THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POETRY: PLURALISM AND APPALACHIA, 1937-1946

Christopher Allen Green
University of Kentucky, zoagreen@iglou.com

Recommended Citation
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/349

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Kentucky Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Christopher Allen Green

The Graduate School
University of Kentucky
2004
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Christopher Allen Green

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Dale Bauer, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2004

Copyright © Chris Green 2004
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POETRY: PLURALISM AND APPALACHIA, 1937-1946

This dissertation demonstrates how poetry about Appalachia expanded American considerations of democracy, ethnicity, and cultural values. I argue that poetry is profoundly communal in its construction and investigate how the value of poetry changes based upon its transfer through varying networks of production, circulation, and reception. Informed by theories of cultural capital and rhetoric, the chapters trace three books of poetry from their composition and publication to their reception and influence, noting how central political and social institutions and individuals shaped that process. The dissertation establishes how the poets crafted their writing to sway specific interpretive communities’ attitudes on pluralism. In Hounds on the Mountain (Viking, 1937), James Still sang about the erosion of the quiet earth for the liberal, middleclass readers of The Atlantic. In U. S. 1 (Covici·Friede, 1938), Muriel Rukeyser wrote about the deaths of migrant and African-American miners, the Spanish Civil War, and the threat of fascism for popular-front readers of The New Republic, Poetry, and the New Masses. In Clods of Southern Earth (Boni and Gaer, 1946), Don West catalyzed resistance in an interracial readership of southern (and mountain) sharecroppers and factory workers. In each case, the complex interrelations between history, authors, and readers show their mutually transformative effects on pluralism. Within American pluralism from 1900 to 1948, my work reveals the vital relations between established ethnicities—African-American, Jewish, Anglo, American Indian, and Southern—and Appalachia. My account follows the concrete connections of pluralism from Plessy vs. Ferguson’s judicial theory of racial purity, through a cultural pluralism based on national origins during WWI, to the Harlem Renaissance, and ends with an
examination of regional pluralism in the 1930s. Appalachia was then often understood as preserving remnants of a premodern America, and the authors about whom I write used it to authenticate the values of community, which they felt to be endangered by the threats of modern dissociation, industrial exploitation, and fascist culture. Through close readings of poems in the three books, I establish Appalachia’s role in the discourse of modern American pluralism—the poetics of region and race.

KEYWORDS: American Poetry, Cultural Studies, Reader-response Criticism, Multiculturalism, Appalachian Region

Christopher A. Green

April 20, 2004
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POETRY: PLURALISM AND APPALACHIA, 1937-1946

By

Christopher Allen Green

Dale M. Bauer
Director of Dissertation

Dale M. Bauer
Director of Graduate Studies

April 20, 2004
RULES FOR USE OF DISSERTATIONS

Unpublished dissertations submitted for the Doctor’s degree and deposited in the University of Kentucky Library are as a rule open for inspection, but are to be used only with due regard to the rights of the authors. Bibliographical references may be noted, but quotations or summaries of part may be published only with the permission of the author, and with the usual scholarly acknowledgments.

Extensive copying for publication of the dissertation in whole or in part also requires the consent of the Dean of the Graduate School of the University of Kentucky.
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POETRY: PLURALISM AND APPALACHIA, 1937-1946

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Christopher Allen Green

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Dale Bauer, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2004

Copyright © Chris Green 2004
For Jenny
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend deep appreciation to Dale Bauer because of her belief, wherewithal, and commitment. I also give gratitude to the quiet direction of Dwight Billings, whom can best be labeled a sage. And thanks to Janet Eldred for standing by me from word go, and thanks to Gordon Hutner for coming on board at the finale. And thanks as well to the Department of English and the University Graduate School, each of which funded my research and presentations around the country. On those travels, I was able to meet remarkable people and utilize essential archives. I bow to my fellow radical scholars: Rachel Rubin, Professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; Jim Lorence, Eminent Scholar of History, Gainesville College, GA; and James Smethurst, Professor of African-American Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I also bow to Clara Keyes, Special Collections Librarian, at Morehead State University; I bow to Pam Hackbart-Dean, Director, Southern Labor Archives, at the Pullen Library, Georgia State University; I bow to Ann Salter, Head Librarian at Oglethorpe University, which opened up new collections for me; I bow to Sara Wilson and LaLoria Konata who manned Special Collections at Atlanta University; I bow to Claire McGann, Manuscripts Librarian, at the University of Kentucky’s Special Collections & Archives; and I bow to Dave, Janitor for the Third Floor of the Young Library who granted me sanity. I also give my sincere appreciation to the Interlibrary Loan Librarians and Timothy Garrison, Borrowing Technician, at the University of Kentucky, who so quickly and ably brought in my varied, myriad requests.

I send out unrelenting adorations to Kimmerle Green, my sister, who explored the Highlander Research and Education Center papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison; I adulate Craig Hobson, my brother-in-law, who took time from his own masters degree to scrounge into the depths of Claude Williams’ Papers at Wayne State University, Detroit. And I thank my parents—all six of them—whose support and love has kept me sane and my family healthy; throughout my lifetime, they have modeled for me what it means to give.

My work also takes its place in a line of scholars whose work has inspired my own: Cary Nelson’s Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945 (1989); Adrienne Rich’s What is Found There: Note Books on Poetry and Politics (1993); Slavoj Žižek’s The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989); Henry D Shapiro’s Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American

Finally, praise be to Gurney Norman and the Gaines Center for the Humanities for first giving me room to love poetry, the world, and the academy all at the same time.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................ iv
List of Tables .................................................................................................................................. viii
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................... ix
List of Files ......................................................................................................................................... x

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1
   Cultural Studies and Poetry ........................................................................................................ 2
   From Rhetorical Hermeneutics to the Cultural Field .............................................................. 3
   Pragmatic Reader-Response Criticism ...................................................................................... 5
   Outline of the Dissertation ........................................................................................................ 7
   Post-Script: On Jesse Stuart ....................................................................................................... 10

Chapter One: The Phases and Problems of Pluralism
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 11
   Part I: Racial Purity and Regional Ethnogenesis .................................................................... 14
      The Day Law ....................................................................................................................... 14
      Berea and William Goodell Frost ..................................................................................... 18
      Regional Ethnogenesis ......................................................................................................... 25
   Part II: The Provincial Aspects of Cultural Pluralism ............................................................ 29
      Josiah Royce ....................................................................................................................... 30
      Horace Kallen ..................................................................................................................... 36
      Alain Locke ......................................................................................................................... 46
   Part III: The Rise of Regionalism ............................................................................................. 54
      Cosmopolitan Regionalism: B. A. Botkin and Lewis Mumford ........................................ 57
      The Vanderbilt Agrarians: Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson .......... 65
      The Science of Regionalism and the University of North Carolina ..................................... 73
      Laughing at Locksmiths: B. A. Botkin and Folk Culture ..................................................... 81

Chapter Two: “‘Authentic Folk Feeling’” and James Still’s Hounds on the Mountain
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 92
   Part I: Getting Authentic ......................................................................................................... 95
   Part II: An Overview of Hounds on the Mountain ................................................................. 100
   Part IV: “Folk Feeling” in The Atlantic Monthly ................................................................. 119
   Part V: Boarding the Viking Press’s Drakkar ....................................................................... 128
   Part VI: Generating Authority for Hounds on the Mountain .............................................. 138
   Part VII: Stumping the Literary Field .................................................................................... 148
   Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 157

Chapter Three: Fascism and the Ideal Pragmatics of Muriel Rukeyser’s U. S. 1 ..................... 160
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 160
   Part I: Radical Outsiders ....................................................................................................... 166
   Part II: Readers, Region, and Rukeyser’s U. S. 1 ................................................................. 174
      U. S. 1: “The Book of the Dead” ....................................................................................... 175
List of Tables

Table 1, Structure of U. S. 1. ...........................................................................................................  164
List of Figures

Figure 1, Stock standings as presented in U. S. 1 ................................................................. 190
Figure 2, “Unity Is An Ax, Page 117” .................................................................................. 239
Figure 3, “Unity Is An Ax, Page 118” .................................................................................. 240
Figure 4, An Ink drawing by Harold Price ............................................................................. 232
List of Files

greendis.pdf  2,153 kb
Introduction

This dissertation explores choruses of actors whose combined work allowed poetry about Appalachia to influence the discourse of American pluralism. My work renovates the scholarly approaches to poetry and American literature in three important ways, all of which emanate from studying the material life of poetry books.

- First, I demonstrate how poetry influenced rather than reflected discourse. In this sense, my work is about the study of rhetoric that intervenes into ideology, aesthetics, and identity. That is, my work is grounded through the study of the hegemonic struggle over the discourse of American pluralism.

- Second, I perform a close reading of poetry books. Just as scholars know to read one chapter of a novel only in context of the larger plot, so I read poems in context of the book’s larger narrative rather than relying on decontextualized poems. This focus on the construction of books means my work is also profoundly bibliographical, necessitating not just a focus on the author, but on other essential actors in the book’s material life such as the publisher(s), typographers, distributors, reviewers, readers, etc. In short, I read poetry in terms of cultural studies.

- Third, while I center on poets as primary actors, I also perform numerous studies (biographies, if you will) of institutions and individuals to illuminate the interpenetration of the literary with the wider cultural and political fields. Hence, my work values many individuals via their network of interfacing acts. In this sense, my work is interdisciplinary, at times of focusing on the history of publishing, of education, of political science, of ethnic theory, or of specific movements (such as the regionalists).

In the end, my detailed description of actors and their situation can best be described as deeply historical. The work of literary history is about charting changes in the American symbolic order as reflected in and directed by the cultural field of literature. Such change is possible because symbolic orders are viscous (i.e. resistant but malleable) and based upon a set of interlocking set of contingent circumstances. A critic’s attention to power, politics, and cultural change explains how agents exert force to maintain integrities while other agents act to change those systems. Ultimately, my goal is to demonstrate how the books under consideration were used by a wide variety of actors to affect the symbolic order. Indeed, poetry’s ability to speak truth is directly
related to its tangential relations to discourses of power that monitor what truths can be formulated and enforce the practical consequences of that truth. Power and knowledge in these power discourses are tightly structured. While often reinforcing each other’s power, recognition of truth is discourse specific: what is true in one discourse is not always true in another. With the structure of poetry in America, poets can easily cross and combine differing discourses, revealing potent and destabilizing truths. These “truths” however are often socially “meaningless” because they are formulated outside the structure of power discourses.

To gauge the “meaning” (i.e., discursive impact) of poetry, my method is best described as pragmatic cultural studies. Focusing on Appalachia’s interrelation with other ethnicities—African-American, Jewish, Anglo, American Indian, and Southern—in the discourse of pluralism from 1900 to 1948, my critical approach joins with scholars who study poetry based on its function in specific historical moments. Drawing from their initiative, my project analyzes the circuit of cultural production, circulation, and reception of the three books under study. Specifically, I consider how the value of poetry fluctuated in this circuit as actors within it (writers, publishers, critics, and readers) generated and used cultural capital. Borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu, the term cultural capital considers how art accumulates value within networks of authority and how that capital is transferred to other fields of action, such as politics. Each of the last three chapters analyzes the workings of such capital in the varied, contemporaneous interpretive communities through which the books circulated. Inspection of these circuits is grounded by inquiring how Appalachian poetry influenced the discourse of pluralism and visa versa. This discursive analysis takes inspiration from Steven Mailloux’s method of evaluating the cultural rhetoric in recorded encounters between readers and texts.

Cultural Studies and Poetry

My study of poetry as worldly rhetoric takes its initiative from Richard Johnson’s discussion of the “circuit of production, circulation, and consumption of cultural artifacts” (46), outlined in his essay “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?” (1986-7). Given the broad range of practices that currently fall under the category of cultural studies, Tony Bennett’s definition aptly reflects the history of the discipline: “cultural studies is concerned with the analysis of cultural forms and activities in the context of relations of power which condition their production, circulation, deployment, and, of course, effects” (60). While analysis of discourses of power and
identity are common parlance for American academics, we tend to focus on texts (which might include a t.v. show, a poem, a speech, a face, or an event); indeed, texts are often analyzed as allegories for the American social system. Less attention has been given to particular moments where the texts are wielded and encountered. Particular approaches do consider certain moments of rhetorical encounter—such as reader-response criticism, Rezeptionsästhetik, and textual theory (such as practiced by bibliographic theorists Jerome McGann, George Bornstein, and D. F. McKenzie)—and my study draws upon their hard won lessons as I follow the texts through their various cultural circuit.

I trace the material history of texts with an eye towards explicating how and to what end various actors (poets, publishers, readers, supporters, and scholars, in alliance and conflict) used them. To this end, I specify the rhetoric used in the texts and demonstrate how aspects of this rhetoric were utilized, appropriated, or repressed by various users. Foremost, I believe actors (individual subjects as well as the power of institutions, political blocks, and the texts themselves) can influence their context, and these actors are constrained to act within the multiple and various defining structures (discourses, institutions, hegemonies, identities) of their world, which both realize and limit possibility. The “value” of a text comes from its exchange through that system of relations, and that value is at every move mutating. Given that every actor, act, and text is contingent, we must find a way to describe their basic parameters.

From Rhetorical Hermeneutics to the Cultural Field

My approach is also an intervention into poetic hermeneutics. Steven Mailloux’s rhetorical hermeneutics provides a critical launching platform for my method. In his essay “Rhetorical Hermeneutics in Theory” (1996), Mailloux labels his work as “cultural historical studies” (3) which uses “rhetoric to practice theory by doing history” (15): “Rhetorical hermeneutics is the theoretical practice that results from the intersection between rhetorical pragmatism and the study of cultural rhetoric.” Mailloux accomplishes this task by examining “specific historical acts of textual interpretation” (3). Taking advantage of how cultural studies had “expand[ed] the discipline’s subject matter to include non-literary as well as literary texts” (4), Mailloux begins by examining a specific historical interpretation of a literary text. “The interpretive act, its arguments, and its framing institutions are then placed within the cultural conversations, relevant social practices, and constraining material circumstances of the act’s
historical moment” (6). Mailloux then traces the discursive history of those arguments and their articulation in “the rhetorical traditions of relevant institutions.” In sum, instead of engaging in interpretive speculation, he tells “a story about a text’s reception and the debates that make it up” (16).

Mailloux offers this focus on real-world debate and interpretation as a specifically pragmatic solution to the chasm between the “hermeneutical idealists” (such as reader-response critics) and “hermeneutical realists” (such as the New Critics). On the one hand, the idealists place all power into the hands of the readers whose interpretation “always creates the signifying texts”; thus, ”meaning is made, never found” (5). On the other hand, the “realists” propose that “meaning-full texts exist independent of interpretation.” Mailloux’s solution thus promotes a surer answer to formulating the meaning of a text than either idealists or realists offer. While an important critical development, Mailloux’s strategy is hampered by severe limits.

