laughs) all those little stereotypicals.

Barb also talked about how her craft of cheese-making and also her lifestyle related to her ideas of being a woman in the region.

Yes, absolutely. Traditionally women in this area would have been very focused on provisioning for their families. All life was focused on that, but women had a different role than the men did. The men were out in the fields and forests and the women were primarily in the home, doing equally heavy work as the men and being very strong and independent in their own ways. I feel very blessed by the tradition of strength and the tradition of nurturing for my family. I think it all folds into my image of being a woman in this area.

Female Kinship and Community

Another significant finding was the theme of kinship among women who practiced these skills or lifestyles. This kinship was specifically female oriented, whether female family members or friends, and some women even reported their practices being similar to a social event. Modern technology has provided a new platform for females in the sub-culture of sustainable or traditional techniques to flourish as well. A few women lived in particularly rural areas, so while they didn't see their female friends physically very often, they did communicate through social media or long phone calls. Deborah, recalling special "canning days," said this, "It was a social thing. My mom, grandma, next door neighbors, we would all get together." When Sherry fondly recalled piecing her first quilt with her grandmother, she shared this scenario,

She [her grandmother] was so excited. As a matter of fact, when I told her I was coming and I wanted her to hand quilt it, she called the ladies at the church where they would do that. So we took it to the church building, and they all gathered together, and we hand quilted it together. That's you know, a kind of social get together; women, talking and sharing their life together ... They loved it. They did it regularly. They didn't just get together for my quilt. If someone had a quilt, they would always help. They didn't care; they didn't even charge me money.

Later when speaking about the formal quilting classes she had taken, Sherry again mentioned, “They are so much fun, you know how when a bunch of women get together, you just, you have fun, you talk about everything.” Barb stated while she doesn’t “get out of the house much” she does feel connected to women in her county.

I definitely feel a lot of kinship with Coree and her friend Cher. This evening there is a meeting, a little group called Macon Families for Simple Living. That is a group of women that focus on one aspect or another of their life, to varying degrees, these kinds of activities. In that measure, yes, I feel like I am part of a community.

Laura expressed similar sentiments of connectivity with female clay potters in her county and how technology allows her to keep close communication with friends.

Absolutely. It’s almost like we have got a union (laughs) ... More actually with age, I see older women, like my age and up, banding together in different ways than younger women do. Younger women have babies and husbands and stuff and need more time or whatever (laughs). Yeah, there is definitely a spirit of camaraderie. We are always together one-way or the other. If I have a problem with the clay I will call up my friend Merrilee and ask what’s going on and she will walk me through it.

Coree actually runs a blog with two other women who practice similar lifestyles and she stated this blog allowed her to stay connected with her friends even during the summer months when visiting each other would be impossible. Later when asked specifically about being a woman in the region she said this,

[B]ecause women here can be very close. But there is a definite difference in the way that women will talk to women, and if a man enters the room, the tone changes. They won’t say the same things, they won’t tell the same jokes. There is a particular kinship between women. Having gone away and having been to other places, I recognize that. I figured that out real quick in other places too ... I have to say getting into little rounds of knitting and crocheting with my girlfriends, there is nothing like that (laughs). It is really a shared craft. It’s really shared, and the bond between women around having children is really intense and interesting.

Lachelle also brought up the use of social media as a way to stay in contact with women in the area.

Now we have social media. Like my friend Barb I was telling you about. She has her farm on a website and she has a Facebook page ... So now you share things that way where I guess at one time women would get together and all do a big batch of something. Apple butter is one distinct one. Everyone in the community would get together and do that; or have a big corn shucking day, stuff like that ... It is just very different than it was say, fifty years ago. It is more online sharing. Barb is always sharing how she had done something, like she just made Chamomile tea so she showed how to do that.

Then later in the interview she went on to say,

I think that must have been an incredibly bonding activity for women. They were in their houses working all the time so they had a chance to come together... I missed out on that. Women didn't really do that that much by the time I came around. I know they used to; I have heard my grandmother talk about it.

The kinship or community features of these traditional or sustainable crafts that women practice help women to combat stereotypical stigmas and allow women a space to not only discuss their craft, but share other, intimate parts of their lives as well. Because of their craft, the women interviewed had a specific avenue to pursue friendships with specific shared traits, providing both support and sharing of new techniques or ideas.

