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Introduction

A PIONEERING PIECE of cultural anthropology by the husband-and-wife team of Robert and Helen Lynd may have made Muncie, Indiana, the most famous “Middletown” in all of America, but a half century earlier it was a local driller named A. H. Cranell who first put the small midwestern city on the map. In October 1886 Cranell sunk a bore into the belt of limestone that runs across much of the central and eastern portions of Indiana and struck gas 922 feet below the town of Eaton. When he lit a flame to the well, it rose ten feet in the air and could be seen all the way to Muncie, a dozen miles to the south. The fiery beacon drew admiring crowds for weeks afterward—and then, for years, industry, jobs, and people.¹

The Eaton well was the first commercially viable natural gas well drilled in the state, and it announced the coming of a gas boom to east-central Indiana that lasted more than a decade and transformed the region for much longer than that. The Trenton Gas Field stretched from western Ohio to around Kokomo, Indiana, forty-five miles northwest of Muncie. At roughly five thousand square miles, it was the largest known gas field in the world at the time, and with the bonanza came all the familiar signs of a gold rush. New drilling companies and boosterish boards of trade were hastily organized across the eleven-county region, which historically had been home to sedate county seats and some of the richest farmland in the state. A real estate frenzy saw land prices increase as much as threefold in Muncie and surrounding cities like Anderson, Marion, and Kokomo. Muncie’s population more than doubled between 1886 and 1890, and then nearly doubled again by 1900—making it the largest city in the Indiana gas belt at the turn of the century.²

Ultimately more significant to the future of the region than the gas itself were the new businesses the boom attracted. Producers in

heat-intensive industries like iron and glassmaking in particular were drawn to the region for its cheap and readily available fuel. In 1880, there were just four glass factories in all of Indiana; by 1900, there were six in Muncie alone and 110 across the state. New outfits like the Muncie Natural Gas Land Company, organized in 1889 by a group of eastern investors and led by a former governor of New Jersey, wooed manufacturing outfits from the coal-burning areas of Pennsylvania and Ohio by providing free land and deeply discounted gas prices. Local businessman James Boyce netted Muncie its most famous catch of the gas boom era when he successfully lured the Buffalo, New York–based fruit jar company Ball Brothers to the city, with an offer of eight acres of land, five thousand dollars, and the company’s own gas well. After the glassmakers and foundries came wire fabricators and bridge builders and stove part makers and refrigeration companies and, especially, automobile parts manufacturers. Long after wasteful drilling practices had tapped out the Trenton Field reserves by the second decade of the twentieth century, Ball Brothers and the other industrial enterprises that settled in the area would ensure that Muncie’s first nickname—“The City of Eternal Gas”—outlived the boom years that had been its inspiration.³

Ball Brothers was the first place that Kenny Lewis got a job when he arrived in Muncie in 1942, at the age of seventeen. Kenny was born in the swampy delta region of Arkansas, where his father raised cotton, rice, and soybeans on a small piece of land that provided “just enough to make a living.” A friend had moved up to Muncie a couple years prior and wanted Kenny to join him, and by the time Kenny came of age it did not require much convincing to get him to leave too. Kenny said, “I just got tired of working in hot fields. And mosquitoes—mosquitoes was bad down there, with all the water. I didn’t want to be a farmer.” Muncie’s manufacturing economy grew rapidly during the war years—from sixteen thousand jobs before the defense boom to twenty-five thousand by 1944—and Ball was a prime beneficiary of both wartime rationing (which stimulated demand for the company’s ubiquitous flagship product, the Mason canning jar) and new government procurement contracts, after it retooled its Muncie operations to produce shells and machine parts for the military. As demand soared, an acute citywide labor shortage worked in favor of recent migrants like Kenny. “I got up here one day, and I went to work the next day at Ball Brothers.”⁴

It was not happenstance that Kenny Lewis ended up working at Ball Brothers. Ball had a reputation for hiring southerners that extended well beyond the Muncie city limits. Many of Kenny’s coworkers hailed from