First, Mailloux’s approach necessitates a focus on high profile fiction over which national debates were conducted. Secondly, he is solely interested in argument and debate over other forms of use. Finally, the players in that debate are limited to writers who had the authority to be published in national venues. While these categories might produce an useful study of debates central to American mainstream discourse, what happens to those readers who had other uses for the text which either did not command debate or those whose contentions (or positions) took them outside of the realm wherein their arguments might be heard? Regardless, Mailloux solves one set of problems and serves as an important basis for my project which will consider just how those texts came to be in the hands of those interpreters as well as considering audiences who fall outside the range of such clear documentation.

Mailloux work follows the labors of the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty. The point is not to argue about interpretation but to demonstrate the actual effects of reading books. It is the responsibility of such a philosophy to demonstrate how change and value is produced, so we must also hazard to extend our evaluation of rhetoric into other moments which it both shaped and was shaped by. In other words, we need to understand the process of exchange, transformation, fetishism, and influence that occurs at each point of encounter and exchange.

With his concept of “the field,” Pierre Bourdieu explains how rhetorical value is won through analyzing how symbolic economies generate “capital” within fields of power. Bourdieu demonstrates how “capital” accretes from “the set of social conditions of the production,
circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods” (Bourdieu, “Editor’s Introduction” 9). This approach recognizes the role of agents (who write, publish, distribute, promote, and use texts) and the structures within which they do so. As explained in Understanding Bourdieu (2002),

A cultural field can be defined as a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, appointments, and titles which constitute and objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorize certain kinds of discourses and activities. But it is also constituted by, or out of, the conflict which is involved when groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field [. . . which is] fluid and dynamic, rather than static. . . . Cultural fields, that is, are not made up simply of institutions and rules, but of the actions between institutions, rules, and practices. (Webb 21-22)

I utilize Bourdieu’s concept of the field to examine how “cultural capital” was won for the texts I study as they negotiate the circuit of cultural production.¹ I then trace how this cultural capital was expended to influence the shape of pluralist discourse.

Pragmatic Reader-Response Criticism

While reviewers in newspapers and literary journals are certainly an important, tangible, moment wherefrom we might gauge the effect of rhetoric, I focus on a much wider set of actors. Richard Johnson—one of the heralds of British cultural studies—points out, that we need to speculate upon how “cultural products are ‘read’ by persons other than professional analysts” in such a way as to understand these readings as “transformations” rather than as “misreadings” (47). Johnson also calls for a carefully contextualized explanation of that encounter: “To understand the transformations, then, we have to understand the specific conditions of consumption or reading.” In other words, I strive to draw portraits of the poets’ various readerships. This work was often difficult as many of these readers did not record their reactions; nevertheless, for a fuller vision of the texts’ social life, I have sketched the conventions of such silent interpretive communities and I theorize about the impact of the poetry’s rhetoric. In my usage, rhetoric directs our attention to the social situation of poetry where we might ask for whom and under what circumstances poets composed their poems and then inquire into the design of their textual strategies. As a way of focusing these considerations,

¹ I draw the primary model for this template from Bourdieu’s The Field of Cultural Production (1993).
my use of rhetoric grounds itself in the work of a pivotal rhetorical theorist—Kenneth Burke, who became an influential cultural player in the 1930s at the same moment that the books under study in my project were published.

Kenneth Burke has been a key transitional figure for literary and cultural theorists, such as Giles Gunn, Frank Lentricchia, and Richard Rorty, who are allied, like Mailloux is, with pragmatism. David Blakesley, in “Kenneth Burke’s Pragmatism—Old and New” (1999) charts out these connections. Such pragmatism is directly informed by the figure of William James (who both Burke and Lentricchia write about). James did not seek the right explanation but instead found that the only answers which matter are those which make a difference: “Pragmatism mediated metaphysical disputes not simply by pointing out inherent ambiguities but by demonstrating the ‘practical difference that must follow from one side or the other being right’ (James, “What Pragmatism Means” 43)” (80). As with James, foremost Burke holds a belief of rhetors as social actors.

Gunn, Lentricchia, and Mailloux each discuss Burke’s allegory of history from “The Philosophy of Literary Form.” In the allegory, one enters a parlor (literally the place of speech) where a heated conversation is already underway (“The Philosophy” 94-96). One does not know what exactly is being discussed, and it takes a while for one to become part of the conversation, which is always heated, and which continues even after one leaves the room. What each author values is Burke’s clear illustration of the contingency and continuity of history wherein those who are part of it can shape how it is passed on. As Lentricchia puts it, “Burke’s fable for history has a double moral. History is a masterful, powerful process: it ‘makes’ us, and yet, at the same time, at any moment in the process, our active willing ‘makes’ the conversation, gives if the propulsive energy that forces it on” (161). But this “conversation” is not so equal as the parable makes it out to be: indeed, most voices in this parlor (which actually holds many conversations) are unheard as people are relegated to certain roles. This parlor is actually the scene of a distinct series of power configurations where there are multiple, often conflicting, conversations underway.

Like Lentricchia, what I value most about Burke is that his view of rhetoric goes beyond argument (goes, indeed, beyond logic) and understands the aesthetic “as the practical and as the rhetorical” (Lentricchia 153) rather than as a passive object for interpretation. Burke explains the rhetorical focus on persuasion in three ways: to induce action, form attitudes, and persuade
identity. On the most basic level, by identity Burke means “consubstantiation” (Rhetoric 20-21), which entails the ways in which two people understand their substance to be shared. Never absolute, this consubstantiality is always partial and purely contingent; the layers and by-ways of substance are many, from appreciation of colors, use of a common language, affiliation of mutual opposition, or a coincidence of names. Thus Burke considers the unconscious shaping weight of the discursive but does not forego the possibility of conscious action.

I expand on Burke by explaining how poetry (and art) perform rhetorical intervention beyond the rational strictures of critical thinking on the level of the non-rational (though not unritualized), including belief and desire. Participation in communal ritual, exchange, and transmission exists in seeming tangent to commodity capitalism and mass media, and the paradigm of productivity success fails to acknowledge the rich, lived complexity of these ongoing economies. However, by combining Burke and Bourdieu, we can more clearly consider the relational exchanges between artists and communities, between the cultural and economic fields.

At issue in my work is the fact that no single symbolic system operates in America. Instead, many systems are at play, and they hold each other in relation (often contentious relation) as actors use representations of each other’s systems as hegemonic tools. On the one hand, we might consider alternative vernacular interpretive communities (within larger identity groupings) who work with a different set of conventions, but on the other hand, we might consider alternative, coexistent symbolic orders. While I will not necessarily be forwarding an elaborate vision of new semiotic orders, my work is charged by studying three contemporary interpretive communities—each of which valued poetry quite differently—and their place and role in the larger American symbolic order.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter One examines the changing rhetoric of pluralism in four interlinked stages, which first held that cultures arise from racial essence and ended with the understanding that cultures emerge from their relations with an environment. The chapter begins just after Plessy vs. 

---

Ferguson, a case based on the theory of “separate but equal,” which held that separation was necessary to preserve racial essence because varied racial cultures added strength to America. The Supreme Court extended this rationale to all educational settings in a 1906 case that segregated Berea College into two units, one for whites and one for Negroes; thereafter, Berea turned its mission to the uplift of white mountaineers. Next, Horace Kallen’s theory of cultural pluralism resisted Americanization of immigrants during WWI by arguing that preservation of one’s culture of origin, which could not be disinterred but only repressed, both kept individuals’ psyches intact and provided the nation with vital resources. In this theory, culture resulted from prolonged nationality, and due to their isolation, Appalachians were seen to have preserved the culture of their Anglo-Saxon settlers—an important appeal in WWI. Then, during the Harlem renaissance, Alain Locke’s cultural relativism recognized the reality of racial cultures based on their historical power relations to a social hierarchy. Thus, by uniting without essentializing race, Locke left the door open for racial melding through changing a society’s power structure. Finally, when the Depression struck, whites acknowledged their own heterogeneity as class distinctions became exaggerated. A wide range of cultural activists validated differences in white cultures based on their adaptation to particular locales, an idea modeled on Mary Austin’s study of American Indians. For evidence, Agrarians, sociologists, and cosmopolitan progressives evoked Appalachia, where race and region combined to produce the most seemingly essential of American ethnicities. As Appalachian crafts, music, and movies also became nationally commonplace, the New York houses that published Locke and Kallen would issue poetry books about Appalachia, arguing for acceptance of non-mainstream white cultures of American origin.

In 1937, Viking Press brought out James Still’s Hounds on the Mountain, which is the focus of Chapter Two. Educated at a Tennessee mountain college that was funded by the founder of Howard University, Still worked as a librarian at Kentucky’s Hindman Settlement School, which benevolence workers started in 1902. Still’s quiet, well-wrought poetry about the endurance of the mountains found publication in national newspapers, The Yale Review, and The Atlantic, the last of which had been publishing fiction about the mountains since 1875. Affirming affluent readers who felt compassion in their removal, Still’s intimate rendition of Appalachia was charged by subtly portraying its plight under the forces of modernity. Hounds on the Mountain was part of Viking’s project to market books that showed Americans their
chthonic wherewithal in the face of the Depression. Thus, in 1940, Viking released Still’s novel *River of Earth* on the heels of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, which they had published the year before.

Steinbeck published with Viking because his editor, Pat Covici, had moved there after his own firm, Covici & Friede (C & F), had folded. A house of literary repute and leftist convictions, C & F published Muriel Rukeyser’s *U. S. 1* (1938), the focus of Chapter Three. Rukeyser, who was given the Yale Younger Poets Award by Steven Vincent Benét in 1935, published with C & F on the recommendation of her left-leaning mentor, the poet, historian, and critic, Horace Gregory. With avant-garde techniques, Rukeyser’s poetry drew her readers into the violence of exploitation and the looming threat of fascism. Published during the Spanish Civil War, *U.S. 1* ends with a long tribute to the Republican cause in Spain, but the book begins with a 20-poem sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” based on Rukeyser’s investigation into the 700+ miners who died from silicosis at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Plumbing the depths of exploitation in the heart of America, the sequence graphs the maze of social, natural, and institutional relations, all the while relaying individual struggles and expressing the dynamics of natural and scientific power and beauty with lyrical resilience. Due to her poetic skill, Rukeyser published poems about migrant and African-American miners from West Virginia in venues as diverse as *Poetry* and *New Masses*. Rukeyser’s literary model was *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields* (1932), which documented the violence and conflict in “Bloody Harlan.” Documented by writers such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Sherwood Anderson, *Harlan Miners Speak* launched Appalachia into the middle of American labor conflict. One of the miner organizers was a preacher and poet named Don West.

Don West composed poetry for working-class audiences to catalyze political action. The son of a sharecropper from the north Georgia mountains, West attended Vanderbilt to become a preacher trained in the social gospel. After co-founding Highlander Folk School in 1932, West served as a Communist organizer in the mid-thirties. During WWII, he earned national recognition as a school administrator who taught democracy in rural Georgia and became a professor of Citizenship at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. After the end of the war, Boni & Gaer brought out West’s *Clods of Southern Earth* (1946) as their first book. Selling 14,000 copies, West’s book was a rallying point for progressive intellectuals and the working class. Designed for accessibility, the poetry authenticated its audiences’ struggles, language, and
desires. Labor and civil-rights organizations that opposed segregation distributed the book into their networks to foster cross-class interracial unity and action. West’s poems confronted racial violence and appealed to readers based on his heritage as a toiling Appalachian whose ancestors opposed slavery. Released the year after Georgia abolished the poll tax and white-only political primaries, *Clods of Southern Earth* instigated waves of support and backlash. West converted that cultural capital and led Georgia’s Progressive Party in the 1948 presidential campaign. However, in light of the cold war and Southern racial anxiety, West was confronted with his Communist past, and he was forced to leave his academic post and finish the 1940s as a farmer. *Clods of Southern Earth* signaled pluralism’s shift from place back to race. Like Don West, Appalachia itself receded into the mountains during the struggle for Civil Rights until Johnson’s 1965 War on Poverty again summoned national attention to the mountains.

**Post-Script: On Jesse Stuart**

Far into the composition of this dissertation, I discovered that Jesse Stuart’s *Man With A Bull-Tongue Plow* (Dutton, 1934) formed the headwaters for all the books under consideration. Indeed, this dissertation might be read as a triptych biography of Stuart, Still and West, all of whom attended Lincoln Memorial Union and Vanderbilt together. The chapter on Stuart remains to be written, but I would like to offer its outline below to inform the reader of another essential interpretive community.

At Vanderbilt, the Agrarians Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom invigorated two young Appalachian poets, Jesse Stuart and James Still. Stuart idealized Donald Davidson who supported his literary aspirations. Although containing 703 sonnets, *Man With A Bull-Tongue Plow* quickly sold over 10,000 copies. *The New York Times* heralded the book as the “Rubáiyát of Jesse Stuart,” who conveyed the “primitiveness” of Kentucky with an “inexhaustible . . . fertility of expression” (Jack). Malcolm Cowley felt Stuart’s testimony allowed outsiders to gauge mountaineers for the first time: “he is always speaking in his own words about his own people . . . He shows us mountaineers, huge families of them, living in one-room pine-pole shacks.” Cowley recounts how Stuart’s life and poems demonstrate the living inheritance of the “pioneers themselves” who were “always driven on by their poverty”—a powerful appeal to those witnessing the effects of the Depression. With the validation of an Appalachian poet, a primal “folk” seemed to emerge as a living fact. The last section of *Man With A Bull-Tongue Plow*
Plow was dedicated to Donald Davidson, who deployed the language of cultural pluralism to defend the South as a separate and distinct culture: “[America’s] government in no accurate way represents the heterogeneity of its parts, which are grouped in a loose spiritual confederation” (185). Throughout the 1930s Davidson would continue to call for a culture and politics based in region, the selected essays on which appear in Attack on Leviathan (1937). I will evaluate Donaldson’s and Stuart’s books via the lens of their heavy correspondence and letters to publishers. Their conservative cultural vision will add an essential facet to the other networks of cultural actors in the later chapters.
Chapter One
The Phases and Problems of Pluralism

Introduction

One federal study, The Problems of a Changing Population (1938), asked, “Is a more rational and finer civilization emerging through the interplay of diverse cultures in American life? Or will their net effect be the debasing of culture, the dominance of elemental passions, and destructive social conflict?” (United States 223). The answer was by no means clear, but by 1938 the federal government was actively weighing the benefits and dangers of cultural pluralism. Authored by The National Resources Committee—which was headed by the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Labor, War, Commerce, and the Works Progress Administrator—The Problems of a Changing Population devoted its climactic section to “Cultural Diversity in American Life.”

