

More Than an Elegy: Framing Appalachian Stereotypes in Literary Discourse

By

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## ABSTRACT

Appalachia has long been the target of stereotyping in popular media and news coverage, portrayed as a region of ignorance and backwardness isolated from the rest of the United States. Reviews of J.D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* exemplifies the perpetuation and negation of these stereotypes, providing valuable insight into how the region is both internally and externally perceived. This study examines how book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* contribute to stereotype facilitation of the Appalachian region. Findings show that moral framing, poverty, race, class, and the coal industry are commonly employed frames and themes used to highlight facets of Appalachian identity, often by playing into common misconceptions and coarse caricatures. These results emphasize the need for a more nuanced approach to Appalachian culture while identifying how the region's identity has been shaped by external influence.

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## More Than an Elegy: Framing Southern Stereotypes in Literary Discourse

### Introduction

For well over a century, the “hillbilly” has been an enduring and often scorned figure in the American imagination—an emblem of poverty, ignorance, and isolation (Harkins 2004). From early 20th-century caricatures to the national spotlight cast onto J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, stereotypes have shaped the way the rest of the United States views Appalachia. In the context of the 2024 election, where discussions about class, identity, and the “real American” dominate political discourse, the power of these representations continues to influence how Appalachian communities are perceived and how they perceive themselves (Aoyama 2025; Kingsolver 2024; Pew Research Center 2024; Willingham & Smyth 2024).

Framing is defined as the process by which media and cultural narratives shape public perception by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while omitting others. It influences how issues are interpreted by selecting and highlighting information within a structured framework (Entman 1993; Goffman 1974). Stereotyping reduces individuals or groups to fixed traits, reinforcing social hierarchies and power structures. It functions as a representational practice that marks groups as different or inferior while justifying inequalities by making them seem natural (Hall 1997; Dyer 1993).

Book reviews as influential vessels of cultural commentary offer an ideal site for exploring stereotyping frames. Not only summarizing a text’s content, reviews serve as a bridge between the public and the literary world, providing interpretations of text themes and social context while even influencing reader perceptions before they read the texts themselves (Kiik 2015). Through framing, reviewers have the power to perpetuate or negate stereotypical

depictions, contributing to cultural narratives that some audiences may not interact with outside of the world of literary discourse.

This study examines how book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance contribute to the perpetuation and negation of regional stereotypes of Appalachia. Through the application of framing theory, it is important to examine how reviews reflect and shape perceptions of Appalachian identity through a variety of regional narratives, especially more reductive depictions further perpetuating the “hillbilly” and other exaggerations as common entities. By focusing on responses to Vance’s book, this study sought to investigate the role of literary criticism in stereotype facilitation. Research questions include how reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* frame Appalachia as well as what themes emerge in said reviews.

### **Perceptions of Appalachia**

The Appalachian region of the United States is a geographically and culturally diverse area, encompassing a range of histories, economies, and social structures. Appalachia is marked by its mountainous terrain and historically resource-driven economy. For the purposes of this study, the Appalachian Regional Commission’s (2025a) definition of the Appalachian region was used. Appalachia is defined as the region spanning 206,000 square miles from Southern New York to North Mississippi, encompassing 423 counties throughout portions of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia as well as the entirety of West Virginia. The region also includes “three federally recognized and five state recognized Native American tribal communities” in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, New York, and North Carolina (Appalachian Regional Commission 2025a, para. 2).

Appalachian culture has been shaped predominantly by the resource extraction practices

of the coal industry, which has been romanticized both within and outside of the region despite its significant contribution to Appalachia's economic strife (Lewin 2019). The region has historically been framed as a "national sacrifice zone" through its exploitation for industrial and energy needs at the expense of its communities and culture. Stereotypes of "hillbillies," "rednecks," and coal miners have justified Appalachia's economic and environmental exploitation, reinforcing poverty lines and limiting sustainable development that ultimately embed narratives that perpetuate cycles of marginalization (Scott 2010).

Moreover, Appalachian culture is deeply connected to its land, shaping both its identity and resilience. Environmental degradation, particularly mountaintop removal mining, directly impacts the cultural fabric of the region. Strong traditions rooted in rural, agrarian lifestyles, craftwork, music, and storytelling help to define Appalachian identity. These cultural practices have been shaped by the region's natural environment, such as the close-knit communities that developed in response to the isolation of the mountainous terrain. Regional identity is tied to a sense of place, where the preservation and appreciation of land is seen as an essential component for maintaining local traditions and values. Appalachia's history of coal mining and labor activism continues to influence contemporary cultural identity, with a tradition of solidarity and resilience among workers and their families. The region's social structures also emphasize strong familial ties, community interdependence, and mutual support. Appalachian culture is thus defined beyond its environmental connection by specific cultural practices like storytelling, music, religious traditions, and a reputation for self-sufficiency and hospitality (Arnow 1989; Howard & House 2009).

## **Overlap of Appalachian and Southern Perceptions**

Seeing as a large portion of Appalachia overlaps with the Southern United States, the regions are often perceived as one. Despite shared historical influences such as agriculture, industry, and migration patterns, both regions contain distinct communities with varying traditions, dialects, and cultural practices. This complexity challenges any singular definition, as local identities within these regions are shaped by a mix of historical influences, economic shifts, and evolving social dynamics. This overlap signifies the frequent grouping of the regions as one in a greater cultural perspective as well as within self-identification from regional residents (Cooper 2017).

The Upland South, which includes parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, embodies this intersection, sharing cultural and historical traits with both Appalachia and the broader South. Characterized by its rugged terrain and agrarian traditions, the Upland South developed economic and social structures distinct from the plantation-dominated Deep South, yet it remained tied to Southern identity through facets such as language, religion, and historical narratives. This overlapping region has particularly contributed to consistent outside perceptions that conflate Appalachian and Southern identities as one and the same. However, the Upland South's unique history—shaped by subsistence farming, smaller landholdings, and a tradition of independence—distinguishes it within the broader Southern landscape while reinforcing its connection to Appalachia (Otto 1986; Peres 2008).

The “hillbilly” figure, which emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, similarly shaped this overlap. Early depictions contributed to the stereotype of rural people within the regions as

isolated and resistant to modernity. By the early 1900s, these images were further solidified through popular media, where the “hillbilly” became a popular icon of the region and even a means of self-identification for Appalachians and Southerners alike. These portrayals reinforce a shared identity between the two regions, contributing to an enduring stereotype of rural people trapped in cycles of resistance (Harkins 2004; Roberts 2010).