Kentucky and Tennessee. Wesley Reagan, who grew up outside of Jamestown, Tennessee—a rural hamlet about a hundred fifty miles east of Nashville and a dozen or so miles south of the Kentucky border—remembers being young and hearing older relatives talk about moving north. When they did, it was “mainly Ball Brothers” that they mentioned. Nor was Ball Brothers the only Muncie employer that looked south when needing to fill workforce demands. During the boom years of the 1920s, local manufacturers brought in so many recruits from the southern Appalachian Mountains that they arranged special trains to deliver them to the city. Companies like Eber Refrigeration, a Muncie firm owned by Tennessee transplants, often placed job advertisements in local newspapers like the *Upper Cumberland Times*, published out of Jamestown. Business was so flush during World War II, in fact, that even the luncheonettes were known to take out ads in out-of-state newspapers for waiters, cooks, and dishwashers.⁵

The influx of southern migrants was so great in these years and during the decades immediately following the war that a reporter exaggerated only slightly when he noted that the staff of one local employer that hired primarily Kentuckians “changes daily.” Newcomers stayed “only long enough to get a stake,” which they could bring back home to their southern places of origin, perhaps to invest in a piece of land or some new machinery on the farm—or until they could find better-paying work locally. Kenny Lewis, for instance, put in two years at Ball Brothers, working in the rubber department; but when a job became available at the nearby Chevrolet transmission plant with pay that started at nearly ten cents more an hour, he jumped on it, and ended up staying at Chevrolet for the next three decades. In the meantime, the makeup of Muncie’s population—and especially its working-class population—began to change in ways that drew growing notice and no small measure of ire from longtime residents. “Have you heard that there are only forty-five states left in the Union?” went one joke heard around town with increasing frequency during the years when Kenny first got there, back when Hawaii and Alaska were still only territories. “Kentucky and Tennessee have gone to Indiana, and Indiana has gone to hell.”⁶

Kenny Lewis and Wesley Reagan were just two participants in one of the largest population relocations in recent American history. Over the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, somewhere around eight million poor white southerners—perhaps even more—left economically marginal parts of the southern countryside and traveled north in search of work.⁷

Some, like Kenny, came from the swamps of northeastern Arkansas, or from among the same rocky ridgelines of the Cumberland Mountains of East Tennessee that Wesley had called home, and from countless farming communities, mill villages, railroad junctions, and mining camps in between. Most left in the years between World War I and the end of the 1960s, when an array of large-scale economic transformations—from the modernization of agricultural technologies to the intensification of resource-extractive industrialization—combined to make traditional agrarian livelihoods increasingly untenable, and when the resulting disparity in the quality of life in the rural South and the urban-industrial North was at its most pronounced. They followed successive waves of relatives, friends, and neighbors who had charted migratory pathways before them, relying on extensive networks of kin and community to navigate far-flung labor markets and secure places to live in unfamiliar and frequently unwelcoming destinations. Some traveled only temporarily, moving back and forth between city and country according to the logic of the seasons or the fluctuations of the business cycle. Many others left the rural South behind for good, bringing with them a set of regionally distinctive experiences and ways of life that conditioned how they settled into their new homes and left an indelible impression on their new urban surroundings. Whatever the case may have been, they journeyed forth on a proliferating network of interstate roadways that would give this massive interregional migration its most abiding nickname: the “hillbilly highway.”

Rural white southerners who left the broad region stretching from the Appalachian mountain ranges to the floodplains of the Mississippi River found their way to every corner of the country over the course of the twentieth century. But the majority, by virtue of a combination of geographic propinquity and generational interconnection, headed for the large cities and burgeoning factory towns of the midwestern manufacturing belt that encircled the Great Lakes. They went to smaller regional centers like Muncie and Dayton, Ohio, where Wesley Reagan ended up and put in thirty-two years at one of the four General Motors plants in town while raising four children with his wife, Lula, who he courted during return trips to Tennessee. Or to larger cities like Cincinnati, where so many impoverished refugees from the declining Appalachian hinterland eventually settled that local officials began speaking of them as the city’s “second minority.” Or to Chicago, where southern newcomers gravitated to a working-class area north of the Loop that by the 1950s had become so chock-full of barbeque joints and country music bars that the neighborhood’s residents rechristened it “Hillbilly Heaven.” Or to Detroit, where southern migrants

became so thoroughly associated in the public eye with job competition, slum conditions, and urban disorder that at midcentury more than one in five city inhabitants selected “poor southern whites” as the most “undesirable” group in the city, with only “gangsters” and “criminals” receiving lower popularity rankings.⁸