Drawing upon the work of progressive sociologists, anthropologists, and other cultural theorists, the authors summarize, “every continuing group—set off by geographical isolation, physical characteristics that serve as a racial ‘uniform,’ language, religion, or economic functions—develops and cherishes a set of social values particular to itself” (222). Given the increased contact between distinct groups, they investigate ways to sustain social order and to promote cultural diversity. They emphasize that disorder has arisen because “traditional ways of living are being replaced by new modes” that emanate from metropolitan “centers where goods are designed, fashions set, copy written, entertainers trained, news and periodicals written, movies produced, and programs broadcast” (223). These centers, the authors acknowledge, are also the places of “greatest diversity of cultural heritages.” America’s cultural crisis was no longer between immigrants and natives or whites and blacks, but between metropolitan cultures, where trends were set, and those in the countryside, where “our cultural institutions have their ultimate roots.”

Noting the cycle of industrial growth in the northeast during the nineteenth century where “successive groups of immigrants” took one another’s places, the National Resource Committee contends, “The cycle is being repeated in the migration of the industry to the south-east to tap the reservoir of impoverished tenant farms and mountain people” (227). And the mountains were where those “ultimate roots” of American cultural institutions seemed best preserved.
Appalachia, that “culture of the southern highlands,” represented the “emergence of a genuinely indigenous American culture” that faced plights similar to immigrants, Spanish-Americans, Negroes, and Asian-Americans (226). Although broken into distinct identity groups in the report, the relationship between locality, nationality, and race were deeply intertwined in the history of American cultural pluralism.¹

This chapter examines the evolving rhetoric of pluralism in four interlinked stages, which first held that cultures arise from racial essence and ended with the understanding that cultures emerge from their relations with an environment. Throughout, I accent pluralism’s relationship to region and Appalachia, because these identity-nodes—and their relationship to racial and ethnic heritage— influenced the manifestation of Regionalism, the version of pluralism in which the three books of my study were most directly involved. Part I, “Racial Purity and Regional Ethnogensis,” begins just after Plessy vs. Ferguson, a case based on the theory of “separate but equal,” which held that separation was necessary to preserve racial essence because varied racial cultures added strength to America. The Supreme Court extended this rationale to all educational settings in a 1906 case that segregated Berea College into two units, one for whites and one for Negroes; thereafter, Berea turned its mission to the uplift of white mountaineers. Under the influence and guidance of John C. Campbell and the Conference for Southern Mountain Workers, the uplift mission of Berea and the Settlement houses melded with concepts of cultural pluralism.

Part II, “The Provincial Aspect of Cultural Pluralism,” examines the three philosophers who shaped America’s understanding of that pluralism. Part II starts with Josiah Royce’s turn-of-the-century consideration of the wholesome province as a way of resisting the homogenizing forces of modernism. Royce taught with William James at Harvard and both influenced Horace Kallen’s theory of cultural pluralism and Alain Locke’s theory of cultural relativism. Kallen’s approach resisted Americanization of immigrants during WWI by arguing that preservation of one’s culture of origin, which could not be disinterred but only repressed, both kept individuals’ psyches intact and provided the nation with vital resources. In this theory, culture resulted from prolonged nationality, and due to their isolation, Appalachians were seen to have preserved the

¹ “Cultural Pluralism” is now often used as a synonym for multiculturalism. In this chapter, however, “cultural pluralism” will hereafter refer to Horace Kallen’s theories that explained the particular intersection between pluralism and culture. To refer to the whole scope of culture’s intersection with pluralism, I will simply use the term “pluralism.”
culture of their Anglo-Saxon settlers—an important appeal in WWI. During the Harlem renaissance, Alain Locke’s cultural relativism recognized the reality of racial cultures based on historical power-relations in a social hierarchy. Thus, by uniting without essentializing race, Locke left the door open for racial melding through changing a society’s power structure. Significantly, both Kallen and Locke drew upon the movement of Regionalism as it was being practiced in Europe by ethnic groups—such as the Irish—who sought to reassert cultural control against the nation states that ruled them.

Part III, “The Rise of Regionalism,” enters into the Depression, which caused American whites to acknowledge their own heterogeneity when class distinctions became exaggerated. A wide range of cultural activists validated differences in white cultures based on their adaptation to particular locales, an idea modeled on Mary Austin’s study of American Indians. For evidence, Agrarians, sociologists, and cosmopolitan progressives evoked Appalachia, where race and region combined to produce the most seemingly essential of American ethnicities. After Appalachian crafts, music, and movies also became nationally commonplace, the New York houses that published Locke and Kallen would issue poetry books about Appalachia. Their publications argued for acceptance of non-mainstream white cultures of American origin.

The discourse of Americanization cuts across and unites Parts I-III as the actors therein sought strategies to cope with modernity and standardization. Yet Americanization was not a static discourse either; its manifestations shifted with changing American international and domestic relations, including the political tactics of pluralism. To begin my investigation of how American policy and cultural pluralism evolved, I turn to Kentucky in 1904 where a law was being passed by the state to debilitate the last biracial college in the South.

Part I: Racial Purity and Regional Ethnogenesis

The Day Law

In 1904, the Day Law forced Berea College to segregate. Representative Carl Day, from Breathitt County in eastern Kentucky, proposed and led the drive to pass legislation that

---

outlawed the teaching of “whites” and “negroes” in the same school and directed punitive action against any student, instructor, or institution that dared such a project. Biracial public education had been outlawed by the Kentucky Constitution, Section 187, in 1891. Carl Day sought to extend this mandate into private schools (Heckman and Hall 39), which the United States Supreme Court had left as legal grounds for “social equality” because students in private schools had “natural affinities” and gave their “voluntary consent” (Plessy v. Ferguson 261).

Unwilling to sacrifice their political careers to opposing the act (Heckman and Hall 37), members of the Kentucky House (73 to 5) and Senate (28 to 5) overwhelmingly voted for the bill (Wilson and Stroup). Berea filed suit, and the Kentucky Court of Appeals affirmed the law in 1906; two years later, the case came before the United States Supreme Court, which ruled 7-2 to uphold the legislation. These decisions recognized and sought to honor and preserve the cultural differences between races, and the court opinions demonstrate the paradox that still haunts pluralism: the struggle between cultural recognition and political inclusion versus veiled exclusion and paralytic essentialism.

The Court of Appeals ruled that the state had to mandate segregation in order to maintain racial purity, which was necessary to maximize the welfare of both the state and individuals. In his opinion, Judge Cantrill O’Rear validated “the exercise of police power” to abrogate “voluntary association between the two races”—privileges he acknowledged that were granted by the Bill of Rights (Berea College v. Commonwealth 12, 20). At issue was “the right of self-preservation” that “inheres in every state” (14), a right whose preservation would be determined by the “good sense and honest judgment of each generation” (15), demanded placing police power above individual rights. O’Rear cited unambiguous moments, including polygamy, quarantine and health laws, incestuous marriages, as well as “the intermarriage of the two races” that would “destroy the purity and identity of each” and “detract from whatever characteristic force pertained to either” (15-18). Thus, he found that the Day legislation “was aimed at something deeper and more important than the matter of choice”: the “divinely ordered” natural separation of races (21).

Each race, O’Rear explains, is driven to unrestrained propagation by its instinctive “homogenesis” and protects itself from racial “amalgamation” via the defensive instinct of “race

prejudice,” which, if unregulated, would lead to racial extermination (21, 23). Working against those drives, the “humane civilization” of American “governmental prescripts” that “preserve the purity of blood” allowed society to realize “the best qualities of manhood in all its races” (22-3). On the one hand, government must mitigate the “racial antipathy to the destruction of its own identity,” and, on the other, government must seek “to conserve the very best characteristic of each race, to develop its idea of morality, its thrift, independence, and usefulness” (25). In short, O’Rear saw it as the government’s responsibility to save the Negro race from white ire by lawfully averting “race destruction” through legislating the separation of races (26).

In regards to the situation in the case, O’Rear explained that college youth are in “the most impressionable and least responsible” period of their lives, so social responsibility could be best realized by separation “until ripened judgment and observation can have set [the youth] well on the safe way of thinking” (26-27). While the appellants had acknowledged the need for separation of the races in moments of forced or casual contact, O’Rear held that segregation should also extend to associations of choice:

[S]uch association at all, under certain conditions, leads to the main evil, which is amalgamation of the races, and incidentally to conflicts between their members naturally engendered by too close personal contact under conditions which are bound to excite prejudices and race animosities. If such evil falls within the police power to prevent, then whatever naturally contributes to them may also be regulated, provided the regulation is itself reasonable. (30)

In November 1908, the United States Supreme Court upheld the Appeals Court’s verdict. In his statement, Justice Brewer ignored the issues of individual rights raised by Berea’s lawyers and focused solely upon the relationship between a state (Kentucky) and a corporation (Berea College): “In creating a corporation a State may withhold powers which may be exercised by and cannot be denied to an individual. It is under no obligation to treat both alike” (Berea College v. Com. of Kentucky 54). In the end, he found that the Day Law did not “defeat or substantially impair the object of [Berea’s charter], grant, or any rights vested under it” (57).

In vigorous disagreement, Justice Harlan, who was also the only justice to dissent against Plessy v. Ferguson, contended that the intention of the legislature was not to focus on corporations but to mandate separation of private individuals (61): “It was the teaching of pupils of the two races together, or in the same school, no matter by whom or under whose authority,
which the legislature sought to prevent” (62). Contrary to the opinion of the court, he also observed that the state of Kentucky had destroyed “the substantial, essential purpose for which the corporation was created” (67): the rights of liberty and property (guaranteed by the 14th Amendment) “to impart instruction to others [which] is given by the Almighty for beneficent purposes.” Once pupils’, instructors’, and institutions’ rights had been so withered, the way was set to intervene in other moments of private learning: between whites and black at Sabbath school or even sitting together at churches; between whites and other races; between meetings of the Christian and Jewish faiths; or between races at other public meetings such as market places (68-69). “Have we become,” Judge Harlan asked in his conclusion, “so inoculated with prejudice of race that an American government, professedly based on the principles of freedom, and charged with the protection of all citizens alike, can make distinctions between such citizens in the matter of their voluntary meeting for innocent purposes simply because of their respective races?” (69) The answer was yes. Although Harlan desired the constitution to be a neutral arbiter—or a document which, at any rate, was slightly disjoined from the contemporary body politic and to which one might appeal—the constitution was (and is) at best a sign whose meaning is weighted with volumes of Federal lore, police power, and popular association, which various social orders seek to bend to their own ends. At that the turn of the twentieth century, the forces of racial essentialism and division were in control.

Seemingly apocalyptic in his opinions about the violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, Judge John Marshall Harlan came to be known as the “Great Dissenter,” especially in cases of Civil Rights. Perhaps his ability to lay bare the prejudice hiding behind veils of law arose because of Harlan’s background. A slave-owning Kentuckian, Harlan was raised in Danville, attended law school at Transylvania University in Lexington, and practiced law in Frankfort and Louisville. In 1859, Harlan was nominated to run for congress by the Old Whig, Know-Nothing, and American parties (Lee), who held stringent nativist values, seeking to promote Anglo-Saxon Protestants against Catholics and immigrants (Mathias). While Harlan had been a nationalist Whig, he raised a Union regiment in 1861 and fought until the sudden death of his father in late 1862, who he replaced as Kentucky Attorney General (Lee). Even though he initially opposed the presidency of Abraham Lincoln and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, Harlan accepted them as necessary steps to unite the Union. Losing a bid for governor of Kentucky in 1871 and 1875, Harlan led the Kentucky delegation to the Republican convention in
1876, where his support led to the nomination of Rutherford B. Hayes for President. The following year Hayes appointed the forty-four-year-old Harlan to the Supreme Court. Having seen the consequences of the economic and political system, upon which he had grown up with and risen to power, Harlan developed the strongest opposition to racial division upon the bench. But if Harlan was able to name the consequences of “sinister legislation” to “the blessings of freedom” (Plessy v. Ferguson 70), his judicial experience did not prepare him to name the connections between race and geography that were being exhibited when Berea College shifted the focus of its dedication from the uplift of blacks to the uplift of mountaineers.

Berea and William Goodell Frost

Berea’s history demonstrates the connection and slippage between race and region when its educational focus on Negro uplift shifted to Appalachian uplift. Berea College began as a mission school founded by the Reverend John G. Fee in 1855 (Sears). From 1855 to 1859, the school campaigned against slavery with the aid of workers and students from Oberlin College. In 1859, however, local slaveholders ran the school out. Fee returned in 1864 to work as a missionary 30 miles from Berea at Camp Nelson, the primary military training ground for blacks in Kentucky. He invited many of them to settle in Berea. By 1866, he had opened a biracial elementary school, and in 1869, seven students were attending Berea College proper. The connections between Oberlin, the American Missionary Association (an affiliate of the Congregational church), and Northern benefactors soon led to a thriving campus. From Berea’s inception until 1893 more blacks than whites enrolled as students (Heckman and Hall 36). Working against external pressures, some 280 African Americans and 122 whites were attending the school in 1881. As the 1880s progressed, however, Northern support for aiding African Americans was waning under the pressure of Jim Crow laws, many of which the United States Supreme Court upheld.

William Goodell Frost became Berea’s President in 1892 and, gauging the change of winds, began to renovate the college’s focus: the school would work to uplift another needy population, the Appalachian mountaineer. On its seal, Berea’s motto read, “God Hath Made of One Blood All Nations of Man” (Hickman and Hall 52), but its new motto appeared on its letterhead: “In Lincoln’s State—For Lincoln’s People” (Klotter 60). Progressives all over the nation, like those at Berea, soon switched their attention and extended the paradigm of racial
difference onto whites in the Appalachian mountains. As with other racial discourses, what it has meant to be Appalachian has evolved with the changing social milieu. This identity evolution both affected and was affected by the wider national discourse of pluralism.

One of the first examples of such mutual effect were the local-color sketches of Appalachia that began appearing in the 1870s. Their purpose was not to elucidate the state of the mountaineers’ social welfare but to entertain their readers with the exotic otherness of the mountains (Shapiro 3-4). Essays such as Will Wallace Harney’s “A Strange Land and Peculiar People” (Lippincott’s Magazine 1873) portrayed the region as a primitive holdover from the eighteenth century (5). This cultural throwback had survived because of isolation from the “progressive and unifying forces” at work in the rest of America. Such essays crowded the pages of national magazines such as Scribner’s, The Century, Appleton’s, Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, and The Atlantic Monthly (6). The people inhabiting the Appalachians were seen to exhibit primitive lifestyles, tales of which tantalized and affirmed the moral and economic lifestyles of the readers of local color.