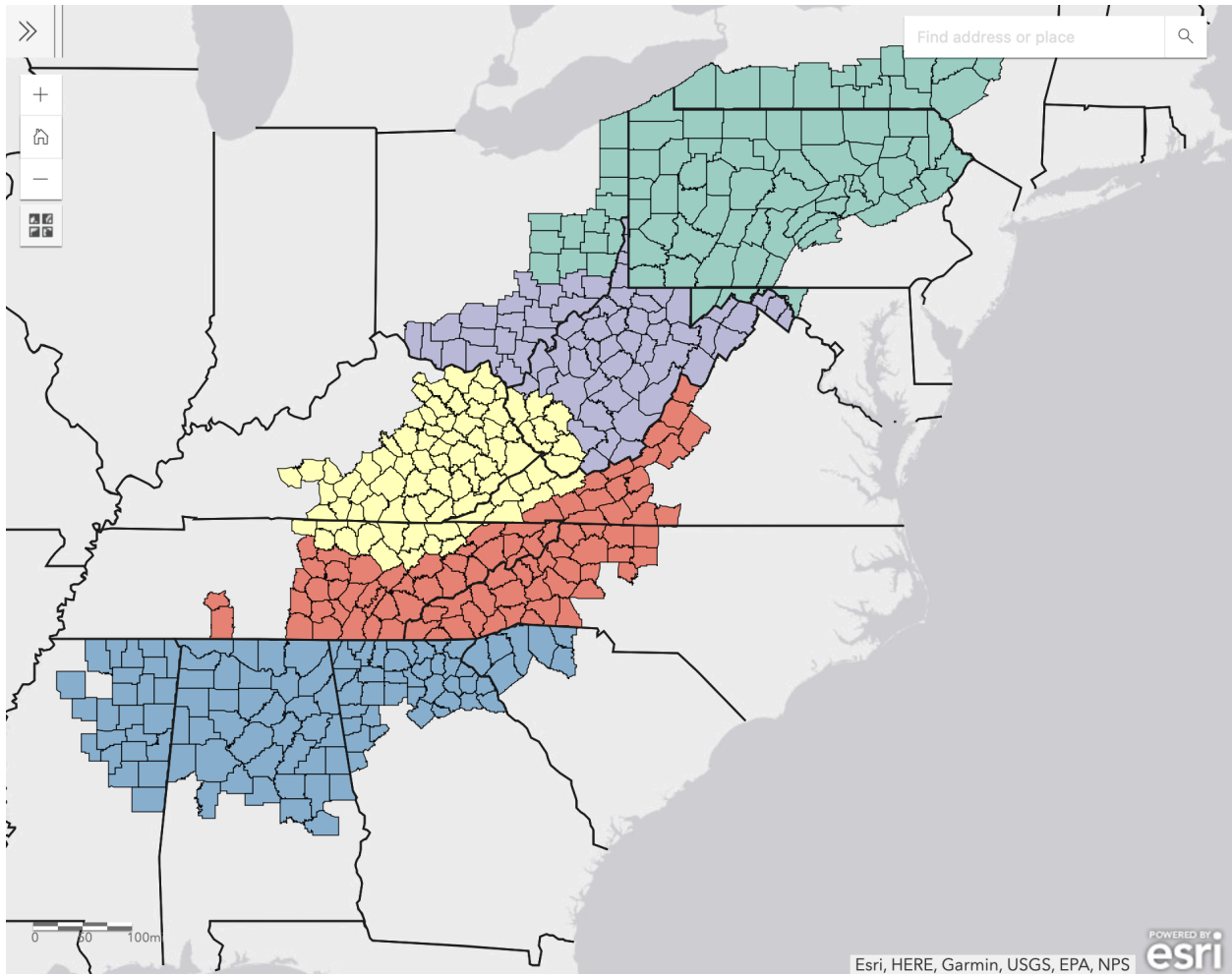
### **Controversy Surrounding *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance**

J.D. Vance is a former United States Senator as well as the current Vice President of the United States. Born in “Rust Belt” Middletown, Ohio, Vance was primarily raised by his maternal grandparents, who had relocated to Middletown from Appalachian eastern Kentucky in the late 1940s. Vance’s surname is derived from his mother, as his parents divorced when he was a toddler. Vance enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 2003 and served during the Iraq War before attending Ohio State University, where he obtained a bachelor’s degree in political science in 2009. In 2013, Vance earned a law degree from Yale Law School and later worked for Californian investment firms as well as Sidley Austin LLP. During the 2016 election, Vance criticized Donald Trump, calling the President “a cultural heroin,” “an idiot,” and “America’s Hitler” on social media. Vance would later vote for Trump in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and would successfully run as Trump’s running mate in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election (Britannica 2025; Ward 2024).

Published in 2016, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance details Vance’s perspective on his adolescence in Ohio as well as the values carried from and imposed by his family’s history in Appalachian Kentucky. The book was adapted into a film by Netflix in 2020 and was directed by Ron Howard. Upon the book’s publication, Vance

received criticism in the media for his critique of Appalachian identity and values, and the book was the subject of much discussion due to its relevancy to the 2016 United States Presidential election and the rising popularity of Donald Trump (Branscome 2016; Kunzru 2016; Rader 2017). However, the memoir also received praise by a widespread audience and was lauded by elite liberals at the time for its explanation of rural White poverty and the rise of “Trumpism” in Appalachia and the South (Walsh 2024). Conversations and critiques surrounding *Hillbilly Elegy* resurfaced during the election of Vance as a United States Senator of Ohio in 2022 and his subsequent election as Vice President of the United States in 2024 (Kincade 2024; Kruse 2022; Slattery & Coster 2024; Zuylen-Wood 2022). Discourse disputing *Hillbilly Elegy* as a nuanced, factual account of Appalachian identity grew immensely within literary communities, particularly among Appalachian authors and journalists during the aforementioned election cycles. This sparked a movement to publish lists of alternative books written by Appalachian authors highlighting the diversity and ideals of the region while simultaneously rejecting and criticizing Vance’s perspective. (Berry 2020; Jones 2020; Winchester 2024).

Figure 1

*About the Appalachian Region*

*Note.* The map depicts the Appalachian region with colors indicating Southern Appalachia (blue), South Central Appalachia (red), Central Appalachia (yellow), North Central Appalachia (purple), and Northern Appalachia (green) respectively. Adapted from *About the Appalachian Region*, by Appalachian Regional Commission

<https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>

## **Theoretical Framework**

Stereotyping and framing serve as lenses for understanding how media narratives shape marginalized regions, especially those like Appalachia and the South (Anglin 2016; Hess 2018; Maggard 1983; Richards 2019; Roberts 2010). Stereotyping simplifies complex identities into easily digestible, often reductive categories that reinforce social hierarchies and power dynamics. Theories of stereotyping, particularly those by Dyer (1977) and Hall (1997), reveal how these depictions aim to normalize inequalities by positioning certain groups as “other” or inferior. Framing, as explained by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), emphasizes how media practices selectively highlight certain issues and interpretations to guide audiences’ understanding of social realities. This process not only structures perceptions but also perpetuates cultural hegemony, as seen in various Appalachian narratives throughout media. By exploring both the construction of stereotypes and the strategic framing of regional identities, this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how regional identity is represented (Dyer 1977; Entman 1993; Goffman 1974; Hall 1997).

### **An Overview of Framing**

First introduced by Goffman (1974), framing theory provides a lens for understanding how meaning is interpreted and ascribed to social reality. Frames act as cognitive schemas that allow individuals to categorize aspects of the world around them, thus governing perception and behavior in everyday life. Additionally, frames structure human experience by defining boundaries around social interaction as well as providing context for understanding events and narratives, rendering them as essential to cultural, social, and media discourses (Goffman 1974).

Expanding on Goffman’s (1974) work, Entman (1993) refined framing theory to its application to communication and media. To Entman (1993), framing concerned taking a point

of a perceived reality and making it salient within a text, prioritizing and downplaying certain interpretations that thereby shape audience perceptions of a given topic. Further, he identifies four key functions of framing: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies. These functions shed light on framing's role in influencing public understanding and responses (Entman 1993).

Both Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993) recognize framing as a selective and interpretative process. For Goffman (1974), frames emerge organically and act as a reflection of shared norms and assumptions. Often, these frames become so ingrained that they appear natural or self-evident, forming their constructed nature. Entman (1993) extends this idea to the domain of media, emphasizing how media and communication creators intentionally construct frames to guide interpretations and influence opinions. Within this context, framing acts as a strategic tool to reinforce or challenge dominant narratives through the varying inflections of perspectives (Goffman 1974; Entman 1993). Beyond these concepts, Pan and Kosicki (2001) explore framing as a strategic action in public deliberation that illustrates how framing is not merely a reflection of reality but an active, deliberate process. Communicators such as political figures strategically select aspects of an issue to highlight and emphasize, guiding public discourse to align with particular, preselected agendas. This framing process shapes the direction of collective audience understanding, which in turn influences public opinion and allows communicators the power to steer societal discourses (Pan & Kosicki 2001).