Most rural southerners arrived in the industrial Midwest with nothing more than what could be scraped together after the fall harvest, or from the sale of the last remaining parcel of family land, or from a final shift at the local mine or sawmill. When the renowned documentary photographer Margaret Bourke-White traveled to Muncie on assignment for *Life* magazine in the spring of 1937, the resulting eleven-page photo-essay she produced—commissioned to coincide with the publication of *Middletown in Transition*, the Lynds’ follow-up to their bestselling 1929 sensation—included one emblematic photo of a pair of destitute white migrants from Kentucky. Scott and Lizabelle Brandenburg were “at the bottom of Muncie’s social strata,” noted the accompanying caption. Photographed in their home, a “one-room clapboard shack in ‘Shedtown,’” a slum district on Muncie’s southwestern fringe, the most notable item of furniture pictured is a homemade brooder next to the bed, in which, as Lizabelle explains, they are raising chickens “fer eatin’” rather than to sell. The Brandenbergs’ well-worn work clothes, their weathered hands and faces, the simple metal-frame bed on which they sit, eyes averted from the camera, all mark them, in Bourke-White’s composition, as recognizable types. “Mrs. Brandenburg talks with the Kentucky hillbilly drawl heard in many Midwest industrial towns,” the caption continued, “from southerners migrated north to work in the great auto plants.”⁹

In the decades to come, southern migrants like the Brandenbergs would share in the kind of working-class prosperity that jobs in midwestern factories provided to a generation or two of Americans—and most of all to white industrial workers and their families. Although white southerners remained disproportionately concentrated in blue-collar jobs throughout the postwar period, by the end of the 1960s the average family income of southern-born whites living in the Midwest would be roughly equivalent to that of other white residents of the region—and 25 percent higher, by comparison, than the incomes of southern-born African Americans in the Midwest. Similar convergences (and disparities) marked the progress that southern white migrants would make when it came to occupational mobility, residential patterns, and other measures of social and economic well-being. Years later, Wesley Reagan would speak with

enduring pride of the moment when he and Lula were able to purchase their first home, in a working-class subdivision just outside of Dayton built by a local developer who put up thousands of such homes across central and southwestern Ohio during the 1950s and 1960s. “A Huber Home is what I bought. Huber was the biggest builder of single-dwelling brick homes in the United States, and that goes back many, many years ago.” And after three decades of paying membership dues to the plant’s International Union of Electrical Workers local, Wesley, who had left Tennessee with barely a penny to his name, would even be able to retire at the relatively young age of fifty-two, with a union pension and company-provided health insurance for the remainder of his and Lula’s lives.¹⁰

In other ways, however, southern white migrants and their families would remain something of a class apart in the urban Midwest throughout much of the twentieth century. Powerful stereotypes stemming from popular beliefs about the impoverished rural circumstances they came from and the low standards of living to which such “hillbillies” were accustomed made them widely sought-after recruits by northern employers, and just as widely despised by the urban workers they were hired to work alongside (or in place of). The rural accents, styles of dress, modes of worship, and leisure activities they carried with them—to name just a handful of the southern cultural forms whose proliferation in northern cities during these decades antagonized long-term residents—were commonly perceived as lower-class attributes and behaviors, and made southern white migrants frequent objects of derision as well as targets of state intervention, discipline, and reform. For their own part, rural southerners brought a wariness about urban-industrial life that often made them reluctant converts to the metropolitan social orders they came to move within. In neighborhoods like Chicago’s Uptown, Dayton’s East End, and Muncie’s southside, as well as working-class suburbs like Hazel Park, Michigan, or South Lebanon, Ohio, they lived with and around other people of similar backgrounds; formed their own churches, social clubs, and other communal institutions; and danced and got drunk with other people like them. Most of all, they maintained powerful attachments to the southern countryside itself and to the family members and communities they had left behind there.