With the growth of Jim Crow, which countered Northern denominations’ uplift effort, and increasing resistance to Northern ecclesiastical encroachment into the white churches of the South, the institutions that the Northern churches had built for such work turned instead to the mountains (Shapiro 35-39, 47-49). Moreover, with the closing of the frontier and an increase in immigration, the late 1800s became a time of anxiety about American self-definition. Thus in the 1880s and 1890s, white missionaries undertook the salvage of their degenerate—but American, white, and Southern—brethren who were understood to be unsoiled with slavery. In effect, the denominational missionaries hoped to build a canal between the backwater ox-bow of

---


4 Due to their common set of editors, contributors, and cultural foci, these magazines constitute what Nancy Glazener has called “The Atlantic Group” (257-66). Their readership “aspired to prosperity and cultural authority” and understood themselves as a group who read about the state of the common man and woman (246, 48). For a bibliography of stories about Appalachia appearing in such magazines, see Shapiro 310-321. These stories and essays set a pattern that was carried out into the late 1930s, when the publication of such essays became rare.
the mountains and the great on-going flow of river America. The trouble was that they were all competing for that same unexploited resource (41).

Aid for these endeavors poured in from all sides. Between 1885 and 1905, the Presbyterians alone organized sixty-five mountain schools (Shapiro 55). Church workers understood the problems of the mountaineers to result from their lack of community and socializing institutions, specifically churches and schools (57). Given the lack of other documentation, for mission-studies texts, workers used fictional accounts such as Mary Murfree’s In the Tennessee Mountains (1884), which was read as an authentic representation of culture in the mountains (57). Writers such as John Fox, Jr. and James Lane Allen would make their careers from such work. These authors regarded the problems of cultural dilapidation in the mountains more in terms of class rather than culture. Where these authors understood the characteristics of mountaineers in semi-sympathetic terms, denominational uplift assessed those characteristics as problems to be cured (60). While the mountaineers were clearly Americans, “the characteristics of mountain life came to seem at once permanent, descriptors of Appalachian otherness, and temporary, remediable conditions which would yield to systematic social action. It also meant the institutionalization of a particular definition of mountain life as squalid and degenerate” (61). To those who implemented the “social action,” the population of the mountains resisted such induction in the American mainstream. It was unclear whether this resistance was due to an inheritance of a retrograde culture or to the adaptation of the mountaineers to their physiographic circumstances (Shapiro 84). Moreover, the turn of the century was an era wherein racial parentage played a central role in understanding behavior. Thus, a paradox arose: the mountaineers were praised for preserving the traits of the American colonies, but in order to become functional members of modern America, they needed to be cured of those traits by changing their culture (86, 92).

In response, a movement of mountain settlement houses arose which sought to provide more than the moral education of church schools. As a first step, these projects sought to end the isolation of mountaineers from each other so they might more easily enter mainstream American

---

5 The trope of isolated temporal regression was perhaps best put by the Chicago sociologist George E. Vincent in his essay “A Retarded Frontier” (American Journal of Sociology 4 [1898]: 1-20): “Following the physiographic lines of least resistance [a progressing American civilization] left quiet pools in the mountains of Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee [where] the frontier has survived in practical isolation until this very day. Only recently have we fully realized this fact made vivid by the stories of Miss Murfree, Mr. John Fox, Jr., and other writers” (1).
While they began with Sunday school, the settlement schools were soon employing day-school education to encourage domestic industry (146). Through such socialization, they sought to counter the consequences of isolation, such as feuding (142-143). Because these projects were divorced from denominational affiliation, the middle-class women who staffed them could present themselves as friendly visitors rather than spiritual saviors (144). As a result, the “problems” that they had originally been understood as cultural deviance were more readily accepted as characteristics of the local group (150).

William Goodell Frost drew upon this evolving discourse and composed an apology for educating the mountaineers, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” which was published in The Atlantic Monthly (1899). A few years before in the same magazine, W. E. B. Du Bois had published an early version of “Our Spiritual Strivings,” the introduction to The Souls of Black Folk. Issues of culture, education, identity, and citizenship were at the forefront of national consideration. Frost begins his essay by calling the people of the southern mountains “an anachronism”: “It is a longer journey from northern Ohio to eastern Kentucky than from America to Europe; for one day’s ride brings us into the eighteenth century” (92). He recognizes how the mountain people are popularly understood as “illiterates, moonshiners, and homicides” and asserts that their “beleaguered” nature demonstrates the “the importance of intercommunication as a means of progress” (93).

Frost’s essay stands as a key example of what I call popular southern mountaineer essays, which draw upon the genre of local color and continued to be published well into the 1930s. Because influential magazines published many such essays, it is important to understand the genre, since they helped to inform popular understanding of Appalachia. I use Frost’s essay to describe and model their generic mode, which drew upon a gallery of similar motifs (which also reappear in the poetry under study). While not every essay uses each motif, an author’s attitude can be interpreted by the pose they strike toward their selection and emphasis. The twenty motifs that Frost employs are common to almost every such essay, academic or not: 1. A description of the geography; 2. The lay of land (state borders); 3. Colonial and Anglo-Saxon heritage; 4. Means of material exchange; 5. Poverty; 6. Isolation; 7. Anachronism; 8. Quality of dwellings; 9. Manners and customs; 10. Pace of life; 11. Language, song, and story; 12. Women’s lives; 13. Family; 14. Independence and kindness; 15. Feuding and moonshining; 16.

6 For instance Hindman Settlement School was founded in 1902 and is discussed in the next chapter on James Still.

After his introduction, Frost defines the geography of the region and the lay of the land. I quote at length, because his basic description holds true for most writers:

The mountainous backyards of nine states abut upon the lofty ridges which separate the Virginias, bound Kentucky on the east, divide Tennessee from North Carolina, and end in Georgia and Alabama. There are some two hundred mountain counties, covering a territory much larger than New England. This is one of God’s grand divisions, and in default of any other name we shall call it Appalachian America. It has no coastline like Scotland, no inland lakes or navigable rivers like Switzerland. The surface varies greatly in elevation and geological structure, but as a place for human habitation the entire region has one characteristic—the lack of natural means of communication. Its highways are the beds of streams; commerce and intercourse are conditioned by horseflesh and saddlebags. (93)

Frost proceeds to describe dwellings (in this case, log cabins) and how the people support themselves without easy access to consumer items. The “dreariness of this destitution,” however, is relieved by the fact that “they can step into the forest and find or fashion some rude substitute. (Though in truth the handmade product is not a substitute but an archetype)” (95). Frost praises hand production, like spinning, for helping to “form the character of our race” (98).

This use of racial heritage twists the normal course of local color writing, whose readers praised their own Anglo-Saxon gusto and ambition in comparison with the stasis of the populations about which they read (Glazener 194-95). Frost’s focus on Anglo-Saxon heritage affirms the reader’s self-identity and encourages them to support Frost’s work to both modernize and preserve the mountaineer. He presents other facts of racial distinctiveness from the “startling survivals of Saxon speech” out of Chaucer. Sure not to threaten his readers, Frost then labels the mountaineers’ ballads, stock phrases, music, and tales the “literature of the illiterate” and describes how place names reflect the isolation of “these sons and daughters of solitude”: “The mountain world is mapped out by ‘forks,’ ‘creeks,’ and ‘branches,’” and travel and

---
communication are so difficult as to lead to an “absence of all haste” (100). These “contemporary ancestors,” he tells his reader, “may be useful in furnishing a fixed point which enables us to measure the progress of the moving world!” (98). Moreover, due to lack of foreign immigration, Appalachia America “now contains a larger portion of ‘Sons’ and ‘Daughters’ of the revolution than any other part of our country” (99). They thus demonstrate “old fashion loyalty”: “a greater individuality and hesitancy in cooperation . . . but follow a leader in the old feudal way.” For an example, he includes how people accepted payment from a politician for their vote. For more tangible evidence he also cites family names as proof of the mountaineers’ colonial stock (101).

Mountain women also are another stock motif. Frost describes them as dressing in black sunbonnets, mouthing cob pipes, and having “shrill voice that betokens desperation” (101). Nevertheless, they are kind, modest, and conventional. Similarly, “Love of home and kindred is nowhere more marked than among these simple dwellers in the hills.” That passionate commitment to family leads also to feuds, for unlawful violence is key component in this genre (102). The feuding, he explains, is a result of strict “social codes and moral standards” that families developed in their isolation. So even as mountaineers are ready to kill for honor, they have “compassion for a stranger, and curiosity to learn news.”

If the mountaineers are isolated from American systems of justice, Frost emphasizes their lack of contact with other systems such as slavery. This isolation also results in an “independent spirit which belongs to the owners of land,” making mountain people versions of the Jeffersonian ideal (102). Thus they are reluctant to accept charity when it cannot eventually be returned. Their independence is also reflected in their attitude toward religion and learning, which Frost finds is “strictly degenerated” because “they have lost the great Protestant idea that a minister must be an educated man.” Thus, Frost reports that they have “a multitude of sects,” hold to fatalism, and believe in literal interpretation of the Bible (103). Although a necessary motif for his emphasis, Frost carries their lack of education to an extreme and points out the lack of skill in evaluating truth: “‘Furriners’ have impressed them with the wonders of the train and telegraph, and they have no standard from which to decide where credulity should stop” (104). Additionally, Frost relates how a group of students at Berea mobbed John Fox, Jr. whose stories they thought had revealed slanderous truths about actual families (102). Such attitudes, mixing
with local pride and the “generations of scorn from the surrounding lowlands,” have led these people to feel that they are “stranded” and are now “but feebly struggling with destiny” (103-04).

Against those weaknesses, Frost describes these “native born” mountaineers as possessing practical skills. What they lack “in intelligence,” they gain in “unjaded nerves” and procreative vigor (105). Hence, drawing upon the anxieties about the South, Frost calls upon education to augment their deficits: “When once enlightened this highland stock may reinforce the whole circle of Southern states.” He concludes by warning of the impending industrial exploitation, which was already well underway: “The lumber, coal, and mineral wealth of the mountains is to be possessed, and the unprincipled vanguard of this commercialism can easily debauch a simple people.” It is understandable why he does not, as later writers would, highlight this exploitation, since he is raising money from those very interests so that the mountain people “can have a part in the development of their own country.” At this point, Frost forwards a brand of pluralism, later promoted by John C. Campbell, director of the Southern Highland Division of the Russell Sage Foundation. Perhaps Frost is shielding the potential investors who might fear that the people just described would cease to exhibit their primitive life-styles and invade civilization, but he writes about an uplift that would make mountaineers “intelligent without making them sophisticated” (106): “we should not try to make them conform to the regulation type of Americans; they should be encouraged to retain all that is characteristic and wholesome in their present life.” He ends by entreating his readers to support him in educating the mountaineers about the use of industrial resources, hygiene, United States history, and modern law. Against the infusion of immigrants and the failure to reform the South, America’s most American people could still be renovated and preserved.

On the other side of the coin, industrial spokesmen proposed to aid mountaineers by offering factory work in textile mills. These apologists were also giving justification for why children should work, and they maintained that the organization of factory labor and the accommodations of modern town life were the right cure for the regional causes of mountain degeneracy (Shapiro 175-185). By 1912 when Appalachia was beginning to be recognized by federal agencies as a discrete region and culture, the question was whether to integrate them into modern America or preserve their culture (187). Working against industry’s apologies and

---

8 The United States Commissioner of Education, Philander P. Claxton initiated a report on public education in the mountains, authored by Norman Frost of Berea College, which was published in 1915: A Statistical Study of the
drawing upon the settlement school experience, mountain benevolence work would take its next, pluralist, spin to affirm and modernize the mountains.

Regional Ethnogenesis

In addition to Frost at Berea, other actors were laboring around the country to foster recognition of Appalachia’s people as a distinct folk. As shown in the Part Two of this chapter, this work happened along side the development of cultural pluralism, which fought against Americanization by favoring cultural difference based on an immigrant’s original nationality. In anticipation of how the regionalists in the 1930s would synthesize their vision of pluralism based on theories of ethnic, racial, and Appalachian cultures, this section outlines the development of Appalachia’s recognition as an indigenous American culture through the mid-1920s.

In The Future of the Church and Independent Schools in Our Southern Highlands (Russell Sage Foundation, 1917), John C. Campbell would write, “There is a native culture in the mountains that has been too much ignored, which should be given expression in any educational system for the mountains” (18-19). Campbell had been with the Presbyterian Department of Church and Country Life, which worked with agencies for the creation of community in the mountains (Shapiro 151). In 1908, Campbell, the former president of Piedmont College, received an invitation to attend the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in Richmond, Virginia, which was focusing on mountain benevolent work (190). What became apparent at the Conference was the need to build roads of communication between the isolated agencies involved in mountain benevolence (192). Writing to Mary Glenn, who had organized the conference, Campbell offered his services to conduct a survey of organizations involved in mountain aid (193-194). Glenn was the wife of the director of the Russell Sage Foundation, and they invited Campbell to submit a formal proposal to the Foundation. By March 1913, the headquarters of the Southern Highland Division of the Russell Sage Foundation was established at Asheville, North Carolina with Campbell at its lead (195). Until his death in 1919, Campbell would work to promote mountain aid that promoted “a viable mountain culture and redefinition of Appalachia as an alternative version of, rather than as the opposite of America” (196).
Campbell served as a nexus for mountain benevolence workers. In 1913 he founded the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW) to extend the project of interagency cooperation. He helped them to coordinate action, share resources, and swap experiences. At the Conference in 1915, mountaineers were discussed as a “folk” and mountain life as a “folk culture” (199). By 1917, the Conference consisted of 150 delegates, 12 denominations, and over 200 agencies or institutions (197). Educational focus soon turned toward rural-life education, crafts, and the purposeful cultivation of regional culture based upon the model of Danish folk schools, in which rural students learned to practice native vocational skills and to cultivate their rural culture (199). That culture was understood to have adaptations appropriate to their circumstances, to pre-date modernism, and to essentialize national spirit.

To realize a mutual Appalachian culture, educators and benevolence workers began promoting those aspects of folk culture that had been advanced (or invented) by settlement schools, including crafts, folksong, and folkdance (216). Drawing upon techniques already at use in urban settlements, these resources were promoted as ways for mountaineers to make a living by selling handicrafts to mainstream America. Although plagued with chronic low wages and the limited version of culture which it promoted, the crafts revival helped establish Appalachian identity both to the nation and for the mountaineers: “By the middle teens, crafts, especially weaving, had come to be seen also as elements of an indigenous mountain culture which the mountaineers had forgotten just as they had forgotten the crafts techniques themselves” (242).