Building from Entman's (1993) framework, Kim, Carvalho, and Davis (2010) explored how U.S. news media frame poverty, particularly within the lens of responsibility attributions. Their analysis revealed the unbalanced tendencies for media outlets to emphasize societal-level causes and solutions over individual-level factors. Notably, the study found variations across

media types and political orientations: liberal newspapers were more likely to highlight social causes and solutions compared to conservative papers, and television news was less inclined than print media to make societal-level attributions. Framing choices such as these significantly influence public perception, potentially shaping attitudes towards policy interventions and societal support for impoverished communities (Kim, Carvalho, and Davis 2010). Similarly, Vossen and Schulpen (2019) examined media framing of global poverty in the United Kingdom, indicating a strong connection between media narratives and public understanding. According to this study, both media and public discourse principally define poverty in developing countries in terms of insolvency and stagnation among other factors. This internal attribution of poverty's causes suggests minimal progress toward widespread poverty alleviation due to the significant influence of framing choices on public perception (Vossen and Schulpen 2019).

Media and public discourse also contribute significantly to negative Appalachian framing, moralizing class differences that present the region's poverty and lifestyle as evidence of moral failing. Richards (2019) argues that this rhetorical moralization creates a stark contrast between the "correct" values of urban, modern America and the "incorrect" or backward lifestyle associated with Appalachia, which further frames the region's struggles as a cultural deficiency rather than a consequence of repeated neglect. By highlighting poverty and underdevelopment from a moral standpoint, these frames act to reinforce societal hierarchies and position Appalachia as a place in need of extensive correction rather than support. Maggard (1983) similarly discusses how news media specifically reinforces dominant cultural narratives that negatively target Appalachia. Under this lens, news media serve to maintain dominant power structures that position Appalachia as the "other." These frames suppress regional complexity and present a monolithic view of Appalachia that completely overlooks its diversity and

resilience. Reductive depictions such as these sustain hegemonic cultural orders that treat alternative narratives as outcasts, contributing to a cyclical process of misrepresentation that ensures that cultural perceptions of Appalachia go unchallenged both by outsiders and residents themselves (Maggard 1983).

Anglin (2016) examined how media frames the Appalachian opioid crisis by highlighting the persistence of reductive narratives portraying the region as dysfunctional and morally failing, which are deeply rooted in long standing perceptions of poverty and backwardness. Frames such as these tend to oversimplify complex social issues, obscuring structural factors such as healthcare disparities that heavily contribute to the opioid crisis while inventing material that neglects to lend voice to diverse, realistic experiences. By focusing on individual deviance and a perceived moral wrongness rather than systemic inequality, these depictions perpetuate stigmatized identities while justifying an intentional, region-crippling neglect of broader societal interventions (Anglin 2016).

### **An Overview of Stereotyping**

Stereotyping is deeply embedded in cultural representation, a process that attempts to simplify and categorize the social world. However, this often has significant implications for power dynamics and identity construction both within and outside of targeted groups. Dyer (1977) argues that stereotyping is essential to human navigation of social complexities and cultural representations, especially concerning identities one is unfamiliar with. In reducing an individual or group to a set of characteristics, stereotypes create familiarity and order that make the unknown more manageable. This process is inherently reductive in most cases, exaggerating or distorting traits to reinforce societal hierarchies as well as functioning as a projection of internal biases and fears (Dyer 1977).

Hall (1997) expands on Dyer's (1977) concepts by examining the visual and discursive construction of stereotypes. Hall (1997) asserts that stereotypes are not neutral, operating as binary mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, stereotypes set guidelines for what is considered "normal" versus what is the "other," forming an opposition between dominant and marginalized groups. This harmful process acts to naturalize inequalities by framing them as inherent, justifying them as a tool for maintaining dominant power structures and legitimizing marginalization through portrayals of deviance or inferiority (Hall 1997).

The duality of stereotyping is highlighted by both Dyer (1977) and Hall (1997) as a cognitive shortcut and social practice with significant ideological repercussions. While stereotypes do simplify the complexities of reality, they also construct further aspects of it by prescribing privilege to chosen narratives while outcasting others. Dyer's (1977) discussions of the repeated frequency of stereotyping in media's creation of universality and inevitability is complemented by Hall's (1997) analysis of how these representations work to fix and perpetuate stereotypes over time. Further, the usage and effects on both those who stereotype and those who receive stereotyping as a result of larger cultural discourses illustrates the potency of the practice in embedding assumptions in every facet of identity (Dyer 1977; Hall 1997).

The interplay between media portrayals and individual biases is critical in understanding the systemic nature of stereotyping. Arendt (2023) argues that media stereotypes contribute to a self-reinforcing dynamic in which exposure to stereotypical portrayals leads individuals to internalize and perpetuate biased perceptions that contribute significantly to societal divisions. This process is amplified by audience selectivity in which individuals actively seek media content that aligns with preexisting beliefs, fostering a preference for information that supports stereotypical views. In short, "prejudiced predispositions influenced prejudice-consistent news

choice and (self-selected) exposure, in turn, elicited a (reinforcement) effect on prejudice” (Arendt 2023, General discussion section, para. 1). Furthermore, Ye et al. (2021) demonstrate that stereotypes are not only reinforced through media but also through interpersonal communications. Individuals are more likely to share information that conforms to established stereotypes, which perpetuates biased beliefs within social networks. Selective sharing behavior through both mass media and social interactions thus illustrates the systemic nature of stereotyping. Together, these mechanisms ensure that stereotypes remain enshrined in societal structures through the reinforcement of both individual and group perceptions (Arendt 2023; Ye et al. 2021).

Stereotyping also operates beyond the level of individuals at the intersection of culture and geography, shaping perceptions of entire regions such as Appalachia. Hess (2018) introduces the concept of “localized othering” to describe how geographically bound stereotypes marginalize Appalachian diversity through the employment of the term “Rutter” in southeastern Ohio. Classic portrayals of the region being backward, impoverished, and uneducated are deeply rooted in broader narratives that justify resource exploitation and perpetuate systemic neglect, as seen with the coal industry’s rise and fall. These portrayals come across as static and regressive, emphasizing the region’s perceived opposition to progress and modernity. By focusing on the spatial dimensions of stereotyping, Hess (2018) reveals how geographic identities become embedded with harmful assumptions that exacerbate systemic inequalities that may well be addressed otherwise and explores how these terms may be used to inflict positive social change regarding regional stereotyping.

## **Framing Theory in Existing Research on Stereotypes**

Framing provides a robust framework for understanding how stereotypes are constructed and maintained through media and culture. Yang (2015) integrates cognitive and sociological perspectives into this relationship, exploring how stereotypical frames oversimplify identities in ways that reinforce societal hierarchies. These framing effects influence audience interpretations by cultivating “in-group” and “out-group” distinctions that lead to normalizations of embellished depictions. This cognitive-sociological model underscores the importance of the use of framing mechanisms in media to uncover the cultural embedding of stereotypes (Yang 2015).

The interplay between traditional and digital media expands upon stereotype perpetuation. Dobson and Knezevic’s (2018) study on the “Sweet Brown” meme highlights how legacy media’s sensational framing of marginalized individuals translates into digital spaces where humor and decontextualization further amplify preexisting stereotypes. Through an examination of virality, this study also reveals systemic inequalities underpinning portrayals and demonstrating the feedback loop created by framing across platforms (Dobson and Knezevic 2018). A similar mechanism is observed in political media coverage and discourse. Gidengil and Everitt (2003) demonstrate how female politicians are framed through gendered lenses that emphasize traditional feminine norms such as the possession of combative demeanors. Just as digital media reconfigures racialized and class-based stereotypes through the repetitive employment of humor, gendered frames in media reinforce societal biases by shaping perceptions of authority and competence (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). These studies illustrate how framing mechanisms function across different identity categories, sustaining hierarchies that normalize distorted portrayals of marginalized groups (Dobson and Knezevic 2018; Gidengil and Everitt 2003).

Similarly, Steele (2020) explores Appalachian identity framing and stereotyping in the context of political polarization during the 2016 United States presidential election, where the framing of Appalachian communities as homogenous has contributed to the reinforcement of negative stereotyping through legitimization and self-identification. The strategic employment of these frames in political rhetoric and media portrayals emphasizes some attributes while downplaying others. These frames also reinforce societal divisions by casting Appalachia as an “other” in opposition to the more progressive, urbanized parts of the country, fortifying “us/them” narratives. This process shapes false external understandings of Appalachian identity while contributing to marginalization that also reinforces internal ideas of identity, further entrenching stereotypes pivotal to the construction of social realities that make combating exclusionary group formations difficult (Steele 2020).