Rural white southerners in the Midwest returned to the South at significantly higher rates than both Black southerners and white southerners who migrated to other parts of the country during the mid-twentieth century, and as a result many came to lead lives that were in meaningful

ways suspended across both rural and urban and northern and southern settings. They returned on weekends between work shifts; to celebrate holidays, prepare for the birth of a child, or help navigate family emergencies; when layoffs sent them packing or when the hurly-burly of the city had simply become too much for them. Even those who made permanent relocations to the urban Midwest, who managed to secure steady work and who raised families in circumstances that far exceeded what they had known from their rural upbringings, often retained such connections to the places they had come from. “I always planned on coming back” was how Wesley Reagan thought about it. By the early 1960s, just as he and Lula were starting their family in Dayton, Wesley had already managed to set aside enough money out of his wages to buy a small piece of land in Fentress County, Tennessee, outside of Jamestown. He and Lula would visit it regularly, preparing for the time they would move there for good. They left Ohio in 1985, on the very day Wesley retired from GM.¹¹

The back-and-forth circuits charted by white southerners like Wesley would be one of the defining characteristics of this decades-long migration. For a population that often set out from their native region in response to some sort of economic compulsion—because the farm went under, or the mine closed down, or simply because, as Wesley put it about growing up in his corner of rural Tennessee, “you just wasn’t going to be able to make a living here”—the ability to return, whether periodically or permanently, represented a limited yet nonetheless powerful kind of agency. It meant having a say over the terms on which they accepted new forms of work, adjusted to new living environments, embraced new customs and cultures—or didn’t. At the same time, the regularity with which such migrants returned to the southern countryside became one of the most frequently invoked charges against them during these years; a reason, in the eyes of others, to question their reliability as workers, their suitability as neighbors, even their fundamental ability to be integrated into the mainstream of American life. And so as these patterns of movement crisscrossed the rural Upper South and the urban Midwest, they both drew together and set apart the communities of displaced white southerners and their families and descendants that lay along the interregional footprint of the hillbilly highway. No longer fully enmeshed in the distinctive lifeways of the southern countryside, not entirely embedded in the urban-industrial milieu in which they sought out work, the complexly interwoven networks of kith and kin that stretched across this broad portion of the American heartland—a region we might think of conjoinedly as “Transappalachia”—became the terrain of a new

and distinctive white working-class experience in twentieth-century American life. The story of that region, and the people who brought it into being, is what follows here.¹²

Hillbilly Highway is a book about the Transappalachian migration's imprint on the social, cultural, and political map of recent American history. As such, it addresses itself first and foremost to a rather significant gap in the otherwise impressive body of literature that has been produced on the twentieth-century migrations out of the American South. All told, nearly twenty million white and Black southerners—and another roughly one million southerners of Mexican and Hispanic descent—left the region and headed north and west during these decades. The story of the Black Great Migration is well known—so well known, in fact, that today it stands alongside the nineteenth-century migrations of westering homesteaders as one of the heroic grand narratives of American history, a transformational passage out of the darkness of the South's blighted past of bondage, disenfranchisement, segregation, and racial terrorism. Over the last three or four decades, a small library of exemplary works of scholarly and popular history—not to mention numerous television documentaries, major museum exhibitions, and other high-visibility forms of cultural recognition—have been produced about the Great Migration. This stands to reason: the Great Migration represented the most profound shift in racial demography at any moment in the country's past, one that would turn a population that at the beginning of the twentieth century was still overwhelmingly rural and nearly 85 percent concentrated in the states of the Old South, into the most densely urbanized population group in modern America. The Great Migration forever altered Black work roles and cultural identities, and, by facilitating their entrance into the emergent city-based political alliances of the twentieth century, ensured that Black Americans would become the most enduring members of the Democratic coalitions of the New Deal and post-New Deal eras.¹³

The midcentury exodus of white farmers from the southern Great Plains to the Far West and especially California was not quite so epochal. Yet it has nonetheless occupied a similarly prominent place in the American cultural imaginary, thanks in large part to the Depression-era symbolic significance invested in so-called Okies fleeing the twinned environmental and economic calamity of the Dust Bowl by the likes of Woody Guthrie, Dorothea Lange, John Steinbeck, and John Ford. The Okie migration would outlast its Dust Bowl origins, only growing stronger as California rode the wave of World War II-era military spending to become an economic

powerhouse and transplanted white southerners continued to flood into booming defense suburbs throughout the Cold War decades. This westward corollary to the hillbilly highway has also received significant historical attention in recent years, especially as scholars have looked to California and its politically ascendant white lower-middle classes for the origin stories of the postwar New Right.¹⁴