During the First World War, Americans began to see Appalachia not only in terms of American history but also as their connection and claim to an essential England. The first graduate from Hindman Settlement School, Josiah Combs, published a scholarly study of the mountain dialect, “Old, Early and Elizabethan English in the Southern Mountains” (1916). Combs performed a detailed linguistic philological study, comparing the mountaineer’s dialect to English as rendered in Edwin Abbott’s Shakespearian Grammar (1877). Combs put the

---

9 The Conference of Southern Mountain Workers was the group's original name. It was changed to the Council of Southern Mountain Workers in 1944 and finally the Council of the Southern Mountains in 1954 until it disbanded in 1989.

connection between blood, culture, and language in plain words: “These four million mountaineers of the South from West Virginia to northern Alabama form the body of what is perhaps the purest Old English blood to be found among English-speaking peoples. Isolated from the outside world, and shut away by natural barriers, they have for more than two centuries preserved much of the language of Elizabethan England” (283). Essayists would eagerly cite Combs for decades thereafter.

Attention to Appalachia as a repository of essential American and English culture was extended by the study of folksong. Scholarly collections of folksong were already important for cultural ties to the past in the age of change and modernism (Shapiro 249), but in 1917, Putnam released English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians, authored by Olive Dame Campbell (wife of John Campbell) and Cecil J. Sharp, an English expert of folkdance and song. Rave reviews followed in the New York Times, Modern Language Notes, The Journal of American Folklore, and The Dial (256). Sharp and Campbell’s book soothed modern nerves and legitimated mountain culture to contemporary America (257).

On the tides of national interest, Berea established its Appalachian folk school in 1920, and the Campbells founded the John C. Campbell Folk School at Brasstown, North Carolina in 1926. A critical degree of discursive momentum had been reached: Appalachians had irrevocably become a people on the American landscape. In 1926, the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers took over Mountain Life and Work, a thirty-two page 8” by 11” magazine, from Berea College that had started it the year before. Against the “inferiority complex” that “found expression in the humble submission to outside invasion and in the eager acceptance of small favors and paltry benevolences,” in its opening issue, Mountain Life and Work promised to deliver a two-fold message—one to the dweller of the hills and the other to his brother of the plains and cities. It will realize its hopes if it can become a voice successfully inviting to a common effort the forces within its field--the schools, public and private, the churches, public officials, clubs and other governmental and private agencies. It will serve a larger usefulness if its voice can reach every

---

11 Detailed discussion and critique of settlement and folk schools takes place in Chapter Two. Don West and Myles Horton would set up The Highlander Folk School at Mounteagle, Tennessee (1933). I have not included Highlander above because it opposed how culture was promoted in settlement and folk schools. Specifically, Highlander was established to foster political empowerment, and it would play a central role in unionizing the South and in promoting civil rights (indeed, Rosa Parks was trained there). Horton and Highlander play an important role in the scenario presented in Chapter Four.
corner of our common country, telling others of the needs of the mountains, of their opportunities, of their ambitions and their potentialities. (Vaughn 3)

For the next fifty years, Mountain Life and Work served as the central venue for sharing resources, stimulating debate, and promoting the mountain cause. By publishing the work of such poets James Still and Don West and conducting reviews of their books, Mountain Life and Work also demonstrated the role poetry played in their social project.

On the national level, the Supreme Court ruling that upheld segregation in Berea College was not only about racial separation, but about the replacement of Negroes as a “separate but equal” race with the ensuing regional autogenesis of an Appalachian folk, whose isolation, it was felt, led paradoxically to their economic inequality, their cultural retardation, and their value in preserving the racial essence that Americans felt was under attack. Appalachia, like every identity discourse, was one of contention and alliance between numerous parties—those of sympathetic interest as well as those engaged in the exploitation of its natural and human resources. Additionally, while many advocates recognized Appalachia as culturally integral, there was constant debate about its integration with the national culture. By 1935, numerous studies had been released by United States governmental organizations providing details about Appalachian education, agriculture, economic welfare, migration, and cultural heritage.¹² The Edwards report, printed by Department of Agriculture, even provided a bibliography of books and articles published about Appalachia since the mid-1800s. Yet by no means did those living in the mountains identify themselves with the discourse of Appalachia—they most often understood themselves as southerners or people who lived in the mountains. Those from the middle and upper classes in the mountains often made easy transitions to places of national prominence. In short, mountaineers could often “pass.”

The argument for Appalachian identity had to be made on all accounts, and those who made it most powerfully were cultural and educational workers. However, not all schools or universities in the mountains promoted their students’ cultural identity as mountaineers. Those that did—such as Lincoln Memorial University, from which Don West and James Still

graduated, or the settlement schools—were limited in the numbers of students they taught. Even those authors, whose writing found its substance in Appalachian culture, promoted varying versions of that culture, and these representations were used as justification by groups competing for political and cultural resources. Later chapters consider how poetry added to that debate over Appalachia when it was mobilized to affect the national understanding of pluralism. But before undertaking that process, Parts II and III of this chapter examine the history of pluralism that would lead publishers in New York to promote Appalachian poetry in the 1930s.

Part II: The Provincial Aspects of Cultural Pluralism

Although the development of Appalachia in the early twentieth-century exhibited many of the same features as cultural pluralism, the two are not often mentioned together. However, awareness of pluralism in Appalachia’s development foreshadows the important role that region would play in the Horace Kallen’s cultural pluralism. Kallen claims he began to use the term “cultural pluralism” during a class given by George Santayana in 1907 in which Alain Locke was a student and Kallen was a graduate assistant (Kallen, “Alain Locke” 119). A year later, both found themselves at William James’s lectures at Oxford, where James laid out a metaphor that Kallen would embrace in literal terms: “. . . nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails after every sentence. Something always escapes . . . . The pluralistic universe is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or kingdom” (145). While scholars have recognized the influence of William James on Horace Kallen and Alain Locke, the two also shared another, perhaps more important, influence—the Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce who held a “life long friendly opposition” to James (Kallen, “Remarks” 135).

Royce’s articulation of the crisis of community in the progressive era informed the social tenets of Kallen and Locke. When Kallen had returned to Harvard in 1905 after his disappointment with pursing his doctorate in English at Princeton, Royce kindly asked Kallen to assist him in teaching a summer course in philosophy (135-136). Kallen, who viewed Royce’s philosophy as a “closed system” compared to James, was influenced by Royce’s thinking about the affect of one’s descent group on his or her moral choices (Toll 65-66). Royce had also been a central figure for Locke in his undergraduate days, and Locke had hoped to study with Royce when Locke returned to Harvard in 1916 to work on his PhD. Although Royce died before
Locke could do so, Royce deeply influenced Locke’s understanding of values as the cohesive force of culture.

Josiah Royce

The same year that the Supreme Court ruled on Berea College v. Commonwealth of Kentucky, Josiah Royce authored Race Questions, Provincialism, and other American Problems (1908), which articulated his social philosophy. Because he worked with the pragmatists Williams James and Charles Peirce, Royce was considered a genteel idealist. Moving from the totalizing teleological schemes of Hegel and German Idealism, Royce directed his energies to realizing possible communities of belonging based on the daily functions and pressures of social mechanisms and human psychology: “my deepest problems and motivations have centered around the idea of the community” (qtd. in Kallen, “Remarks” 135). Royce set forth the problems that community and interconnection faced under modernism and provides a solution: “a wholesome provincialism” (“Provincialism” 52).

Royce described the disruption of community by regimented normalization. His work anticipated the issues that modernists would wrestle with through World War II and with which America is still wrestling today. While only one of many commentators making such observations, as the teacher of Horace Kallen and Alain Locke, his vision presents a common point for cultural pluralism, cultural relativism, and their offshoot, regionalism: “the two tendencies, the tendency toward national unity and that toward local independence of spirit, must henceforth grow together” (“Provincialism” 53). While his dire diagnosis of the modern economic and social structures led some to consider him a nostalgic conservative, Royce was conversant in cutting-edge social theory on race and society.

Royce understood the category race as a contingent human construction: rather than a result of biological heritage, racial characteristics resulted from environmental factors and power relations—relations exacerbated by America’s developing imperialist posture. In his essay “Race Questions and Prejudices,” Royce compares the success of “Negroes” in Jamaica, which was facilitated by English civic institutions, to the seeming failure of blacks in the American south.13 The Southern race-problem, he explains, “will be relieved when administration grows

---

13 Published in Race questions, Provincialism, and other American Problems, the essay “Wholesome Provincialism” was originally read before the Chicago Ethical Society in 1905 and was published in the International Journal of
sufficiently effective, and when the Negroes themselves get an increasingly responsible part in this administration in so far as it relates to their own race” (40). Belief that racial characteristics were “unchangeable” and “essential”—rather than being a “transient incident, or a product of special social conditions”—occurs because of the human proneness “to confuse the accidental with the essential” (40). Hence, when a human being is understood as “debased,” it is not the result of a racial type but of the “power” which has been “persistently” devoted to debasement, such as the “results of alcohol, of infection, or in some instances, of the long-continued pressure of the environment” (46-7). Royce was anything but conservative. His philosophy diagnosed and sought cures for the human instinct to produce irrational categories of belief, through which societies generate their coherence.

Royce writes of the need to guard against social training that promotes the construction of such negative belief-categories: people are “submissively plastic” to social training including the cultural traditions built around how “one human being finds another portentous” (47). The instinctive attribution of portent to human presence becomes “systemized” into prejudice based on features of difference. “Hence the antipathy, once by chance aroused, but then named, imitated, insisted upon, becomes to its victims a sort of sacred truth, sacred merely because it is felt, a revelation merely because it has won a name and social standing” (49). For Royce, the “sacred truth” of such structured antipathy is one of the negative means through which human communities adhere.

Just as “sacred truths” such as race generate identification between people without generating community, in his essay “Wholesome Provincialism,” Royce lays out three contemporary social factors that created the phantom of community and promoted America’s economic nationalism: disconnection to community through economic migration, the levelling power of communication, and mob-mentality. He recognized that interior migration and immigration in search of prosperity were a central feature of America. On one hand, “The stranger, the sojourner, the newcomer, is an inevitable factor in the life of most American communities. . . . To give him his fair chance is the rule of our national life” (54). On the other hand, if such newcomers lacked connection to the social welfare of the communities, their

---


14 Published in Race questions, Provincialism, and other American Problems (1908), “Provincialism” was originally read as a Phi Beta Kappa address at Iowa State University in 1902.
influence would likely be detrimental, because they cared neither for the community’s residents nor its long-term prosperity. Having been born in 1855 to English immigrants who had come to California just after the gold rush, Royce personally knew the consequences of economic migration following on the heels of economic exploitation. This experience was repeated with the quick-paced land grab when railroad barons faced down ranchers and in the 1880s when new sectionalisms were arising as corporations from the northeast dueled for rights to extract raw resources (such as timber and coal) from Appalachia.

As a second cause for community malfunction, Royce diagnosed “the levelling tendency of recent civilization” (“Provincialism” 56). By “levelling,” Royce meant the social training that abstracted people from connection to their immediate contexts. He asserted that the “over mastering social forces” of popular education, centralized authority and industry, and mass media resulted in a homogenization of knowledge. A nation of the size and expanse of America, according to Royce, could not begin to generate the loyalty needed to create a sense of common moral responsibility need for community, that “communion of commitments” as Horace Kallen adroitly explained Royce’s definition (“Remarks” 138). Levelling also resulted from workers’ passivity, which was necessary to industrial economies:

The vast corporation succeeds and displaces the individual. Ingenuity and initiative become subordinated to the discipline of an impersonal social order.

And each man, becoming, like his fellow, the servant of masters too powerful for him to resist, and too complex in their undertakings for him to understand, is, in so far, disposed unobtrusively to conform to the ways of his innumerable fellow-servants. (57)

That sense of habituated conformity numbed awareness of one’s local geography and was, for Royce, a weak version of loyalty. Such conformity could be deposed by engaging an individual’s critical sensibility, which was a danger to all ideals and loyalties.

Economic migration and levelling led to the dissolution of the most central aspect of community—personal responsibility: “In the rightly constituted social group where every member feels his own responsibility for his part of the social enterprise which is in hand, the result of interaction of individuals is that the group may show itself wiser than any of its individuals” (61). With the loss of direct interpersonal empathy and responsibility, mob-mentality ensues. By “mob,” Royce refers to a company of people who, “by reason of their
sympathies, have for the time being resigned their individual judgment” (60). Just as he was aware of how humans could be trained to racism, he notes the power of large groups to generate “strong sympathy with one another” (59). When in a state of group hypnosis, “The individual may be led to acts of which he says: ‘These things are my duty, my sacred privilege, my right’. . . . [S]o the member of the mob may feel the sense of pure initiative, although as a fact he is in bondage to the will of another” (60). When Royce is writing about the mob, given that dislocation and levelling lay the basis of false-sympathy for those with whom one is not in actual contact, he refers to nothing less than American nationalism.

Yet with the American situation, how was “the further development and intensification of the community spirit” to be realized (54)? Royce’s solution was the cultivation of common ideals and loyalties necessary for any “community of interpretation,” a term set forth in his 1913 book, The Problem of Christianity (211). Following the work of the pragmatists, Royce forwarded his explanation of the social construction of knowledge as a “triadic structure” of interpretation, (Clendenning 349). In an earlier work, The World and the Individual (1901), Royce challenged the theory of dyadic knowledge through a discussion of Kempean logic: “An act of comparison always involves more than two terms: it involves also the quality between them” (qtd. in Clendenning 349). In his intellectual biography of Royce, John Clendenning recounts that Royce’s thinking about the factors that brought the knower and known together reached its fruition when he returned to the essays of Charles Peirce, especially "On a New List of Categories" (1867). Therein, Peirce demonstrates that interpretation of the relationship between any two terms (signs) depends on a third, intermediary sign. That sign, of course, can only be known through another interpreter or sign, and on and on. Hence in "Some Consequences of Four Incapacies" (1868), Peirce sets forth how these series of interpretations are grounded only in the shifting sands of contingent communities. As Royce explains,

Interpretation seeks an object which is essentially spiritual. The abyss of abstract conception says of this object: It is not in me. The heaven of glittering immediacies which perception furnishes answer the quest by saying: It is not in me. Interpretation says: It is nigh thee—even in thine heart; but shows us, through manifesting the very nature of the object to be sought, what general conditions must be met if any one is to interpret a genuine Sight to an understanding mind. And withal, interpretation seeks a city out of sight, the
homeland where, perchance, we learn to understand one another. (The Problem 151-152)

Exactly what would constitute that homeland, that commonness, is Royce’s great focus and worry as it has been for pluralists ever since.