### **Literature Review**

Appalachian, and by extension Southern, stereotypes have historically been shaped by pervasive exaggerations that have evolved with U.S. culture, reducing Appalachia and the South to a one-dimensional region teeming with illiterate, backwoods figures that are ill-placed among other regional identities or even in different classes of the same culture (Hamilton 2009; Slade & Narro 2012). This literature review explores how regional stereotypes are constructed, perpetuated, and challenged with media and literature along with contributions from historical, cultural, and psychological perspectives. In reviewing key works, this review aims to highlight the stereotype origins, effects, and persistence within various realms to argue for a more nuanced approach to regional identity.

## **Historical & Cultural Roots of Appalachian Stereotyping**

Stereotypes are deeply rooted in Appalachian and Southern history and culture, shaped over time by both internal complexities and external perceptions. Early archetypes like the “Southern gentleman” and “mammy” stood as idealized symbols that represented hollow identities (Gros 2010; McPherson 2003; Radu 2013). Time was unkind to these personas, further reducing regional figures to caricatures that featured traits such as racial division, ignorance, and backwardness. Resulting from larger cultural shifts, the South grew into a region perpetually caught in the past that symbolized resistance and rejection of modernity (Dumbrava 2007). The working class, which a majority of Appalachians belong to, would similarly confront formative stereotyping that reshaped outside perceptions of its members. Labels of inferiority and low social mobility continue to plague working class members as well as dehumanize them as objects of labor rather than real people with societal roles (Durante & Fiske 2017).

The derogatory labeling of “redneck” would also arise as a framing vessel for stereotyping applicable to both Southerners and Appalachians. Initially used as a term equated with Communist, “redneck” was employed from the 1900s to the 1940s as a sort of slur toward labor union members, particularly those that participated in strikes. Throughout the period, the term was also synonymous with other insults such as “agitator” or “a member of the NMU,” the National Maritime Union, before later being adopted in Appalachia to label union miners. It also spread as far as the Deep South at this time as “an analog for cracker, hillbilly, and peckerwood” (Huber 1994). As for “redneck’s” origins, Huber (1994) speculates that the term came from the red handkerchiefs of union miners that kept the grit of coal off of their skin. This label would evolve into a proud title adopted by these miners “as a badge of honor” that marked “another form of protection” outside of the skin covering. Over many years, “redneck” would come to

perpetuate stereotypes used in popular images depicting regional isolation and stagnation, where the term is now spoken as an insult toward “poor, uneducated white Southerners, especially those who hold racist, conservative, or reactionary views” (Huber 1994, p. 107).

### **Southern and Appalachian Media Representations**

Media representations consistently contribute to the continuation of historical stereotyping. Slade and Narro (2012) argue that television coverage and programming construct a falsified version of regional identity that focus on both glamorized and sanitized portrayals. These depictions home in on Southern hospitality, charm, and quaintness while overlooking the very raw racial and economic struggles that still exist in the South. By creating a sense of Southern nostalgia, media create a static image of a historically inaccurate South untouched by contemporary issues, completely neglecting pivotal events such as the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement. An emphasis on traditional values and old-timey charm ignores the dynamic evolution of culture that the South continues to experience (Slade & Narro 2012).

In contrast, a plethora of negative Southern media representations also contribute to larger Southern stereotyping. Compared to the “aw shucks” attitude of the sanitized shows addressed by Slade and Narro (2012), Hamilton (2009) paints a grittier picture of Southern media that features characters that are ignorant, backwards, and unrefined. These depictions cast a label of inferiority onto Southerners and perpetuate a sense of otherness that increasingly contributes to the social divide between the region and the greater United States. Gross misrepresentations such as these inform non-Southern audiences’ notions of Southern identity and lead to assumptions of ignorance and inferiority for real people (Hamilton 2009).

Southern framing during the Civil Rights Movement is an excellent example of media’s role in perpetuating Southern misconceptions. At the time, Hollywood films and television

focused on White redemption rather than fashioning realistic narratives of structural issues underpinning racial tensions. Racial struggles were instead depicted as personal moral dilemmas for White Southerners and detracted from the larger, truthful issues ingrained in systemic inequality. These illustrations offered a sentimentalized view of the South that allowed outside viewers to believe that the region was able to be redeemed through obscure efforts rather than through institutional change (Graham 2001).

On a broader scale, McPherson (2003) critically discusses how Southern representations are shaped by nostalgia, race, and gender, reinforcing idealized images of the region that obscure its complex history. Southern identity in media is often reimagined as a nostalgic, pre-modern place where race and gender hierarchies are romanticized rather than critically examined. This concept of an imagined South is presented as a site of traditional values and cultural authenticity that diminishes the realities of racial tension and inequalities that define the South's historical and contemporary struggles. Southern idealization further perpetuates stereotypes with the broader trend of framing the region as outside the modern, progressive mainstream that ignores important events throughout its history (McPherson 2003).

### **Appalachian and Southern Identity in Literature**

Southern-based literature also has a long history in contributing stereotypical representations to Southern media. Wright (2001) explores how Southern literary canon formation has contributed to the reinforcement of regional stereotyping through works that have been deemed “definitive” representations of the South. By examining Caroline Miller's *Lamb in His Bosom*, Wright (2001) asserts that the literary canon has historically reinforced simplified portrayals of Southern identity that often reduces it to the same stereotypes of poverty and backwardness that pervade broader cultural depictions, where Miller negates the “two-class

White” South. While Miller’s work offers a more nuanced portrayal of the South from a deeply feminine perspective, it stands in direct contrast to more traditional canonical works that perpetuate tropes like the “redneck” or the “hillbilly,” which are also deeply applicable to Appalachian stereotyping. Wright (2001) asserts that the selection of certain works— those that most align with popular perceptions of the South as a region of racial and economic tension— has actively shaped public consciousness. By excluding more complex, nuanced works, such as Miller’s, the literary canon helps entrench the one-dimensional view of the South that underpins many stereotypes both within the United States and abroad (Wright 2001).

These ideas are being challenged in contemporary young adult Southern and Appalachian fiction as well. While the “redneck” stereotype still appears in modern Southern literary works, a growing number of regional authors are working to subvert traditional harmful portrayals. A growing presence of complex, multifaceted Southern characters in young adult fiction defies oversimplified stereotypes, creating nuanced representations of whole characters with diverse, unique experiences and identities. Within the genre, these depictions trade old-fashioned, one-dimensional characterizations for realistic reflections (Martin 2023).

### **The Psychological and Social Impact of Appalachian and Southern Stereotypes**

Stereotyping can have a very real impact on the psychological and social state of Appalachians and Southerners, shaping outsider and internal perceptions. Stereotype threat, or the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about a component of one’s identity, affects the intellectual performance of targeted groups. A study by Clark et al (2011) found that Southerners reminded of stereotypes regarding Southern ignorance and backwardness before engaging in intellectual tasks performed worse compared to participants with an absence of stereotype reminders. The seriousness of stereotype threat serves as a reminder to the effect of stereotypes

on self-esteem and academic confidence, which may also lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which individuals subconsciously conform to stereotypical expectations, further reinforcing broader stereotypes. Effects additionally contribute to mass marginalization where U.S. culture perceived Southern identity as lacking in unique backgrounds or skills due to their failed performances in instances such as these (Clark et al 2011).

Gonyea (2017) reinforces the media's role in shaping harmful stereotype effects on Appalachians by arguing that negative stereotypes emphasizing attributes such as ignorance and violence go beyond cultural misrepresentation to reinforce social dynamics that enhance stigmatization of Appalachians. By examining the media's impact on identity formation, Gonyea (2017) demonstrates how external stereotypes influence Appalachians' sense of belonging and self-worth, underscoring the broader societal consequences of stereotyping that inhibits the region's social mobility.