DISCUSSION

Although Appalachia is a substantially large geographical area and its people and culture can fit into the category of a sub-culture in America, in-depth qualitative research is limited. Indeed, even most reference material used in this research is from books published by independent authors with an interest, rather

than in academic journals or scientific publications. One possible explanation for the lack of information about this subculture, could be the avoidance of stigma (Goffman 1963), where isolated individuals realize their identity and restrict themselves to interacting with only those who share the identity, and thereby limiting the flow of information about themselves to the outside world.

Undeniably, stigma regarding this region is alive and well. One journalistic example is found in *The White Ghetto* (2013) written by Kevin Williamson and published in the National Review, where Williamson traveled to small towns within the region to paint a contemporary portrait of Appalachia from an outsider perspective. Other distorted portrayals include popular television shows such as *Appalachian Outlaws*² or *Moonshiners*,³ which provide viewers with a derogatory “reality” show of propaganda as a form of entertainment. Findings in my study are consistent with the literature regarding the implications of poverty and noncompliance with modernity in the region; however, the idea of returning back to nature was embraced by some of the women interviewed. Also congruent with literature is the deep sense of self-sufficiency or being independently connected to the region. Although most of the women did not express feeling particularly Appalachian, they did mention feeling associated to the region either through tradition or community. Similar to past research, my study also found kinship among women who practice traditional or sustainable techniques (Abramson and Heskell 2006) and women were interested in passing their knowledge to others,

² Television Network *The History Channel* series show “Appalachian Outlaws”

³ Television Network *The Discovery Channel* series show “Moonshiners”

whether specifically to other women, or both genders in their community (Thompson and Moser 2006). Although “femininity” was not overtly stated, adherence to gender typical tasks was evident. The literature suggests socialized femininity helps to create a gendered self, which was marked in multiple examples throughout the interviews. Indeed one part of agency could be embracing traditionally gendered tasks as an expression of femininity, although further analysis is needed that specifically explores gender relative to the regional subculture.

Rather than seeing traditional or sustainable practices as old-fashioned or not valuable to modern culture (Mies and Shiva 2014) these women embraced their identity as holders of knowledge and felt their contributions to their community and region were important. Several even taught formal classes on how to practice their technique and appreciated the renewed admiration of their skills. The middle-aged women I interviewed sensed they were of a generation at risk of losing knowledge about traditional or sustainable techniques. A few women mentioned knowing older women who had to live a certain way or do certain things out of basic necessity. The women I interviewed were not old enough to *have* to do what they were doing. Yet, they were concerned about the possibility of traditions being lost. They felt it was important to pass on knowledge of their crafts even though younger generations certainly have the ability to live without these techniques. In this research I was interested in exploring what women would have to say for themselves about the skills and lifestyles they practice, especially in view of renewed interest in folk life or “grass

roots” arts and crafts. While renewed social interest in these practices is drawing more positive attention to the region and what holders of these traditions have to offer, tourist hubs such as Gatlinburg, Tennessee or Asheville, North Carolina capitalize on the commercial aspects of selling mass produced wares. The commercialization rarely directs attention to the actual people in the region. However, women I interviewed did not use their skill, lifestyle, or craft to support themselves financially, and we can thus draw the conclusion that regardless of other’s interests in their activities, these women would still do what they do.

Due to financial and time restrictions, my sample was limited to the 55 county region of Tennessee. Thus, this study cannot account for geographical or regional variations of women or the crafts/techniques they practice. As with most qualitative research, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Considering the geographic location in which I collected data, some sustainable or traditional techniques may “overlap” with what would be considered simply “southern” or “rural” practices, such as food preservation. For instance, sustainable/traditional practices may vary in “deeper” parts of Appalachia, due to distance from an urban area, economic opportunity, differing plant/animal species, or necessity.