In Royce’s search for “an intensification of community spirit,” the word “spirit” held strong resonance, because Royce was as much a theologian as a philosopher and logician. As an idealist working in the tradition of Hegel, Royce wants for that homeland to be a common Christianity. But in the social world, he realizes that such commonality is only found through malleable relationships with other people. To ground the infinite regression of interpretive referent, Royce calls for loyalty to an ideal, sealed through some common sacrifice. As we have seen with Royce’s discussion of race, such a sacrifice called for turning victims into “a sort of sacred truth.” His Christian hope was that the sacrifice might be of oneself to provide for others:

If, then, I am worthy to be an interpreter at all, we three—you, my neighbor, whose mind I would feign interpret,—you, my kindly listener, to whom I am to address my interpretation,—we three constitute a Community. Let us give this sort of community a technical name. Let us call it a Community of Interpretation. (The Problem 211)

Clendenning points out the open-ended consequences of this interpretive process: since it initiates “an infinite sequence of interpretive events and an endless variety of selves mutually interpreted. . . . This vast network of signs and interpretations results in a universe in which all cognition is social activity” (350). In an essay referred to by the regionalists in the 1930s, “Province,” Royce proposes the province as a pragmatic solution to finding a “homeland” of common understanding to ground the spiral of social knowledge.

Royce sets forth, “a province shall mean any one part of a national domain, which is, geographically and socially, sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity, to feel a pride in its own ideas and customs, and to possess a sense of its distinction from other parts of the country” (“Province” 51). Royce stipulates that his goal is to nurture loyalty rather than to cultivate cultural jealousies or economic antagonisms, which result in “sectionalisms” such as between the North and South. Citizens of a province would achieve commonality by idealizing the “half-legendary past,” knowing their history, and glorifying “the bounties” of the region (55).
At tension in any social configuration is imitation, upon which “all civilization depends” (58), and initiative. Against the levelling forces of national inculcation, “provincial pride helps the individual man to keep his self-respect even when the vast forces that work toward industrial consolidation, and toward the effacement of individual initiative, are besetting his life at every turn” (58). Royce clarifies the tension between social participation and individuality that is needed for a strong community rather than a mere assembly of individuals or automatons. He observes that from Roman law to the British constitution, “The group has depended on the variety and not the uniformity of its members” (62-3).15

Royce takes the individual and diversity into account in his central philosophical thesis of “loyalty to loyalty.” Kallen, in his essay memorializing Royce’s 100th birthday, clarifies that Royce “bids each, first to be loyal to his cause and to take the consequences of loyalty that ensue; and again to help others to keep the faith of their own commitments, and thus to be ‘loyal to loyalty’” (“Remarks” 137). This move leaves the dialectic behind and becomes a “passionate, practical way from the Many to the One,” as an ideal community. While Kallen might be accused of yoking Royce to his own philosophical wagon, when we consider Royce’s “wholesome province,” there is reason to believe Kallen when he proposes that Royce’s central ideal was “the communion of commitments wherein communities live and move and have their being” (138).

Such an exchange of respect between those of varying loyalties would certainly have solved the pluralist dilemma of equality and cultural difference (if not rectifying recourse to essentialism), but it is hard to see how “loyalty to loyalty” could have been implemented. But, as with the best of ideals, “loyalty to loyalty” manifested as “wholesome provincialism” proved inspirational. In 1902, Royce predicted that “the world” soon would turn to wholesome provincialism for its saving grace. While regionalism would become a serious version of pluralism in the 1930s, pluralism’s connection to region first developed through the thinking of Royce’s students Horace Kallen and Alain Locke, who focused on ethnic origins and race as sources for cultural authentication and community.

15 In a haunting gesture, Royce celebrates that Americans and the English are “colonizing peoples” whose success “as possessors of new lands depends upon this one skill in making new lands where we came to dwell soon seem to us glorious and unique” (54).
Horace Kallen

In October 1917, following the recommendation of Columbia University’s President, Columbia’s Board of Trustees unanimously expelled James Cattell, a professor of Psychology, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, a professor of comparative literature and English. In his commencement address earlier that year, president Nicholas Murry Butler emphasized that when “national policies” were under debate, the university promised freedom of speech and assembly, but that promise, he warned, had changed now that the Congress and the president had declared that “it would volunteer as one man for the protection and defense of civil liberty and self-government” (qtd. in “Columbia Ousts” 1). With war declared, “What had been wrongheadedness was now sedition. What had been folly,” continued Butler, “was now treason.” The consequence for students or faculty who conducted such acts would be expulsion.

Two other professors—Charles Beard and James Robinson—soon resigned in protest against the University’s actions. Those four ex-Columbia faculty, joining with the editor of the recently launched The New Republic and other professors who had also stood up for freedom of speech during the War, began planning the New School for Social Research, an institution which helped pluralism become part of government policy considerations by 1939. Throughout the history of pluralism and the social life of poetry, connection between educational innovation and political resistance have served as essential cultural catalyst.

Pressures in New York City had been growing since The Selective Service Act of 1917 authorized the drafting of up to 500,000 men until the cessation of conflict. By October 29, a bounty of $50 per head was offered for any of the 1,490 New Yorkers who had officially become deserters because they did not answer their draft summons, and each of their names and addresses was published in The New York Times (“Names”). In defiance of Columbia’s president’s commencement warning, James Cattell had sent a brief letter to congressmen asking them to support “a measure against sending conscripts to fight in Europe against their will” (qtd. in “Columbia Ousts” 2). Since Cattell wrote on Columbia letterhead, the congressmen contacted Columbia’s President about Cattell, who, they charged, was “sowing seeds of sedition and treason with the apparent sanction of the institution of which you are the honored head” (qtd. in “Columbia Ousts” 2).

The second professor, Henry W. L. Dana, who was Longfellow’s grandson, was a member of the People’s Council—a group which Butler described in his letter of dismissal as
“striving to weaken the national effort to nullify the national will.” A stalwart member of the People’s Council, Dana traveled the country in their name and even sought to meet with President Wilson, so Butler found Dana to have “inflicted the greatest damage” upon the University’s repute.

A week after Cattell’s and Dana’s dismissals, Charles A. Beard, a professor of Political Science, resigned in protest. In his letter to president Butler, Beard frankly stated that “the institution had fallen under the control of a small and active group of Trustees” (qtd. in “Quits Columbia” 1). Although Beard supported the war effort because “a victory for the German Imperial Government would plunge us all into the black night of military barbarism,” the university’s squelching of free speech and attempt to change opinion by “bludgeon” demanded action: “We are in the midst of a great war, and we stand on the threshold of an era which will call on all the emancipated thinking America can command.” John Dewey, a professor of philosophy and leader in progressive educational reform, and James Robinson, a professor of history who had been at Columbia 23 years, also protested the President’s actions. Robinson presaged, “[W]e fear that a condition of the repression may arise in this country similar to that which we laughed at in Germany” (“Quits Columbia” 3). These professors not only challenged Columbia but also opposed the route of higher-education in general, which they saw as succumbing to the task of training a new managerial and professional elite (Rutkoff and Scott 10).

Beard and Robinson soon found an intellectual home with The New Republic, whose editor, Herbert Croly, had founded it in 1914. They discussed the possibility of establishing an institute for adult students that offered social science lectures and provided research opportunities. Soon thereafter, Croly met with Dorothy Straight, heir to the Whitney fortune, to secure funds to establish the New School for Social Research (Rutkoff and Scott 10). In the first weekly planning sessions during the spring of 1918, Croly, Beard, and Robinson joined with other scholars, including James Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, and Horace Kallen (11). Kallen was well known, for he was William James’s literary executor who had written against Americanization in The Nation (1915), edited Creative Intelligence (1917)—the most important pragmatist anthology to that point—and lost his job at the University of Wisconsin in 1918 when he had advocated for the rights of pacifists (“Dr. Horace”).
As Kallen became known in New York, his ideas on cultural pluralism were seen in light of the New School’s educational policies. Robinson’s books, *The New History* (1912) and *The Mind in the Making* (1921), became the pedagogical foundation of the New School. He held that historical scholarship should study those moments that had current significance and address general audiences so they might become critically engaged in their own values (Rutkoff and Scott 7). In pragmatist education no claim was taken for granted, but all were scrutinized for relevance and veracity. This new history would teach students to adopt scientific methods, to analyze the original sources, and to postulate theories about the cause of events. Those explanations, he was keen to assert in *The Mind in the Making*, needed to be grounded in historical and cultural moments rather than in human nature. In asserting that environment and context rather than heredity and race were key, he drew upon the work of his fellow professors at Columbia, Dewey and Franz Boas (Rutkoff and Scott 8). The New School for Social Research, *The New Republic*, and pragmatism would come of age together.

The New School’s public lectures soon became legendary, drawing large crowds (Rutkoff and Scott 78). While Kallen lectured on Judaism and aesthetics, he gained fame as a spokesman against Americanization. It was the job of American democracy, he argued, to foster “the spontaneous self-rooting and automatic growth of differentiated communities and the free flow, impact, compenetration [sic] and rendering of spiritual values between them” (“Postscript” 42). Americans had two choices: “Kultur Klux Klan” or “Cultural Pluralism” (43).

Kallen had first written about cultural pluralism in his article “Democracy vs. the Melting Pot” (*The Nation* [1915]). Cultural pluralism was not only an argument about cultural diversity in American democracy, but Kallen argued against the forces of modernity that resulted in a pacified homogeny. The model American was the “‘average’ American of British stock,” a neighborly and elemental individualist who was “unthinkingly devoted to ‘laissez-faire’ in economics and politics” and, hence, moved “by formulas rather than ideas” (83). Yet within this “Anglo-Saxon” type, Kallen—echoing Royce and Frost—proposed that the Declaration of Independence promise of equality had been reduced to an illusion of sameness “such that all persons . . . became alike on either the lowest or highest plane.” This “leveling up” was realized through “‘standardization of externals,’” commodity standardization, and consumer social imitation (84, 101). The resulting “likemindedness” was also brought about by mass communication, national pastimes, the mobility of populations, and public schools (101). Kallen
even quipped that mainstream Americans all even seemed to have “the same syndicated hokum” for reading (84).

Americanization, Kallen held, wanted to cast (both in the sense of shape and social caste) immigrants to that Anglo norm. This normalization sought to minimize “the external differences upon which prejudice so often feeds” by enforcing the “adoption of the American variety of English speech, American clothes and manners, and American attitudes in politics” (79). Kallen understood two forces as resisting such easy, outward assimilation—organized labor and the immigrants’ “natio, the inwardness of his nativity” (94).

Under the promise of a “new ‘American race’” (97), immigrants found themselves subject to a veiled power hierarchy: “The first immigrants in the land simply through accident of being first, have become its aristocracy, its chief protagonists of pride of blood as well as of the pride of [s]elf . . . its standard bearers of culture” (98). Moreover, against the new influx of immigrants, “‘patriotic societies’” and “tribal associations” formed, “tracing their stock back to the same pre-Revolutionary ancestry” (99). Americans, that is, did not want immigrants to become American, but rather wanted to produce workers habituated to “being a cog in the industrial machine” (95). This goal was accomplished by “a complete cutting-off of the ancestral memories of the American populations, the enforced and exclusive use of English language and English and American history in the schools” (120). Immigrants, Kallen warned, were becoming simulacra, and when not succeeding in the public schools (as many did not), they became American through mass culture—“the yellow press, the movies, and similar engines which have set themselves explicitly the task of appealing to appetites” (96). America “is an abstraction,” asserted Kallen, an unrealized “word” (94).

Against that exploitation, Kallen denounces the “political conscious” of actors who, by trying to create equal access to wealth, are “seeking by a mere change in outward condition to abolish an inward disparity” (88). And even if sharing wealth were possible, Kallen held that the outward similarity between various peoples in America was one of “place and institution,” which was “acquired and not inherited, and hence not inevitably transmitted” (92). Yet for any person, “[b]ehind him in time and tremendously in him in quality, are his ancestors; around in him in space are his relatives and kin carrying in common with him the inherited organic set from a remoter common ancestry. In all these he lives and moves and has his being. They constitute his, literally, natio, the inwardness of his nativity” (94). Hence, the greatest resource in resisting
assimilation (industrial servitude), Kallen declared, is ethnic identity, for the greatest “group-consciousness occurs” at that point. Indeed, cultural association with other “fellow nationals” was amplified as an immigrant comes to a brutal awareness of native Americans “to whom he is merely a Dutchman, a Mick, a frog, a wop, a dago, a hunky” (94). Resisting the prosecution by Americans of colonial stock—who Kallen claimed had forfeited equality for sameness—the incoming ethnic group would find they held “common vision,” ideals, and ethos (104-105).

Kallen’s essay was prompted as defense against the negative estimation of Edward Alsworth Ross, his fellow professor at Wisconsin, who wrote *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (1914). Laden with charts, statistics, and photos, Ross characterized immigrants: Eastern European Hebrews are “keen-witted” “moral cripples,” whose “souls” have been warped by “iron circumstance” (148, 154). Hence, they have “no reverence for the law” and “break down the ethics of their profession” (150, 153). Ross identifies the primary “race-trait” of the “Hebrews” to be their “intellectuality” (157), “abstractness” (159), lack of feeling (160), and “tenacity of purpose” (163). Similar lists—though generally more positive—could be cited for Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, Italians, and Slavs. In the end, Ross predicts the “race suicide” (299) of “white Americans” unless they close the borders and instigate “pride of race” (304): “Now we confront the melancholy spectacle of this pioneer breed being swamped and submerged by an overwhelming tide of latecomers from the old world hive” (282).16

Against this cry, Kallen suggests that what troubles Ross and other Americans of British “stock” is the belief that “only men [who] are alike in origin and in feeling . . . can possess the equality which maintains that inward unanimity of sentiment and outlook which make a homogeneous national culture” (“Democracy” 115). But given the diversity of immigrants, the rapid change of American culture, and the “historical sectional differences” between sprawling regions “not only in political matters but in manner an outlook,” Kallen concludes, “the likelihood of a new ‘American’ race is remote” (97). As the great influx of immigrants awakened the belief that cultural difference was not easily dissolved, Kallen called for “a cooperation of cultural diversities, as a federation or commonwealth of national cultures” (116). In support of that vision, Kallen suggested using social projects to promote the “the existing

16 Ross defines “white Americans” as half of the current number of whites in American who had “native grandparents” with “one or more pioneers among their ancestors” (282). In this context, one can understand the emphasis upon the heritage and ancestry of southern mountain whites.
ethnic and cultural” differences and “provide conditions under which each might attain the cultural perfection proper to its kind” (121). The state, that is, should liberate and nurture the “human capacities,” which were “inalienable” because they are “ancestrally determined” (123). The result would be an “orchestration of mankind,” a “federal republic,” “a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously through common institutions in the enterprise of self-realization” (124).