### **The Need for a More Nuanced Approach to Regional Identity**

As has been previously established, Appalachian and Southern identity is often oversimplified and reduced in literature and broader media, overlooking the rich diversity and culture composing the region. Binary opposition has largely influenced this negativity through the "civilized" North and the "backward" South and Appalachia. This oversimplification discounts the complexity of the history along with the cultural multiplicity that continuously reshapes the regions. Additionally, such labeling turns a blind eye to the very real struggles faced by Appalachia imposed by outside exploitation such as economic and educational disparities as well as "diseases of despair" (Appalachian Regional Commission 2025b; Appalachian Regional Commission 2025c; NORC Walsh Center 2024).

By critiquing more traditionalist approaches to regional media representations, nuanced approaches to identity that consider the duality of struggle and resiliency contribute to stronger portrayals. For example, representations so minor as that of hyperlocal news institutions are posited to make a difference in attitudes toward the lifestyle and issues confronted by Appalachians, inspiring change and greater aid by institutions equipped to help both within and outside of regional communities. This acknowledgement of contradictions, complexities, and ongoing evolution are essential to accurate and inclusive regional representations (Carey 2017).

### **Research Questions**

This study examines frames and themes of Appalachian identity and culture within book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance, focusing on the following research questions:

- *RQ1*: How do book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance frame Appalachian stereotyping?
- *RQ2*: What themes regarding Appalachian stereotyping emerged in book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance?

### **Methodology**

This study sought to examine how book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance framed regional stereotyping. The Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) JEWEL search function was used to determine the sample. This function allows for the search of “books, articles, images, videos, scores, audio recordings, encyclopedia entries and more from a single search” using filters such as “item type, publication date, subject, and more” (Middle Tennessee State University Walker Library 2025). The Google search engine was also used to supplement reviews that were not included in the Middle Tennessee State University database. Google’s

advanced search function was used to filter results using the term “book review” to find results from national and regional organizations.

Data were collected from the Walker Library JEWL search engine and the Google search engine for book reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy*. For the purposes of this study, the term “book review” is defined as a critical evaluation or discussion of a book’s content, themes, or significance, written for the purpose of informing or influencing an audience (Lee et. al, 2010).

Each book review published was considered a unit of analysis. Book reviews published from June 2016 until May 2025 were considered. This date range was chosen because *Hillbilly Elegy* was published in June 2016, and this study began in May 2025. This range additionally includes the 2016, 2022, and 2024 elections and relevant political events. Book reviews that are blurbs and publication announcements were excluded from this study. For example, JEWL search results showing reviews from both *Library Journal* and *Foreign Affairs* were excluded during a preliminary search due to being blurbs that were one-third of a page long. Other results serving as lists that included *Hillbilly Elegy* such as *TIME Magazine*’s seasonal book lists were also excluded. Reviews were required to come from reputable publications, which include national and regional news organizations such as *The New York Times Book Review* and *NPR*, and academic and scholarly journals, periodicals, and magazines, such as *Rural Sociology* and *American Prospect*.

Data collected were analyzed using textual analysis, which “allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text” (Fürsich 2009). This entails systematically interpreting textual data for the identification of patterns and themes. Each review was analyzed for both explicit and implicit references to Appalachian stereotypes, focusing on recurring frames. Particular attention was given to how these frames are

contextualized, predominantly focusing on if regional stereotypes are reinforced, challenged, or negated.

## **Results and Discussion**

In total, this study analyzed 55 reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance for themes and frames surrounding Appalachian identity and culture. From these reviews, five major themes and frames regarding Appalachia emerged, including the frame of moral failure and the themes of race, poverty, class, and learned helplessness and self-victimization. Based on these results, moral failure served as the most frequently and significantly discussed frame with reviews tending to perpetuate stereotypes through this lens, with poverty, class, the coal industry, and race closely following.

### **Moral Failure**

Regarding research question one, which concerns framing of Appalachia, moral failure is the most prevalent frame across reviews, with nearly every review included in this study implying either its presence or a defense against it in some form. As is the case with other topics, moral failure is mostly presented as a binary in which Appalachians either suffer from various afflictions due to inherent moral failure or have been labeled with moral failure as an unfortunate consequence of outside neglect and exploitation. For reviews favoring the former, moral failure is discussed from various perspectives that include themes of “learned helplessness” and self-victimization as well as an innate hopelessness and inability related to escaping the damning characteristics of Appalachian culture. Other significant themes that emerged through the frame of moral failure include race and poverty.

Moral failure is a broad term with many vague uses and meanings across fields and belief

systems. Batson (2016) discusses the various attributions of moral failure, where “some experts believe the problem is a lack of character” while others “say we’re victims of poor judgement” (p. 2) and yet more assert that “the problem is that we’re knocked off course by strong situational forces that overpower our good intent” (p. 2). Batson (2016) continues in contending that “implicit in these different views is the assumption that if we can grow up properly, if we can think and feel as we should, and if we can keep a firm hand on the tiller despite the shifting winds of circumstance, all will be well” (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, moral failure is defined along Batson’s (2016) terms as the supposed failure of an individual or even, in this case, culture at an inherently moral level.

***Learned Helplessness, Self-Victimization, Cultural Failure & Innate Hopelessness***

Nested within the theme of moral failure, “learned helplessness,” a term that is employed in reviews due to its use in *Hillbilly Elegy*, makes recurring appearances as a tool of regional condemnation, where Appalachians have allegedly absorbed practices of self-victimization and sorrow to evade the responsibility of personal choice required for economic and cultural improvement. In one review, Liddle (2017) writes, “Vance is good—and right—on the fecklessness, the “learned helplessness,” of welfare dependency and horribly constrained expectations, the stuff you might expect from a neocon assessment of the modern world” (p. 56). Such dependency would, arguably, require personal intervention to effect any change. Further supporting this idea, Norman (2016) writes that Appalachians “are the ones who cannot find work, or say they can’t, in the digital world. They are, in a word, victims in fact and, more important, in spirit. Victims, largely of themselves” (p. 31). According to this perspective, government aid is useless due to both a regional wariness of intervention as well as an individual unwillingness to seek progress. Anderson (2016) contends, “[Vance] cannot abide the suspicion

of institutions and outsiders. Nor can he tolerate his people's quickness to blame others for their problems and their certainty that the deck is stacked against them" (p. 83). Similarly, Gochnour (2017) states that "choices matter. Public policies can help, but will never be enough. Harry Potter's Dumbledore was right. It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (p. 32).

There is much argument in favor of this "learned helplessness," though there is little negation of it in defense of Appalachian suffering. Only two reviews confront this assertion head on by arguing that obstacles unrelated to morality have contributed significantly to regional livelihood. Greenberg (2019) states, "Working-class families and communities are indeed in trouble, but a lot of factors contributed to it. The culprit was not bad choices. It was not lack of personal responsibility or a government that was clueless about how to get to a better economy and society. We are not powerless to address these ills" (p. 49). In the same vein, Stoll (2018) writes about a poor couple that is discussed in *Hillbilly Elegy* who are written as unwilling to work. He writes,

As Vance sees it, the couple stands for other poor folks who supposedly refuse to do a hard day's work, and this becomes the problem of Appalachia or rather the problem with Appalachia. He sets the apparent failings of these indolent people against his own triumph. His hard work led him out of poverty, out of self-defeat, and out of Appalachia altogether. But the problem with the anecdote is that Vance tells us nothing about what else went on in the lives of this couple. They lack their own story, which if we knew it might inspire empathy for their behavior. We come to know Vance from his interior world, but we only see the couple from the exterior of theirs. Yet Vance generalizes both, turning their failure into diagnosis and his success into something like the cure (p. 347).