All of the women I interviewed practiced a different technique. While this provided a well-rounded sampling of various practices in the area, it also makes the findings inconclusive. Coree and Barb, for example, were “Jacks of all trades” and practiced multiple sustainable and traditional techniques with their families. These two women also “lived off the land” and did not have electricity, water, or sewage. On the other hand, other women lived quite modernly with the exception

of food preservation and their particular craft. Given the limited region of data collection, the variety of crafts and lifestyles practiced, and small sample size, findings from this research are not generalizable to Appalachia in its entirety or women who live there. Yet common threads of cultural identity, personal agency, and a gendered identity indicate the women who practice these traditional or sustainable techniques are much more similar than dissimilar, regardless of lifestyle or regional location.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to provide a qualitative account of women in the southern Appalachian region of Tennessee who practice sustainable or regionally traditional techniques. The research particularly sheds light on the women's attachment to the culture of the region, gender identity in the form of socialized "femininity," and a strong sense of personal agency in developing their crafts. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with participants that self-identified as practicing a sustainable or traditional craft. Although commonalities existed among women interviewed, my research suggests geographic location influences how much concern is given to the environment. Women who lived in more rural areas practiced more sustainable lifestyles as a whole, rather than simply engaging in one or two crafts. However, as expected and reflected in the literature, all of the women did mention environmental concerns that influenced their day-to-day activities.

The geographic location of the upper Cumberland and middle Tennessee area is located in the middle of the southern edge of Appalachia. Middle Tennessee counties are geographically closer to urban areas like Nashville and Murfreesboro, while the upper Cumberland is just outside of the Great Smokey Mountains, one of the many ranges that is part of the Appalachian Mountains. Being located in the outer regions of Appalachia could have influenced how women who were interviewed define their own regionalism, as social concepts of Appalachia portray it as more rural and mountainous. Nonetheless, heritage in some form was expressed as significant to all of the women interviewed.

Although the narratives shared are specific to the individuals of this study, commonalities among these women illuminate a particular sense of pride with being holders of specialized knowledge. The generational age of these women provides a glimpse of women living in a historical period of transition in between necessity and modernity, who felt for one reason or another their craft or lifestyle should be preserved and passed on. This study provides detailed accounts of some women in southern Appalachia, adding to a body of knowledge that only recently has begun to include women and their sustainable practices and artistic contributions to communities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – IRB Approval Letter



12/1/2015

Investigator(s): Amanda Brown
Department: Women and Gender Studies; Sociology and Anthropology
Investigator(s) Email: adb@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Protocol Title: "Sustainable Life Practices of Appalachian W/omen",

Protocol Number: 15-2114

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board, or a representative of the IRB, has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants and qualifies for an expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110, and you have satisfactorily addressed all of the points brought up during the review.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for 15 participants.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918. Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

You will need to submit an end-of-project form to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research located on the IRB website. Complete research means that you have finished collecting and analyzing data. Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date. Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Failure to submit a Progress Report and request for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of your research study. Therefore, you will not be able to use any data and/or collect any data. Your study expires **12/1/2016**.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to complete the required training. If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers to the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion and then destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.

Sincerely,

Aleka Blackwell
Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

APPENDIX B – Photographs



Barbara, Wilson County, Tennessee



Lachelle, Putnam County, Tennessee



Laura, Putnam County, Tennessee



Sherry, Rutherford County, Tennessee



Barb, Macon County, Tennessee

APPENDIX C – Interview Questions

1. Can you please state your name, age, race/ethnicity and county in which you live?
2. What is the sustainable technique you practice?
3. What age did you first learn the technique?
4. Who taught you the technique?
5. Do you know who taught your teacher the technique?
6. Have you taught the technique to anyone else?
7. Can you please describe the technique to me?
 - What do you like about it?
 - Why do you do it?
 - Is there anything about the practice that is hard?
 - Have you changed the way you perform the technique since you learned it?
8. Has this activity ever helped support you financially?
9. Do you feel that this activity is an important part of your heritage?
10. If so, what makes it important?
11. Do you know of any men who perform the same technique or craft or practice?
12. What tools do you use to help you with this practice?
13. How does engaging in this activity relate to your personal ideas about living in this region of the country? About being a woman in Appalachia?

14. Do you feel that you are a member of a community of women who practice distinctive crafts in this region? What does this mean to you? Please explain.
15. Do you think that your craft or activity is good for the environment? In what ways?
16. Do you hope that others will continue your craft or activity when you retire from it? Why or why not? Please tell me more.