How does Kallen’s vision differ from that the Appeals Court opinion in Berea College v. Commonwealth? First, As Judge Harlan made clear, the issue in the Berea case was one of maintaining a caste system rather than protecting racial purity. Kallen sought to depose that hierarchy. Second, Kallen stood against the system of standardization upon which that caste system was built. In 1924 he warned,

It is within the unifying, all-enveloping atmosphere of science and industry that a man to-day must come to himself. Against the architectonic and regimentation of the later, the logical oneness of the former, the deep-lying cultural diversities of ethnic groups are the strongest shield, the chief defense. They are the reservoirs of individuality, the springs of difference on which freedom and creative imagination depend. (“‘Americanization’” 229) (my emphasis)

While scholars have justly critiqued Kallen for essentializing difference based on ancestry, they have failed to allow that Kallen was only one in a chorus of voices arguing against uniformity—he was just using the immigrant viewpoint to do so.17

The editors of The New Republic articulated a similar stand against standardization in national politics and called for middle-class whites to bring politics back to the local level—another forecast of regionalism. Speaking in May 1921, President Harding announced, “The great war effaced the last vestige of sectionalism and we stand more firmly united today than ever before” (qtd. in “The Passing” 61). The centralization of resources and industry was facilitated by a drive to support American involvement in the Great War. This effort demonstrated the utility of social planning on a nation-wide scale. In particular, the Liberty Loan campaign, which raised $21,435,370,600 in five bond drives from May 1917 to April 1919

---

17 For specifics about the this critique see “Appendix A: Kallen’s Critics and Discursive Heroes.”
(Eiteman), demonstrated the power of business, government, and a citizenry working in tandem to forward American patriotism.

In June, The New Republic published an editorial, “The Passing of Sectionalism,” that agreed with Harding that the people of the United States had become “more welded together” than ever before in its history (61). However, that “unification” and “nationalization” were conducted at “the expense of American local vitality.” The “centralization and specialization” of government and business along with the standardization of the American people, the editors warned, “will endanger the foundation of an essentially territorial democracy.” The Liberty Loan campaigns “broke down the barriers to the standardization of ideas and wants to an extent that they have never been broken down before in this or any other country,” and such standardization, they claimed, made the public susceptible to suggestion.

The editors acknowledged that during the nineteenth century, the “loose territorial, economic, and political tissue of the country” had made progressive ideals difficult to realize against the shelter of “state rights and sectional interests and prejudices.” However, the very dispersed nature of the American socius allowed “provincialism and individualism” to create tension with “nationalism,” from which the “the great middle class of small property-owners which has always ruled this country had derived its strength” (62). With Harding in office after the war, the balance of equation was shifting in favor of “an over-stereotyped American man and an over-centralized American political and economic organization.” For the middle class to remain a political player, the editors called upon them to cultivate their “former essentially provincial, territorial and town-meeting economy and democracy.” Against the “unrestrained” standardizing force of “commerce, industry, and banking,” which provided consumable goods to satisfy wants, Americans would have to reinvigorate the neighborhood as “the source of national vitality.” “Economic machinery,” the profits from which President Harding was elected to promote, needed to be in service to “human nature” rather visa versa (63). Americanization was happening to established Americans as well.

If the forces that brought Harding to power were profiting, the New School was strapped. By 1922 there were problems raising funds for an educational format that provided professors resources to focus on research and gave students, who were deemed to be apprentices come to study with a master, access to professors lectures without grades or tuition (Rutkoff and Scott
In response, a new director, Alvin Johnson, redirected the School’s energies toward students and gave them the “privilege of organizing courses on their own initiative and responsibility” (qtd. in Rutkoff and Scott 34). He added arts courses and humanities, which attracted more tuition-paying students and donors (44). After the research division was dismantled, this new student focus led Beard, Robinson, and Croly to leave. Although he had received his PhD in political science and economics, Johnson saw the arts as tools of cultural understanding, tools which students could not only appreciate but even learn (48). Johnson felt the arts, along with the social sciences, were crucial tools of self-reflection that allowed practitioners and participants to break old molds and recast their cultures as more democratic and cross-cultural. In addition to raising monetary support, the restructuring resulted in both more students and a greater percentage of those working in human services and labor (47). The New School was renewed, and Horace Kallen was in his element.

Recognizing a fellow progressive trouble-maker, Horace Liveright brought out Kallen’s *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* in 1924. Kallen, Liveright explained, was “radical” like his other authors—John Reed, Theodore Drieser, Eugene O’Neill. “Radical,” Liveright clarified, meant that they “got at the roots of things” (686). Certainly, Kallen’s book did that. 1924 was a bumper crop year in defending and building what it meant to be an American, because in the War’s aftermath, federal policy undertook the defense of territorial boundaries. The newly formed U. S. Border Patrol minted the term “illegal alien” and began to regulate the 89,000 Mexicans who had poured into America the year before. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Quota Act was legislated, which allowed the entry of immigrants into the United States based on 2% of each nationality currently in-country in 1890. Not only would the influx of foreign races be monitored but wayward and

---

18 Most students had already graduated or attended college (60% and 80% respectively), and of the 3,435 students who attended from 1919-1923, 16% were educators, 15% were professionals, 10% were from other institutions, while only 5% were laborers, and just 1% were “housewives.” If the masses were not exactly rising to the occasion, two-thirds of the students were women and 30% of students had Jewish surnames.

19 Born in 1874 to Danish immigrants, Johnson was educated in Nebraska public schools and studied classical and German literature at the University of Nebraska. He served in the army during the Spanish-American War and after graduating with his PhD from Columbia became an academic migrant, teaching at Columbia, Nebraska, Texas, Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell. Finding academic life unrewarding, he took a year’s leave from Cornell in 1916 to work for *The New Republic*, went from there to the Council of National Defense, and later worked with the War Industries Board in Washington, D. C., where he became, like others at the New School, convinced that social and economic planning worked (Rutkoff and Scott 33). He returned to *The New Republic* to help direct public attention to “a nonvindictive peace settlement” and helped edit the magazine until 1922. So Johnson took over the New School that April as an insider.
out-of-line Indians and Negroes would be held in check. As a variation of Americanization, the Indian Citizenship Act was passed, which recognized all Indians born in the territorial United States as citizens, seeking to absorb them into national life. Similarly, the Ku Klux Klan numbered some 3,000,000 members. One can see why John Higham would claim that Kallen’s ideas, as discriminating as they were, did not immediately dent American public opinion.

Kallen dedicates *Culture and Democracy* to Barrett Wendell, his English instructor at Harvard in the late 1890s. Although his father was a Boston Rabbi, Kallen had almost cast aside his Jewish identity until “Barrett Wendell, professor of English literature at Harvard, showed [him] how the Old Testament had affected the Puritan mind and traced the role of Hebraic tradition in the development of the American character” (qtd. in “Dr. Horace”). During his first three years at Harvard, Kallen “never once . . . had more contact with other students than touching elbows in classrooms,” and instead of living in dormitories, he lived “those years either at home or in a social settlement in Boston’s North End” (Kallen, “Journey” 116-117). Rather, Kallen’s “initiation” came from his contact with his instructors Dean Briggs, George Santayana, William James, and Barrett Wendell, the last of whom, Kallen writes, “freed my surprised mind for ways of perceiving the American idea” (118).

Barrett Wendell’s key theory about American identity, national inexperience, rests in close correspondence with John Fredrick Turner’s thesis about the outlet of the frontier as being necessary to American democracy. Wendell assigns the genesis of American individualism and the influence of Puritanism to the lack of social pressure and the resulting “national inexperience,” by which he meant “at once the absence of such altering and distorting environment, and a certain relaxation of external pressure, which prevents fixity of habit; this is evident in individual American life” (Wendell, “Collection” qtd. in Self 99). In his * Literary History of America* (1900), which was an educational standard until the 1930s, Wendell writes that such experience exists “only under conditions where the pressure of external fact, social, political, and economic, is relaxed,—under conditions, in short, where the individual type is for a while stronger than the environment” (33). This situation, “along with the American power to absorb immigrants, maintained as vital much of the Elizabethan and Puritan vigor while the Civil War and Protectorate in England destroyed the youthful exuberance of the Renaissance” (25).

The important point for Wendell, and his influence on Kallen, was how to lay claim on that inheritance without the leveling of culture in American progressivism. Wendell articulated his
theory out of genteel dismay at the great influx of uncultured people gaining wealth, and hence prestige and status, but Kallen, born in Germany to Jewish parents, cultivated his relationship to America by more fully realizing his own Judaic cultural roots.

In his introduction to Individualism: An American Way of Life (1933), Kallen describes how his vision of a “pious and heroic” American past worked in accord and on the foundation of “the Jewish doctrine and discipline” that he learned in his childhood from the study of “the Hebrew Bible with its Judaist commentaries” (5): “The textbook story of the Declaration of Independence came upon me, nurtured upon the deliverance from Egypt and the bondage in exile, like a clangor of trumpets, like a sudden light. What a sounding battle cry of freedom! And then, what an invincible march of Democracy over any enemy” (7). Once Wendell renewed Kallen’s interest in the connection between Judaism and America, Kallen became a Zionist in 1902 and helped found the Harvard Menorah Society in 1906 (Menand 389). After graduating from Harvard, Kallen taught English at Princeton for two years until “the God-fearing authorities refused any longer to harbor me and my Jewish heresies” (Kallen, Individualism 10). He returned to Harvard and earned his PhD in philosophy with his dream about freedom and equality in America “completely distorted” (11); he described himself during those years as “obsessed with the sense of frustration and defeat that Brooks Adams finally epitomizes in the phrase the degradation of the democratic dogma” (11). Kallen continued to fight for increased democratic participation through his retirement from the New School in 1969 and “argued strongly for 60 years that the Jewish people needed a homeland in Palestine to protect them against persecution and to enhance their Jewish cultural heritage” (“Biographical”) until his death at the age of 91 on February 15, 1974.

As a child immigrant from Germany who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century and as an academic who gained his professional footing through World War I, Kallen fashioned cultural pluralism to demonstrate how being American meant political participation that supported one’s cultural beliefs within the limits of the American Constitution rather than through conformity via Americanization. For his African-American peer Alain Locke, however, participation in America was hedged by constitutional limits. Another route would have to be found.
Alain Locke

Even as America undertook the defense of its national-racial borders in 1924, that year and the next saw progressive publishers release key books that forwarded the idea of cultural pluralism. These texts would influence policy makers in the ensuing decades and have become foci of debates about American modernist identity. In addition to Boni and Liveright’s publication of Kallen’s *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, Albert and Charles Boni (who split off from Liveright in 1923) would bring out William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925), Alain Locke’s *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), and Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1926).20 These books did not represent the first articulation of the ideas about cultural pluralism nor were their authors and publishers their only proponents, yet investigating *The New Negro* provides the next step in unraveling the matrix of pluralism—race.

Investigation of African-American art and culture in *The New Negro* paralleled publication of books on Negro folksong collected from the deep South. These books sought to reassure white audiences by transferring attention from the Harlem Renaissance to blacks as a primitive folk. In 1925, Viking Press (in its first year of publication) published *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* edited by James Weldon Johnson; the University of North Carolina Press released *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) edited by Howard Odum, a central theorist and organizer of regionalism in the 1930s (discussed in Part III); and Albert & Charles Boni juxtaposed *The New Negro* with the publication of *Mellows, a Chronicle of Unknown Singers*, which anthologized Negro work songs, street cries, and spirituals, edited by Robert Emmet.

Read within this context, Locke’s innovations to the discourse of pluralism take on particular resonance. Locke spoke to and of Negroes as another ethnicity who were rallying in cultural self-recognition along with other cultures. To do so, he utilized Kallen’s defense of immigrant cultures and talked about the Negro culture as being like the “submerged nationalities in Europe” (“Racial Progress” 99), such as the Irish and Scottish with England, or the Provencal people with France, who had risen against the nation states which sought to incorporate them. Harlem, Locke wrote, was “the home of the Negro’s Zionism” (*New* 14), from which to build “an Americanism on race values . . . through the fullest sharing of American culture and

Locke’s greatest innovation of pluralist ideas was to see race and ethnicity in plastic and relational terms: what Kallen called “cultural pluralism,” Locke called “cultural relativism” (Locke, “Values” 331).

To understand the workings of Locke’s theories, this section examines three moments in his career. I begin with consideration of The New Negro as a publication of Charles Boni, whose cultural program not only brought the first anthology of Imagism to America but also published Don West’s Clods of Southern Earth (1946). After that, I look forward to Locke’s philosophic explanation of cultural relativism and the relation between value, belief, and power in his 1935 essay “Values and Imperatives.” And I end with a look back to his foundational educational experiences and lectures on “race contacts” given during his first professorship at Howard (1915-1916).

In 1925, the press of Albert and Charles Boni published some 80 books. Worldly and progressive, their scope included history, philosophy, and politics, but they primarily published literature. Their American Library Series included new editions of Melville’s Moby-Dick, Or the Whale and novels by Ambrose Bierce; in addition, they published translations such as François Rabelais’s The Lives, Heroic Deeds & Sayings of Gargantua & his Son Pantagruel, a series of Emile Zola novels, and contemporary works such as Donald Odgen Stewart’s The Crazy Fool and Ford Madox Ford’s No More Parades, which underwent “two printings in two weeks” (“A & C” 607). Books on international history included The Economic Development of the British Overseas Empire and another called Israel about anti-Semitism; on the home front, they set forth a history of Jesuits in North America from 1610 to 1791 along with a new translation of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer, a central articulation of the melding of culture to region. The Bonis were cultural players who promoted a version of America that ran counter to the immigration laws legislated in 1924. Indeed, just who was an American and America’s relationship to world culture and politics were deliberations at the center of Albert and Charles Boni’s program.

The Bonis were sons of a well-to-do Jewish insurance executive, Charles Boni who married Bertha Saslavsky. While attending Harvard in 1913, the brothers opened The

---

21 Locke’s call for developing a Negro cultural identity was based on the European cultural movements, which they called Regionalism. Notably, Locke’s racialized European Regionalism was taking place within a metropolis. While no less racialized, the regionalism that would later appear in the U.S. during the 1930s began as a specifically rural movement.
Washington Square Bookshop in New York. They used the money their father had given Charles to finish law school to set up shop, which became the “setting for the founding of The Washington Square Players, the Theatre Guild and the Provincetown Players” (“Charles Boni”). From that post in Greenwich Village, they met the likes of Max Eastman, Emma Goldman, John Reed, Margaret Sanger, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene O’Neill. As committed socialists, their bookstore also became a central meeting place for Villagers in the movement (Dardis 46). While selling books and socializing (literally), they also published and sponsored Alfred Kreymborg’s *Glebe*, a little magazine that set the tone for American modernist writers. Before shutting down after ten issues, Kreymborg had published an issue that introduced the Imagists: H.D., Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, James Joyce, Richard Aldington, and William Carlos Williams. While the Bonis brought out the Little Leather Library, which sold over a million copies through Woolworth’s in 1915, the young brothers (Albert was 23 and Charles 21) over extended their finances and so had to sell their shop.