Additionally, a number of reviews attribute an innate hopelessness as well as inherent cultural norms in Appalachians as cause for failure. Because of this, reviews assert, Appalachians have little morale or want for upward mobility, perpetuating cycles at their own detriment. Anderson (2016) succinctly writes, "When you lose hope that you can better your own circumstances,

someone else has to do it for you” (p. 83). Norman (2016) echoes this sentiment, stating, “Though they may have left the hollow, it had never left them” (p. 31). Further arguing this point, Bendis (2016) similarly states, “Their expectations are so low that many simply quit trying for a better life” (p. 31). Norman (2016) also argues that, while Vance’s family may have found success in escaping harsh Appalachian life physically, they were still hindered by “the pathologies of the hollow” that “went with them” (p. 31). Lee & Olasky (2017) further this argument in targeting Appalachian values, where “Vance shows how young men who choose to work fewer than 20 hours per week or get fired for coming in late or stealing merchandise blame others for their failure, even though they don’t walk the values they praise in the abstract” (p. 36). McWhorter (2016) drives the idea of cultural corruption home by avowing, “But after 50 years of Great Society programs that tried to legislate poverty out of existence, it’s clear that government alone cannot create real change. To pretend that culture is somehow beside the point is a denial of a people’s humanity, for all its intended benevolence” (p. 37).

Once again, reviews defending Appalachian culture and cause for hopelessness are scarce. Regarding these topics, Stoll (2018) solely vindicates Appalachians through his examination of *Hillbilly Elegy*, asserting that “Vance doesn’t need to fight for those left behind. He can cast their hardship as mostly their own fault, or that of the maladapted culture they inherited” as well as that “the point is that Vance is either entirely unaware of that struggle or prefers to cast his narrative as a tragic failure of character for which there is no policy” (p. 349). In this light, Appalachians and Vance are juxtaposed to illustrate how regional failure is typically faulted as a sort of fate for Appalachians, as it is easier to operate from this narrative rather than to acknowledge the systemic abuse that has occurred instead.

Stoll (2018) summarizes these judgements well in highlighting the lack of nuance given

to Appalachian strife and lifestyle. As is the case with other sections of this study, these reviews fail to acknowledge the devastating impact of industrial neglect imposed upon the region regarding not only the success of Appalachia as a whole but also the health and wellbeing of its individuals, where there is little aid in overcoming obstacles created by harmful systems and institutions. A lack of positive change enables attitudes of hopelessness and perceived “learned helplessness,” where it would seem easy to fall into despairing attitudes due to seemingly little progress toward better conditions. It is proven that reminders of adverse conditions and negative outside perceptions inhibit optimism and performance toward societal advancement; therefore, reinforcing narratives of dejected attitudes toward the region only further tamps down its residents (Clark et al. 2011). Additionally, nonexistent coverage regarding present issues deeply affects Appalachian mobility by strengthening stagnant views. For example, the common conception from within Appalachia that poverty is seen as “business as usual” reinforces a dominant ideology that poverty is an inherent trait of the region’s culture that cannot be helped, where a lack of local news coverage of poverty only cements this idea (Carey 2017). Little hope for improvement only intensifies feelings of despondency; therefore, bringing adequate, nuanced attention to real issues faced by Appalachians is the first step to improvement. These stereotype-based reviews that spread narratives of an inherent inability and lack of will toward regional progress only reinforce internalized perceptions of cultural failure and immobility, thus leading to Appalachian dejection based on a lack of realistic representation and empathy and creating a greater issue of hindering progress by unjustly placing blame on an unchangeable culture rather than systems and institutions that can be held accountable for injustices.

### ***Race***

Concerning research question two, race as a theme appeared in many reviews, often

framed through the lens of moral failure in comparison to minorities. In a number of reviews, White low and working class Appalachian traits and issues are compared to those of minorities. 16 mentions across reviews compare Appalachian culture and its residents' ability to deal with similar struggles to Black communities, whereas three reviews make this comparison with Hispanic communities and one review does so with other minorities. Multiple of these reviews frame Appalachians as less apt to deal with struggles across minority groups such as poverty or industrial oppression due to perceived moral failings or other diminishing qualities within the region's residents, implying that both subculture and minority members are inferior or lacking in some way. After spending several paragraphs discussing the perceived self-helplessness of Appalachians, Williamson (2016) writes, "Thought experiment: Imagine these people living on minimum wage or welfare. Imagine them living in a black ghetto in Detroit rather than a white ghetto in Ohio" (p. 43). Arguing in favor of the presence of moral failure in Appalachian communities as an agent of dereliction, McWhorter (2016) asserts,

[Appalachians] wallow in abstract vitriol against 'the system,' use violence to settle trivial disputes, have children early and without the means to support them, and often succumb to substance abuse. They do all of this in numbers far too vast to be dismissed as mere anecdotal peculiarities. In fact, incarceration rates for these poor whites are going up at the same time that they are going down for poor blacks (p. 37).

Other reviews simply equate Appalachian struggles to those of minorities, framing them in the same racist, unflattering light. In one review, Farhat-Holzman (2017) writes, "[Vance's] observations apply similarly to other groups living in poverty: Blacks in inner cities or as sharecroppers in the South, and second-generation Hispanics living in gang-poisoned urban enclaves" while also asking "Is this not the same crisis in masculinity suffered by inner-city Blacks and Hispanics? This crisis is leading to a rise in divorces, one-parent families, and a plague of irresponsibility among men" (pp. 149-150). Mead (2016) argues that "the decline of

industrial employment in the last few decades has left both blacks and whites bereft of jobs and subject to the forces of social decay, made worse in both communities by habits of violence and the presence of drugs” (p. 180).

Regardless of their stance on attributing struggles as equal across groups or in promoting Appalachian moral failure regarding the issues faced by multiple groups, these reviews merely add insult to injury for both Appalachian and minority stereotypes by reducing their very culture to statistics and common perceptions that assert that these identities are inherently tarnished or prone to failure, often in a racist light. Many of these stereotypes attributed to Appalachians are shared with those of minorities, such as excessive violence, incompetence, laziness, and a non-existent work ethic. These reviews offer little to no empirical research on either Appalachian or minority struggles with impoverishment, vast other issues, and their causes because facts and data would show that such strife is derived from the oppression imposed by harmful societal, governmental, and industrial influence and exploitation as well as their fluctuations over time. Instead, many reviews rely on race-baiting in an attempt to further other Appalachians. These reviews also imply that general standards are lower for minorities, which are painted as lesser than, and dehumanize both regional and minority members as little more than faulty tools of labor.

For example, Appalachians with poor living conditions concerning isolation, increased limitations to healthcare and recovery support, and economically distressed locales are more likely to suffer from “diseases of despair” such as drug abuse and suicide, with residents in the 35-44 age range experiencing a 55% higher mortality rate than the same group in the rest of the United States (NORC Walsh Center 2024). Similarly, Appalachians suffer from educational disparities due to “the digital divide and financial pressures at home” that force young residents

to “prioritize work over education, reinforcing cycles of poverty over generations,” setting some areas like Central Appalachia at 19.5% below the national average in education (Appalachian Regional Commission 2025b; Appalachian Regional Commission 2025c).

### ***Poverty***

Also operating under the frame of moral failure, the prevalence of poverty in Appalachia is largely presented as a binary theme within reviews. While some authors illustrate impoverished residents as victims of corrupt systems and industrial abuse, others tend to fall back on an inherent lack of dedication and motivation in finding work as causes.

A number of reviews frame Appalachian culture, a derivative of moral failure, as a significant contributor to poverty, where ingrained traits like an unwillingness to work directly supply financial failure that cannot be supplemented by any amount of governmental aid. Again, McWhorter (2016) asserts, “But after 50 years of Great Society Programs that tried to legislate poverty out of existence, it’s clear that government alone cannot create real change. To pretend that culture is somehow beside the point is a denial of people’s humanity, for all its intended benevolence” (p. 37). Dalrymple (2017) likewise writes,

The more opportunity a society offers, the more you are faced by your own responsibility for your own fate, which in the great majority of cases will, by definition, be far from the very top of the tree. Without an unfair start in life or injustice to explain failure, you are thrown back on self-examination, which is often more painful and less satisfying than resentment at injustice suffered (p. 18).