The same cannot be said about the Transappalachian migration, even though the number of white southerners who migrated to the urban-industrial Midwest roughly equaled those who ended up on the West Coast, and outnumbered *all* Black migrants out of the South by some two or three million. There are shelves worth of country music songs about the hillbilly highway, at least one woefully underappreciated literary masterpiece about the migration, and, most unfortunately, J. D. Vance's bestselling poverty-shaming memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, published in 2016 and remade as a risible star vehicle by Netflix in 2020.¹⁵ But there is no *Grapes of Wrath* or *Invisible Man*, no Migrant Mother on a postage stamp. Likewise, the scholarship on this migration has been both more limited than in the other two instances, and generally narrower in scope. In the last twenty-five years, there has been only one historical monograph written about the southern Appalachian migration to the Midwest. Chad Berry's *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (2000) is a deeply sympathetic account of this history—Berry's grandfather was himself a migrant along the hillbilly highway—and it excels in its ability to allow participants in the migration to “speak for themselves” and become “authors of their own identities,” thanks especially to the scores of oral histories the author either conducted or consulted in his research. But Berry spends comparatively less time situating the migration experiences he gathers within the context of larger histories of economic growth and decline, class formation and conflict, the changing racial composition of American cities, and the overarching political transformations of the period. As a result, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* has relatively little to say about how the Transappalachian migration impacted the broader terrain of American society during these years.¹⁶

The only more recent work of historical scholarship to address the migration in an extended fashion, James Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (2005), does considerably more in this last regard.¹⁷ But Gregory's book is largely synthetic in nature and explicitly comparative by design. Leaning heavily on the preexisting scholarship about the southern Great Migrations—including Gregory's own, pioneering earlier

work on the Okie migration to California—*The Southern Diaspora* necessarily reproduces that literature's strengths and weaknesses. Detailed and eloquent on how the arrival of Black southerners reconfigured the racial, cultural, and political landscapes of northern and western cities, equally persuasive on how white southerners helped turn California into an unlikely bellwether of the new conservatism, it relegates Transappalachian migrants to an only tertiary role in the grand dramas of recent American history.¹⁸

These are oversights that *Hillbilly Highway* sets out to correct. A core contention in what follows is that Transappalachian migrants were at the center of many of the defining events of the period—from the country's explosive industrial development around the turn of the twentieth century to the rise of the modern industrial labor movement during the 1930s and 1940s; from the unfolding of the postwar urban crisis to the decisive political realignments that transpired over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, looking at these events through the lens of the Transappalachian migration often forces us to reconsider some of our core preconceptions about them. Most accounts of the early years of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, for instance, locate the midwestern labor movement's roots in the radical political traditions cultivated by the region's polyglot immigrant working classes.¹⁹ Southern white migrants are generally absent from such narratives, and when and where they do appear they are often dismissed out of hand for their "conservative tendencies," for their "staunchly anti-union" cultural dispositions, for "lack[ing] class consciousness."²⁰ But upon closer examination, Transappalachian migrants were early and eager supporters of midwestern industrial unions, in both radical hotbeds like Detroit and more provincial outposts like Muncie. Similarly, most histories of the postwar urban crisis hardly mention the so-called hillbilly ghettos that began cropping up in midwestern cities like Chicago and Cincinnati during the decades after World War II. Yet these suddenly ubiquitous enclaves of poor white southerners shaped contemporary thinking about the causes and consequences of urban poverty no less profoundly than did the zones of concentrated Black and brown poverty they appeared alongside, and even came to play a pivotal role in the design and implementation of the War on Poverty, postwar liberalism's most ambitious, if flawed, social policy initiative.²¹

