“COUNTRY ROADS” IS THE GLAMOR SHOT IN THE FAMILY ALBUM

A dominant image of place, “Country Roads” brings forward pride in West Virginian identity but also obscures the actuality of who we are. Because “dominant images conceal from us more complex realities,” it is important to “recognize representation as a tool for exploitation,” distortion, or harmful generalizations, and to analyze depictions both positive and negative, as all representations have effects and consequences (Satterwhite, “Objecting” 69). We must recognize what “Country Roads” represents and see it for what it is: a popular tune that shines a positive light on a place often seen as dark, but one that must be heard and read in conversation with other depictions.

Outside namings affect our relationships with place. Cultural anthropologists Gupta and Ferguson denote a parallel between the way internal-colonialist industry created the company town in mining communities and the way multinational corporations colonized developing nations, fracturing people’s sense of place through “loss of territorial roots, of an erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of spaces.” Once a place is shaped from the outside, even in popular culture depictions, its meaning shifts, too, both within place and without, so that a definition becomes warped, “for even people remaining in familiar and ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken.” West Virginians’ enthusiastic integration of “Country Roads” into the rhetoric of cultural identity affects our memories of place, as “remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people,” and a sense of home “remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples” (Gupta and Ferguson 9–11). “Country Roads” brings us together, but it also keeps us apart from the reality of other depictions of West Virginia.

Generally, we do not want to talk to outsiders about the problems we have in our state—drugs, pollution, poverty, inequity—those are ours to fight, to bitch and moan about, to sometimes surrender to. West Virginia musicians sing about them in songs of protest and anger, at rallies, in bars. These songs are not “Country Roads.” They are raw, hopeful or hopeless, sometimes angry. They describe calloused hands, hard work, danger, disaster, tragedy. They are proud visions of who we are, what we can be. They are real, but they are not glossy and positive like “Country Roads,” a song many West Virginians love. It is hard to “unlove” something that is so much a part of who you are, that you have grown up with, that surrounds you. We cannot abandon those feelings or those markers of identity. In some ways, “Country Roads” is West Virginia as we want to be seen. It also is influential in our lack of awareness of our own songs, ones written by, for, and about West Virginia. How do we learn to listen to those voices? Hear those songs? Especially when so many of the messages we hear come from outside our state?

I am not advocating for a dismissal of “Country Roads.” As a cultural anthem, artifact, and text, it is important to West Virginian identity and of wider cultural significance. Theresa Burriss and Patricia Gantt, in their book Appalachia in the Classroom, describe place as ever changing so that the “distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ proves challenging” and advocate “a ‘both/and’ approach . . . since Appalachia comprises insiders and outsiders, rural and urban, Northern, Central, and Southern, Black, white, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian. And again, it is important to emphasize that the Appalachian culture is alive and evolving, continuing to respond to and

incorporate local, national, and international influences" (Burriss and Gantt xiv). New music, and new understanding, is being made all the time: Thus, a "both/and" perspective on "Country Roads" seems useful, too. West Virginians, when we face the ugliness of what they say about us, can cue "Country Roads," and suddenly we are recognizable outside the negative stereotypes. We have taken it up as ours, even though it does not tell the whole story, perhaps because the whole story is not entirely suitable for a popular audience.

As we grow and deepen understanding of place, we can choose to leave or love "Country Roads" and also hear the voices of diverse West Virginians who sing about place. As Michael Lipton, director of the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame told me, "The real challenge in places like West Virginia is to make kids understand that there's nothing magic. You know, like there's nothing magic that someone else has that you don't have." Place is central to identity: Knowing who we are helps us make a place in the world. Since 2007, the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame has represented musical voices across our state, having inducted diverse musicians from many genres and perspectives, showcasing talented West Virginians of all backgrounds. Their educational resources include interactive maps, traveling exhibits, and prepared sessions for schools and communities. This is just one of many working to educate by amplifying West Virginia's musical voices and by making visible the complex reality of a unique place.

To extend the glamor shot metaphor discussed earlier, I want to propose that "Country Roads" hangs in public spaces like a gallery portrait. Images like Glamor Shots are effective because they are meant for general viewing and allow a vision of some aspect of ourselves in that viewing, even when we may not know the subject of the photo. The looking is reflective. In contrast, songs written by, for, of, and about West Virginia are more like photographs in the family album: candid images, unposed, exposed, and raw. They capture reunions, separations, love, loss, birthdays, and anniversaries. They feature parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, friends, lovers, and significant others in unfiltered portrayals of life as it is lived. And, most tellingly in this analogy, family albums are precious to us, though no one outside our families really wants to look at them. We keep them safe and bring them out on select occasions; we use them to tell stories, and we treasure them together. In our metaphorical family album, many West Virginians put "Country Roads" in the first leaf, so we may never make it past that page. West Virginian voices continue to meaningfully express truths: in small local clubs, in large gatherings and festivals, through organizations like the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame, Mountain Stage, the West Virginia Humanities Council, and others. All across the state, in all kinds of genres, West Virginians are doing what they can to center voices from here, of here, and about here: keeping the family album. We owe it to each other to look beyond the posed, public-facing shot. How do we know who we really are when the most visible image we have is "Country Roads"? Can we love it and resist its tendency to oversimplify and silence? We must learn to listen carefully, to reclaim and rename, to learn new songs, and to define ourselves.

We must also consider how global context is important. We have already discussed how cultural conversations renewed interest in Appalachia in the 1960s related to poverty, economy, and "saving" the region, often from itself. This played out politically, including interest in West Virginia from President Kennedy, which led to the establishment of the Appalachian Regional Commission and policies to improve infrastructure through road building and other efforts. It played out culturally in TV specials, news features, fiction, and film. It was impossible to ignore

West Virginia in the late sixties, but much of the public discourse was related to deficits and deficiency. In a political context where West Virginians were typically portrayed negatively, “Country Roads” spoke, and still speaks; however, the song has reach far beyond this purpose and audience. It is important to acknowledge that its popularity was fueled by a global music industry so that for listeners everywhere, it represents the virtue of “almost heaven” as a place of belonging. This gives it staying power worldwide, in the music industry, commercially, and as a universal sign of hiraeth and home. It is necessary to explore the song’s history and other rhetorical uses to fully understand it as its own phenomenon.