Void of discussing government or outside aid, yet more reviews cast blame on Appalachian culture, which some claim promote helplessness and self-pity, as a vessel of economic distress as well as a desired suffering. Liddle (2017) argues that Appalachians have “a perverse pride in being poor” (p. 55) that aligns with Williamson’s (2016) view that Appalachian strife “wasn’t

the misery of poverty and privation” rather “the misery of people determined to be miserable at any price” (p. 42). Additionally, Reimer (2017) argues that critical territory for impoverished Appalachians “is in the home” (p. 40). Much like reviews addressing the uselessness of governmental aid as a tool for mobility, frames such as these reinforce poverty as a desired lifestyle that could be improved if Appalachians were not so attached to cultural despair. In perhaps the strongest perspective of promoting Appalachian’ inherent failure at being able to find income, which similarly relates back to aforementioned race-baiting, Andrews (2016) states,

To the extent that white-trash America’s troubles figure at all into the national conversation, the suggestion has been that they have only themselves to blame. If these bitter clingers get outhustled for low-skill jobs by immigrants who can’t speak English, then that just goes to show what poor-quality workers they were in the first place (p. 36).

In stark contrast, other reviews acknowledge a lack of opportunities and adequate regional support as having the greatest influence on Appalachian poverty, which place blame on industrial and governmental systems that have all but abandoned Appalachia. Greenberg (2019) points out a slew of unavailable resources that could aid poor residents by writing,

Maybe Vance’s hillbillies would not be helped by new and better job opportunities, higher wages, less outsourcing, investment in building infrastructure, expanded child tax credits and income supports, housing vouchers, nutrition programs, unpolluted rivers and air, consumer protections, affordable child care, paid family leave after bearing a child, and universal health insurance. Before we assent to Vance’s indictment, we’d do well to try such policies (p. 44).

Along the same lines, Gorby (2017) discusses the “single-industry coal economy” of Appalachia, arguing that its tendency of “providing ‘growth without development’” (p. 82) is more likely a cause of regional strife than any inherent traits of identity. Summarily, Brown (2020) writes, “Appalachian poverty is not the story of a culture of poverty, but one of the power of the elite, corporations, politicians, and to those who stand to gain from the media industry of Appalachian ‘discovery’” (p. 205).

These reviews also tend to directly contradict arguments supporting moral failure and inherent cultural dereliction. Greenberg (2019) directly confronts misconceptions about cultural contributions to poverty in stating that “conservatives are most certainly wrong to believe that this powerful personal story confirms their beliefs that poverty is invariably the result of bad personal choices and immune to any governmental solutions” (p. 43). Stern (2016) similarly argues, “If Appalachians fail, in other words, it’s their own fault—not the fault of, say, exploitative landlords and employers (often coal and timber companies), rampant pollution, widespread discrimination and a gutted welfare system” (p. 33). Further, Stoll (2018) contends, “The problem, as [Vance] sees it, is not poverty and its causes but cultural inheritance, yet both exist in an eternal present, without origin or development, without history. In his implied definition, culture exists prior to class” (p. 348).

Poverty operates as the catalyst for many of the issues that Appalachians confront. Without stable incomes, it becomes almost impossible to experience any upward mobility that would increase the region’s quality of life. Many of these reviews assert that poor Appalachians experience poverty due to their own lack of effort; however, this gives little credence to the systemic failures that have directly contributed to regional economic decline. The coal industry, which once built up the region through mass employment while subsequently overtaking all of its resources, has since abandoned it, and with its collapse went the jobs that so many were dependent upon to remain financially stable.

Moreover, the presence of poverty in Appalachia is undeniable, with 14.3% of residents living at or below the poverty line as well as the median income sitting at \$10,000 less than the national average; however, attributing poverty as a consequence of inherent moral and cultural wrongness imposes harsh stereotyping and blatant misconceptions from outsiders on the region

and erases the true causes of these conditions as well as opportunities for support (Appalachian Regional Commission 2025c). This also suggests that other impoverished or struggling communities outside of Appalachia do not face the same scrutiny derived from the moral failure-induced poverty that is so closely associated with Appalachian isolation, making the region unique in its inability to improve. This is ironic in the context of the origin of “redneck” as a label for Appalachians, initially coined for coal miners with union membership (Huber 1994). The very enlistment in unions suggests that these miners were eager to get and maintain stable sources of incomes, therefore naming Appalachians as lazy or helpless completely overlooks the labor-intensive, harsh history of the region’s workforce and exploitation while simultaneously using the term as an insult that historically signifies an opposite denotation.

### **The Coal Industry**

In regard to research question two, which concerns themes of Appalachia within reviews, the theme surrounding the coal industry was scarce throughout reviews. Of the 55 reviews analyzed for this study, there were only 23 mentions of the coal industry, including use of the phrases such as “coal country” describing the Appalachian region. Of 23 mentions, only 12 engaged with a greater context of the coal industry’s effect on the Appalachian region and its interaction with stereotyping. Eight of these mentions framed the hardship of the coal industry on Appalachia as a negation of Appalachian stereotyping in explaining the industry’s forced devastation on the region’s economy, viability, culture, and even morale. One review by Christman (2017) criticizing *Hillbilly Elegy*’s perspective on White working-class Appalachians asserts “[Vance] avoids looking into the roots of the region’s deep cynicism—that might lead him to the coal companies, which have done things to the soil and air of Kentucky that would qualify as acts of war if done by a foreign power” (p. 117). Gorby’s (2017) review similarly contends

that the perceptions of Appalachian identity posed by the memoir gets their “cause and effect misconstrued by suggesting these traits are innate to the people. In actuality they grew from the boom-and-bust nature of a single-industry coal economy” (p. 82).

In contrast, four of the reviews mentioning the coal industry either contributed to the perpetuation of Appalachian stereotyping or remained indifferent to the industry’s effect on the situation of Appalachia in a broader context of identity and stability. In one review, Farhat-Holzman (2017) writes about Appalachian’s inability to adapt to a changing career environment, stating “many have dropped out of the labor force as coal mining and factories decline, choosing not to relocate for better opportunities” (p. 150). Additionally, only two of the 12 reviews with mentions of the coal industry include more than a few sentences on the subject. Greenberg (2019) dedicates a paragraph to the industry’s effects on Appalachia that explains how non-Appalachian companies claimed the region’s land and coal resources, leaving its residents dependent on them and, eventually, without jobs as the coal economy began to decline. Stoll (2018) similarly explores the labels of laziness and unreliability cast onto Appalachian industry workers in a lengthy paragraph about coal companies’ imposition of control as well as the devastation imposed by their profuse resource extraction and exit of the region.

The coal industry’s past and present effects on Appalachian identity are hardly mentioned across reviews, who seemingly attribute common components of collective Appalachian identity to no one particular source. However, coal has significantly impacted the region’s culture and normative values due to its deep connection with its land, as can be seen through the formation of tight-knit communities due to isolation as well as the solidarity and resiliency born of the industry’s abuse (Arnow 1989; Howard & House 2009). This oversight is not novel, however, as media coverage of the coal industry has often framed miners, particularly those that are union

members, as “unruly and greedy” as well as a threat to the stability of national energy; therefore, it is not surprising that the industry’s hand in abuse is overlooked due to a general bias toward its purpose, especially in areas such as media coverage (Maggard 1983).

In relation to the significant effects of the coal industry on Appalachian infrastructure, labor forces, culture, and stability, the amount of times the industry is mentioned in reviews is scarce. Appalachia has been historically presented as a “national sacrifice zone” due to the decimating resource extraction practices inflicted upon it, primarily by the coal industry’s invasion and overtaking of the region (Lewin 2019). Therefore, the number of reviews that merely acknowledged the coal industry’s presence is puzzling, making the scant number that dared to provide commentary on the vastness of its devastation even more appalling.