The point here is not simply to find traces of the hillbilly highway where others have not bothered to look. Historians have largely accepted at face value contemporary presumptions that transplanted white southerners were constitutionally disinclined to challenge their employers'

authority and join in solidaristic activity with other kinds of workers; as a result, we have failed to consider not only the many instances in which their actual behavior departed from such expectations, but also why it so frequently did. How did the material conditions that confronted natives of the rural Upper South during these years also influence the complex movement culture of the country's powerful industrial unions? Why did the persistence of southern, rural, and working-class identities and cultural habits in the communities these migrants formed in the urban Midwest appear for a time to pose such an irreconcilable challenge to the expectations of midcentury consumer society? How did they figure in the intellectual debate about the relationship between racial identity, cultural inheritance, and social class that preoccupied social scientists and policy-makers in the postwar decades, and what did that reveal about growing tensions between more elite interests in the liberal New Deal coalition and the poor and working-class whites who made up its social base? More often than not, the key to these and other questions lay in the circuitries of migration that distinguished life along the hillbilly highway—the back-and-forth dynamics of displacement and attachment that shaped the social and cultural geography of Transappalachia as a distinctive terrain of experience whose complex history still awaits its full telling.

If scholars have failed to grasp the significance of this history, the same cannot be said about the working-class white southerners whose personal, familial, and cultural lives have been embedded in the Transappalachian migration and its legacy for the better part of a century. While conducting the dozens of oral histories and other research that went into the production of this book, I met many natives of the Upper South and the Midwest who knew the “hillbilly highway” intimately, who were long accustomed to using or hearing that phrase to refer to the migration experiences that they or their relatives, friends, and neighbors had known throughout their lives. But the first time I encountered the phrase was actually in a country music song—specifically, on the lead single off Steve Earle's debut album *Guitar Town*, called, aptly enough, “Hillbilly Highway.” Earle did not grow up along the hillbilly highway himself. But as a child, he did manage to acquire his own firsthand experience with the frequent relocations that would have been all too familiar to those who did. Born in 1955 on the Army base at Fort Monroe, Virginia, Earle spent much of his youth shuttling around the South while his family followed Jack Earle's postings as an air traffic controller: from Virginia to El Paso, Texas; the next year to Lake Charles, Louisiana; then back to a little town in the Guadalupe Valley

outside of San Antonio called Schertz, where, as Steve would later put it, “I used to get the shit kicked out me by great big square-headed cowboys named Otto on a regular basis.” By the time a nineteen-year-old Earle set out hitchhiking to Nashville, where he would begin a long and successful career as a session musician, songwriter, and eventually as a recording artist in his own right, moving had become something of a way of life for him. He would draw on that experience to powerful effect when he entered the studio to record his first full album a dozen years later.²²

“Hillbilly Highway” is less a work of personal autobiography than it is a kind of collective history, generic enough in the details yet specific enough in what they are intended to evoke that the song manages to capture something fundamental to the experience of millions of Transappalachian migrants. Spanning three generations in the life of the singer’s family, the song moves from an unnamed Appalachian coal camp, to Detroit, to Houston, before ending up back on the road—“that old hillbilly highway,” as the song’s refrain repeatedly intones—destination unknown. The men in the song keep trading dying towns and dead-end jobs for “a dream of a better life” for themselves and their family; the women are always crying and waving goodbye, as the search for work pulls yet another family member away from home. The singer, who quits school to become a musician, thinks he has broken free from these demoralizing routines of working-class life; but the irony is inescapable when he finds himself back in the same old place as those who came before him. “Now I’m standing on this highway and if you’re going my way / You know where I’m bound,” Earle muses as the song motors toward its interminable conclusion: “Down that hillbilly highway / On that hillbilly highway / That old hillbilly highway / goes on and on.” A traveling song that subverts the genre, “Hillbilly Highway” replaces the wanderlust for the open road long celebrated by middle-class artists and intellectuals with the unshakable sense of precarity that more often typified the transient unsettledness of a very particular kind of working-class existence. As much as any other cultural document produced about the Transappalachian migration, it manages to capture exceedingly well the unresolved tension between mobility and marginalization that was at the crux of the migrant experience.²³

There was something additionally poignant about the timing of the release of Steve Earle’s “Hillbilly Highway.” *Guitar Town* came out in the spring of 1986—about a decade after the onset of regional deindustrialization had begun to make the country’s emerging “Rust Belt” a far less likely destination for job-seeking migrants, and a little over midway through Ronald Reagan’s eight-year tenure in the White House. The

first development effectively ended the decades-long story of the hillbilly highway; subsequently, it would be the rural South itself, as well as other low-wage, low-union density regions of the country, that absorbed a growing portion of the industrial jobs that flowed away from the old factory towns of the Midwest.²⁴ The second, meanwhile, marked a no less consequential realignment of twentieth-century American politics. Earle had very personal reasons for abhorring Reagan: Earle's father had been among the more than eleven thousand air traffic controllers Reagan fired during the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike (in return, Earle would release a song about Reagan before his second term was out that likened the president to a war-mongering snake oil salesman). And so it only flummoxed Earle that much more that Reagan's ascendancy pivoted to a considerable extent around the changing political allegiances of working-class voters like the hillbilly migrants he identified with and sang about.²⁵

The rightward drift of white blue-collar workers and union members over the second half of the twentieth century is one of the more critical events in recent American history, and one that has drawn a significant amount of attention from professional historians as well as scholars working in other disciplines.²⁶ In many of these accounts, and in much popular commentary on the topic, the conservative political inclinations of the white working classes of the Upper South and the industrial Midwest are largely taken for granted, treated as an almost automatic projection of their diminished economic standing in postindustrial society; their resentment of the social reforms brought about by the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s; even, according to some, their culturally embedded authoritarian tendencies. One final contention of *Hillbilly Highway* is that this history is more complicated than it might initially appear. Southern Appalachian migrants were no less likely than any other group of white Americans to express such political attitudes during these years. But neither were they any more so, despite deeply engrained assumptions about poor southern whites being a uniquely reactionary force in modern American life. Furthermore, although we have grown accustomed to talking about *the* white working class as if it were a single, monolithic entity, the communities of rural white southerners that formed across the landscape of Transappalachia had their own, historically specific reasons for growing disillusioned with the politics of postwar liberalism. Scorned for their rural attachments and southern cultural identifications, stigmatized by the urban middle classes who increasingly came to dominate the worldview and policy agenda of the Democratic Party, these "hillbillies" had always represented something of a working-class "other"

at the heart of the New Deal order.²⁷ As that order began to decompose in the decades after the 1960s, long-standing divisions of class and culture etched into the terrain of the Transappalachian migration would prepare the ground for one of the most profound and far-reaching realignments of class politics in modern American history.

Hillbilly Highway tells the story of the rise and fall of the Transappalachian working class across six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the forces of economic development that precipitated a massive exodus from the southern countryside beginning around the turn of the twentieth century. New patterns of land use, new modes of industrial activity, and new forms of state policy combined to transform the rural South during these decades, nowhere more decisively than in the southern Appalachian region that would send so many migrants out along the hillbilly highway in the ensuing decades. As millions of rural southerners watched viable livelihoods tied to the land disappear, many turned first to the burgeoning mine and mill economy of the Upper South, where first encounters with industrial society would leave lasting impressions—especially as growing numbers began migrating out of the region entirely. Chapter 2 zeros in on the concrete details of the migration process itself: how migrants decided where to go, how they got there, what they brought with them, and when and why they decided to go home again. As more and more natives of the Upper South became adjusted to lives oriented around the proliferating highways connecting the southern countryside with the midwestern factory economy, what had once been a rural surplus population became something else altogether: an increasingly transregional working class.

Chapter 3 moves to the midwestern factories where rural white southerners started arriving in significant numbers in the decades before World War II, much to the satisfaction of northern employers who had already begun sending their emissaries into the southern hinterland in the hopes of recruiting a desperate and docile surplus labor force. The disconnect between that particular image of southern working-class conservatism—the hillbilly scab—and the actual record of workplace ferment among rural white southerners, which marked the critical interwar period in a variety of settings across the urban Midwest, is the subject of this chapter. Chapter 4 focuses on the growing—and increasingly visible—communities of rural southerners that began to materialize in the urban Midwest during and immediately after World War II, when the southern out-migration was at its peak and hundreds of thousands of rural whites were moving in and out of the region every year. As the country at large entered a period of

extended affluence, so-called hillbilly ghettos challenged normative ideas about working-class whiteness in ways that seemed to set rural southerners apart from their northern neighbors once again.