### **Class**

Class, another recurring theme across reviews, had a more significant presence than the coal industry, and its discussion serves as integral to understanding perceptions related to Appalachian cultural identity. Many reviews include Appalachians in a general group of “White working-class Americans” of which their behavior and status are evaluated along with White working-class members from various regions across the United States. A more universally known group, Kuttner (2016) explains in one review that “the vulnerabilities and the hatreds of the white working class are an old American theme” (p. 104). Therefore, it makes sense that Appalachians are considered members of this group given their industrial history. However, this amalgamation of various subcultures leads to generalizations independent of regional identity asserting that the singular culture of White working-class members is stereotypically homogenous and, more often than not, self-sabotaging to class members’ wellbeing and success.

Halvorsen (2019) argues that *Hillbilly Elegy* “certainly does provide context for understanding what about the American political climate resonates with this proud, hair-trigger hillbilly culture as well as what the American white rural working class shares with members of the working class around the world” (para. 2). Similarly, Pehl (2017) writes, “What Vance means is that in the working-class towns he knows, fatalism, anger, and even fecklessness are no longer the characteristics of certain individuals but the overriding ideology: they define a working-class way of life” (p. 241). Bendis (2016) contends that, on the outlook of this class, “optimism is a precious commodity. According to the Pew Economic Mobility Project, there is no more pessimistic group in America than working-class white people. Their expectations are so low that many simply quit trying for a better life” (p. 31). From a strictly regional standpoint, the Appalachian working class is regarded much the same by reviews. Farhat-Holzman (2017) comments on Appalachian wellbeing in arguing that “[working-class people] have descended into low social mobility and poverty, divorce, and drug addiction. The entire region is in misery” (p. 146). Addressing the region directly, Kuttner (2016) also argues that Appalachia “displays one of the hidden injuries of class, which is low self-regard” (p. 100).

Other reviews, however, use this broad grouping to examine the consequences of the failures of social, industrial, and governmental systems that have largely contributed to White working-class hardships, combating beliefs that this class strife arose solely from its own lack of effort to financially and socially ascend. Greenberg (2019) asserts that *Hillbilly Elegy* “ignores the working-class battle to get its share of the pie” and

bypasses how millions of white workers would enter America’s middle class in the three decades after World War II, as the government invested in their education and subsidized their homeownership. It misses how these workers’ legs were then kicked out from under them by foreign competition, technology, globalization, and trade agreements like NAFTA that undercut American jobs (p. 44).

Further supporting the imposition of industry failure on the working class, Stoll (2018) contends, “Class cannot be separated from the history of capitalism and its creation of owners and laborers” as well as that *Hillbilly Elegy* “interjects the subject of class in an effort to stamp it out” (p. 345, 347).

Because *Hillbilly Elegy* provides a lengthy commentary on class, it is not surprising that many of its reviews contribute to either furthering or negating the perceptions formed within the book. The homogenization of national working classes is also unsurprising given narratives that most people throughout working-class subcultures are viewed to be one and the same. Common working-class stereotypes, regardless of region, frame members as low in social status and mobility as well as widely incompetent with an emphasis on their perceptions as dehumanized objects within the context of their work (Durante & Fiske 2017). The majority of reviews discussing class outright draw off of these judgements, arguing that working-class Whites have integrated the negative, detrimental attitudes derived from their status into their very identity. Thus, these attitudes allow for a further erosion of class conditions that breed pessimism and complacency perceived in some spaces as an inherent, self-derived lack of success. What these reviews that perpetuate class stereotyping fail to acknowledge, however, is the conditions that drove workers to such pessimism and the continued failure of systems to revive livable wages, mobility, and morale. As discussed in the coal industry results, industrial takeover, monopolization, and subsequent abandonment of Appalachia has left the majority of working-class residents without opportunity lest they leave the region for outside industry jobs. In many cases, this is not feasible due to financial restrictions, not to mention the deep connection to place associated with much of Appalachian culture.

## Outliers

Though uncommon, there are a few reviews that act as outliers in this study's broader discussion about Appalachia that participate in employing stereotyping without any particular attribution such as moral failure or class. Eppard (2016) asserts that uncontrollable factors like luck or good fortune contribute to sporadic Appalachian success, implying that this triumph could not come of one person's abilities alone. He writes, "Many [Appalachians] will turn out fine due to a combination of intervening factors, many not of their own choosing, as well as a healthy dose of luck. This is the take-home message from *Elegy*, and despite Vance's contradictory worldview, this deeper message makes this book well worth reading" (Eppard 2016, para. 8). Yet another review asserts that Appalachians are irresponsible and unable to set themselves up for success without any indication as to why this is so other than an implied incapability. Eliasoph (2017) states, "What saved Vance was not just kin, but also wise taxpayers who paid for a good, clean, orderly public school *that his irresponsible mother did not have to select for him*. Today, a kid like him would likely have to rely on irresponsible parents to figure out how to pick a good school for him—and chances are, the parents would fail" (p. 61) as well as that "this could mean forming organizations *with* White rural people. It's a great idea. Some academics and activists might be warmly welcomed, but I am not sure 'they' would want all of 'us,' because, well, frankly, the fear and scorn *does* go both ways" (p. 62).

While these reviews do not reinforce perceptions tied to class, poverty, moral failure, or other issues, they still contribute to harmful narratives that indicate that something is amiss with Appalachians' ability to make choices or to find success without intervention. Additionally, the "us versus them" narrative employed in these reviews creates a damaging dialogue that there is something inherently different about Appalachia compared to the rest of the United States, which

can be seen in Eppard's (2016) dehumanizing inference that the region's residents are inferior and violently opposed to those that are supposedly best equipped to help them. Similar to other areas of stereotyping, these reviews overlook Appalachian complexities in favor of primitive depictions that reduce and condemn the region to popular one-dimensional portrayals seen throughout media coverage of oft-stereotyped regions like Appalachia and the South (Hamilton 2009; Slade & Narro 2012).

### **Limitations & Future Research**

This study is limited in both its timeline and scope. *Hillbilly Elegy* was published in 2016, less than 10 years before this study was conducted. Since then, Vance has also served as a United States Senator and Vice President of the United States with a remaining three years left in his term as Vice President upon the conclusion of this study. As more reviews are published during and beyond Vance's term, attitudes toward and perceptions of Appalachia have room to evolve, with potential to contribute further to stereotype negation or perpetuation. Future research could employ interviews of journalists in order to gain additional perspective on Appalachian identity both within and outside of the region, further expanding the content and scope of such framing. Additionally, interviews with audiences could be beneficial in understanding perceptions of stereotypes and how reviews contribute to narratives surrounding the region. Further perspective may also be gained from a similar content analysis of stories and reviews from news outlets, which did not fall within the scope of scholarly sources included in this study.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to examine the presence of framing and stereotyping of Appalachia in

book reviews of *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance. Through the employment of textual analysis, this study examined 55 book reviews of *Hillbilly Elogy*. Ultimately, this study found one major frame and four themes within reviews, including the frame of moral failure and the themes of the coal industry, poverty, race, and learned helplessness that discussed Appalachian culture. A majority of reviews largely perpetuated Appalachian stereotyping through their frames and themes, while fewer reviews either remained neutral or negated stereotypes. Such results illustrate the continued employment of stereotyped perspectives toward Appalachian identity and culture that severely impact the region's reputation both within the United States and internationally, also hindering much needed aid due to issues such as the increasing digital divide. This stereotype employment leads to further entrenchment of false Appalachian identities, creating greater caricatures that continue to distance Appalachia from the rest of the nation. However, the combating of these depictions through stereotype negation aids in opening doors for Appalachians, demanding the respect and equality owed to the region.

Examinations of book reviews and *Hillbilly Elogy* are only the start in studying the harsh labels that have plagued Appalachia for over a century. Dubbed with stereotypes of violence, instability, and ignorance, the region is often overlooked for its rich culture and history. Still, Appalachia continues to struggle with issues in much need of addressing as it fights to situate itself within the greater national narrative. It is thus the responsibility of reviewers and audiences alike to address Appalachian identities with nuance and respect. Otherwise, these conditions and perceptions will only worsen, further hollowing out Appalachia's place. Szilgayli (2017) said it best in writing, "If other people belong to an innately inferior breed, those in power can justify depriving them of basic human rights and opportunities" (p. 1107).

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