For midcentury liberals concerned about the fate of American cities broadly and the intractable problem of urban poverty in particular, the emergence of these hillbilly ghettos ensured that southern white migrants in the Midwest increasingly came to appear as a problem-population. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, they also became an object of concern for reform-minded policymakers and intellectuals. Chapter 5 addresses the largely unacknowledged role of the Transappalachian working class in the development of liberal urban and antipoverty policy after World War II, and what ultimately became a missed opportunity for midcentury liberalism to develop a lasting connection with communities of poor and working-class whites. Chapter 6 assesses the consequences of that failure through the increasingly conservative undertones of American country music. By the end of the 1960s, the widening popularity of country music had emerged as one of the more unequivocal demonstrations of the broader cultural consequences of the southern Appalachian migration to the Midwest. Contemporaries often associated the strident patriotism, muscular anti-urbanism, and latent racism of the genre in the era of George Wallace and the Vietnam War with a reactionary political tradition embedded in its rural southern past. But, as I argue there, the music had by that point long since been severed from its hillbilly roots, instead becoming ever more conservative in its tone and message the more it became palatable to middle-class audiences in northern cities. Indeed, it is one of the overarching claims of this book that the particular conjunction of region and class at which poor southern whites found themselves in the urban Midwest blinded not only contemporaries but later scholars as well to the more critical, even radical, potential in hillbilly culture—a radical potential that, for a time, had made even American country music a music of liberation.

One final note, on the use of the word “hillbilly.” A contested term, like other examples of sociological shorthand that originated as racial or class slurs its meaning tends to vary depending on who is in the position of the speaker. When Steve Earle uses the term in “Hillbilly Highway,” he does so to invoke the perennial rootlessness that had become a defining condition of a certain kind of regionally defined, class-inflected social experience. “If you’re going my way,” he nods to his audience, “you know where I’m bound.” On the other hand, when the *New York* magazine writer Frank Rich greeted the election of Donald Trump in 2016 by declaring “No

sympathy for the hillbilly,” he did so, at least in part, to put as much distance as possible between conscientious metropolitan elites such as himself, and “the hard-core, often self-sabotaging Trump voters who helped drive the country into a ditch on Election Day.”²⁸

I do not use the terms “hillbilly” and “hillbilly highway” throughout the following chapters to engage in a similar act of condescension. I use these terms, on the one hand, to call attention to the way contemporaries used them—both the Muncie town trustee who complained to the Lynds of “the cumulating cost of human debris thrown on the city by the heavy importation of ‘hillbilly’ labor,” as well as the millions of migrants and their families who wrestled with the various and at times conflicting implications that were tied up with this kind of language. To be a hillbilly in the urban Midwest during the mid-twentieth century could mean, at different times and in different contexts, to be a farmer or a southerner; to be someone who worked with their hands, or someone who could not find work at all; to be white, or to be not quite white; to be a fellow migrant, or yet another interloper; to be a coworker, or a job stealer; to be a rustic, or a racist, or a hail-fellow-well-met; to be an existential danger to the American way of life, or the most reliable, “old-stock” American WASP you could find. The very mutability of this term is an important throughline in the history of the hillbilly highway, and rather than eliding that part of the story—and not wanting to burden the reader with an excessive number of scare quotes—I have elected to use the term where appropriate, while doing my best to be self-conscious and self-critical throughout.²⁹

On the other hand, I also use the term “hillbilly” here in an effort to reverse some of the historical work that has been done—along the hillbilly highway and across the landscape of Transappalachia, no less—to cast uniformly negative aspersions on that term. Rather than an explanation for the conservative turn in postwar American politics, I see the marginalization of hillbilly politics and hillbilly culture as another of its symptoms, and one for which Frank Rich and his predecessors own a share of the responsibility. While deploring efforts to “find common ground with the Trumpentariat”—an election-year neologism that quite intentionally echoed Marx and Engels’s term *lumpenproletariat*, or “the passively-rotting mass thrown off by the oldest layers of the old society”—Rich wonders aloud whether we should “waste time and energy” attempting to understand the sources of political disaffection and alienation that drove such voters into Trump’s embrace.³⁰ As I see it, the answer clearly is yes—and to redeem the hillbilly highway from the dustbin of history is, I hope, to take a step in that direction. So if you’re going my way, you know where I’m bound.

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