Soon after Albert Boni and Horace Liveright met while working at Alfred Wallerstein’s advertising agency, they established the firm of Boni and Liveright in 1918 (Gilmer 2-4). Theirs would be only the third Jewish publishing firm (besides Huebsch and Knopf) to challenge the publishing world which was run by self-identified Christians for whom anti-Semitism was an ever present practice—these firms (such as Harper & Brothers, Charles Scribner’s, and Houghton Mifflin) all had roots in the nineteenth century and were controlled by heirs of their original founders, nearly all of whom had been educated at Yale, Harvard, or Princeton (Dardis 50-52), which had limited Jewish admissions during the 1920s.22

First, Boni and Liveright brought out the Modern Library, which inexpensively reprinted classics of world literature (such as Maupassant’s *Mille. Fifi*, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*). These books were met with great praise and even greater sales. Then they showed their political fire by bringing out Lotzko’s *Men and War* (which the Federal government suppressed, leading military intelligence to keep the publishers under watch), Trotsky’s *The Bolsheviki and World Peace* (which sold 20,000 copies), and John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Then came their support of Eugene O’Neill and Upton

---

22 “Unable to deny entry on the basis of scholarship, these established colleges and universities instituted character tests and psychological exams as part of their admissions requirements. Quotas were also used to limit Jewish admissions. After an unspoken quote took effect at Columbia University in the 1920s, Jewish enrollment dropped from 40 to 22 percent in two years. During the same period Harvard was still publicly discussing limiting Jewish enrollment” (La Belle and Ward 10).
Sinclair, radicals whose literary reputations steadily grew. However, the partners soon came into conflict, and Liveright won the firm in a coin toss. Boni went into business with his brother in 1923, which operated in high volume until 1939 (Dardis 56-65).

Thus it was with savvy and strategy that Albert and Charles Boni published The New Negro. Calling for the Negro no longer to “subscribe to the traditional positions from which his case has been viewed,” Alain Locke, who edited The New Negro, had clear ideas about “shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem” and “achieving something like spiritual emancipation” (4). In the flush of the “Negro migration, northward and city-ward,” Locke offered that the “chief bond between [Negroes] has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness.” That condition could be transformed to consciousness in the “race capital” of Harlem, which, like Dublin for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia, would become a center for “folk-expression and self-determination” (7). Locke sought not only to upset entrenched racial hierarchy and definitions but to redefine the relationship between the “new intellectuals” and the “rank and file,” whose “transformed and transforming psychology” Locke encouraged intellectuals to follow.

Locke called upon those coming to Harlem to go beyond “charity” and to work for “justice” and “understanding” by building a common self-sense based upon the “deep feeling of race” which “is at the present the mainspring of Negro life” (10, 11). As with Kallen, Locke’s embrace of “race values” did not mean a rejection of American life but rather “a constructive effort to build the obstructions in the stream of [the Negro’s] progress into an efficient dam of social power.” Locke’s call was “not between one way for the Negro and another way for the rest, but between American institutions frustrated on the one hand and American ideals progressively realized on the other.” Locke would come to name the dynamic relations of mutually affecting and transforming cultures “cultural relativism.” Locke began to develop cultural relativism when he was the first black Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. English students, colluding with American southerners studying at Oxford, had excluded Locke from social activities, and he found the experience jarring.

In 1935, Locke would share that his life’s motto, “all things in reservation,” had been fostered by his youth in Philadelphia with her “petty bourgeois psyche and with the Tory slant” and by his undergraduate education at Harvard that favored the “genteel tradition of Palmer, Royce and Musterberg” (Locke, “Values” 312). So Locke undertook perhaps the most
challenging growth in his education at Oxford when other students of color from various English colonial provinces shared scholarship about the debilitating consequences of colonialism—consequences that Locke saw applied to his own experience in America. As a result, in 1935 Locke would describe himself as “socially anglophile, but because of race loyalty, strenuously anti-imperialist; . . . internationalist and pacifist in world-view but forced by a sense of simple justice to approve of the militant counter-nationalisms of Zionism, Young Turkey, Young Egypt, Young India, and with reservations even Garveyism.” In other words, while pluralist, Locke understood that hierarchies of power had to be changed. His diagnosis for revolution, however, did not seek combat on the streets nor in the stands of logic; rather, his philosophy focused on the pragmatics of belief.

Locke argued his case in his essay “Values and Imperatives,” which was published in an anthology of philosophy edited by Horace Kallen and Sidney Hook. Compared to his more voluminous cultural and literary writings, the language used therein can seem abstract, but his work in this essay stands as a philosophical ars poetica for a cultural relativism that went beyond the circumstances of race in America. For Locke human relations boiled down to one word, values. When articulating his “normative principle” for values, Locke sought to preserve “imperatives” and to avoid philosophical “absolutism” (313-314). He began by acknowledging that most people universalize their values: “the common man . . . sets up personal and private and group norms as standards and principles, and rightly or wrongly hypostasizes them as universals for all conditions, all times, all men” (315). Rather than resulting from logic or consequences, those “standards and principles” are guided by values that are, in turn, grounded in feelings, preferences, and affinities—psychological categories of belief (318-319). Hence, if one wishes to change actions, one should not resort to argument but must primarily work to change the beliefs in which values are grounded (322). This blind “socializing” of value occurs through institutionalized orthodoxies in the “monopolistic tradition of most of our institutions” (331), so Locke sought to establish a mobile base of socialization whose normalization would not create arguments for absolutes. Although he did not have a clear answer beyond “combating” monopolies of tradition, Locke appealed to Josiah Royce’s principle of “loyalty to loyalty,” which if it were to be followed through “proclaimed a relativism of values and a principle of reciprocity” (332). While Locke made this appeal in idealistic terms, his life work had been conducted to understand and counter the power of racial and imperial discourses.
Before returning to Harvard, to regain his footing from his excoriation at Oxford in 1910, Locke had studied social philosophy at the University of Berlin. In a sharp article on Locke’s philosophy of value, Tommy Lee Lott proposes that while in Germany Locke encountered the thinking of the social philosopher Johann G. Herder. Herder considered the folk as source of articulating and maintaining national political identity. “This sense of collective political identity is both natural,” writes Lott, “in the sense that folkways always arise from the experiences of the group, as well as a product of cultivation, in the sense that political identity must be forged from the indigenous culture” (108). For Herder, language and group experience, not heredity, was the criterion for common culture (111). As Lott paraphrases Herder, “every folk, or nation, has a distinctive set of psychological traits resulting from their physiological structure, which is in turn a product of their adaptation to the environment. Hence, national characteristics that vary from group to group can always be traced to tangible elements in the experience of the group” (110). These insights were not radically different from Royce’s own explanation of race, as we have seen, but unlike Royce, Herder explained the historical nature of the folk, a concept that informed not only Locke’s thinking in The New Negro but also informed Locke’s vision of how a people with common history might resist imperialism.

After returning from Germany, Locke taught as an Assistant Professor of English and philosophy at Howard from 1912 to 1916. When Jesse Mooreland donated his voluminous collection of Afro-Americana to Howard in December 1914, Locke proposed to produce its bibliography, to establish a course on “race contacts,” an “institute of race relations” akin to what the department of sociology at Columbia had started (Stewart xix-xx). Howard’s Board of Trustees resisted this last idea since they thought the university needed to avoid controversy and, instead, focus on the practical knowledge needed to train professionals such as teachers and doctors (xx). Locke went on to seek the support of the Howard Chapter of the NAACP and the Social Science Club, and he ended up offering a series of five public lectures as an extension course in 1915 and 1916. In addition to students and people from the community, high-ranking college administrators attended. In the syllabus provided with the lectures on “Race Contacts and Inter-racial Relations,” Locke cites forward-looking, international sociological, philosophical, and anthropological scholarship.\footnote{Four citations, shared as they appeared on Locke’s syllabus, are note worthy in this investigation of influences: Royce, J. Race Questions and other American Problems, Macmillan, 1908, pp. 1-53. (407) [sic]} In these lectures, Locke took his most
outspoken stance about the connection between imperialism and racism. While this thinking informed the rest of his career, its threatening thesis led Locke to downplay the relationship between race and power until he and Bernhard Stern, who taught sociology at Columbia and anthropology at the New School for Social Research, edited a collection called When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts (1942).24

Locke’s lectures discussed how cultures with distinct social hierarchies constructed the category of race. Going beyond Boas’s move to see all cultures in relative terms of how they had adapted to their particular circumstances, Locke examined how race operated under European imperialism: cultural groups, while ultimately having developed a cultural apparatus appropriate to their circumstances, nevertheless found themselves forced into unequal relations by imperialism. Given that racial categories supported imperialism, Locke explained how members of a race might use that category as grounds to develop group esteem. He also undertook to clarify how racial categories were not solely the result of economic relations but were produced from the human urge to create ideological self-definitions in moments of crisis, such as those Europe had faced during the era of colonialization. Moreover, in his summary, Jeffery C. Stewart, who edited the transcribed lectures, explains, “As had de Tocqueville before him, Locke argued that race prejudice was particularly prevalent in democratic societies, where, in the absence of aristocratic—and hence, hereditary—barriers, society created analogous ones in race discrimination” (xxix). In the fourth lecture about “Race Creeds,” Locke compared race to national ethnicity and pointed out the utility of making such distinctions in the contemporary American scene. He also noted that the apparatus of racial prejudice, which once allowed for the economic exploitation of groups, would continue after competitive economics, ever interested in better social forms of procuring profit, had made such forms of prejudice outdated.

Ross. The Causes of Race Superiority. (412)
Odum, H. W. Standards of Measurement in Race Development. [in Journal of Race Development 5.4 1915]] (412)
Royce, J. War and Insurance. Macmillan 1914. (413)

Locke’s use of Royce reinforces his influence on Locke’s ideas. Notably, Locke also cites Ross and Odum, both of whom reiterated then standard ideas of racial basis. That Locke would draw upon such white academics shows his attempts to frame his understanding in terms that Americans would find valid. Odum’s work is discussed in Part III.

24 When Peoples Meet provides a wide set of foundational essays that explained the pragmatic vision of culture, race, and power—as being contingent, having mutual effect, and possessing adaptive integrity—forwarded by Boas, Benedict, and Locke. A better manual on the pragmatics of cultural pluralism, conflict, and resistance was not compiled. Indeed, the essays therein forecast the work of post-colonial studies. Published by the Progressive Educators Association, When Peoples Meet offers testimony to the attempts to bring the complex intellectual tools that pluralism demands into a broader range of use in the United States. It was an anthology that Locke spent his life compiling as can be seen from the bibliographies he provided in his 1915-16 lectures.
In the climatic fifth lecture, “Racial Progress and Racial Adjustment,” Locke attempted to show how cultivation of racial identity by Negroes in America was key for both assimilation and changing American culture, since that culture was not just the creation of one group but was the end product of the relations between all groups. He observed that what “men mean by ‘race’ when they are proud of race” no longer refers to “blood” but a “kind of national unity and national type” (86). Drawing on Edward Ross, against whom Kallen wrote, Locke explained, “Every civilization produces its type” which can succeed under that system’s institutions (88, 92). Given the scope of “modern systems,” those systems “cannot tolerate any great divergence” in social conventions and, thus, demand assimilation (91). At the same time, civilizations struggle to maintain hierarchies of power, under which the dominant group came to power: “The stronger group, by virtue that it is stronger, has the power, the initiative, [but] that is all. . . . [T]he dominant group in society cannot stop the process of assimilation or amalgamation” nor the changes that such assimilation would mutually bring about in national institutions (93). Thus, upon the model of “submerged nationalities in Europe” (99), such as the Celts, Locke calls on Negroes to develop “race pride” and establish a “doctrine of racial solidarity” (97) so they can gain some control of assimilation (95). The contradiction, one that Locke could not solve, was that to establish racial pride demanded the cultivation of conventions, which marked their difference even as the group sought to meld with the larger society.

This contradiction worked against Locke’s most idealistic goal: that the entire race, not just some segment of it, would cross into the cultural mainstream on equal terms. Locke’s hope was that creating a “race type” would join the fate of the race together and “prevent the representative classes” from being “absorbed” and “dissipated” in the “larger group,” which had occurred in other civilizations (97, 98). Locke’s project sought to break the hierarchies of power—class and race—by setting up “a dam in the social stream that is gradually raised as the representative classes lift the submerged class,” until they all gain and, hence, change the “general level of society as a whole” (98). At question is the degree to which pluralism has succeeded in such change and the degree to which integration has co-opted the middle- and upper-class African Americans, leaving the less powerful to cultivate the ideal of race. While answers are under vociferous debate, the question of actual pluralism versus selective uplift into mainstream America is one that haunts all minority cultures.
Nevertheless, Locke’s work as a scholar, critic, teacher, and editor carried through the goal of gaining equality and changing America by rallying people around renovation their social categories. Locke’s philosophy was pragmatist in the sense that he understood meaning as contingent and socially constructed but based in value.\textsuperscript{25} Locke’s great innovation was moving beyond fact, logic, meaning, and knowledge to theorize and enact the structuring categories of value and belief. In “Community and Cultural Crisis: The ‘Transfiguring Imagination’ of Alain Locke” (1991), an article which was an important revaluation of Locke’s place in African-American and American history, Everett H. Akam argues, “Values, rightly regarded as provisional truths subject to revision as a result of experience and discourse with others could foster a political community premised on democracy and the cultivation of difference within the context of a culture shared created by all” (260). Akam submits, rightly I think, that Locke understood the imaginative work of art—realized in organic, yet cultivated, social interconnections, such as were found with the New Negro in Harlem— to “serve as a rich alternative to a desiccated individualism” of an Anglo-American culture “premised on abstract rights and the accumulation of property” (264). For blacks, race became the central source of cultural self-definition in the aftermath of Jim Crow, but Locke’s vision was one of national revivification. As shown in Part III, during the depression, regionalists from all around the country would apply the lessons learned by Kallen and Locke against the effects of a standardizing caste system intensified by economic nationalization.

Part III: The Rise of Regionalism

If Horace Kallen articulated cultural pluralism to maintain cultural differences based on nationality and Alain Locke used similar racial variations to mobilize cultural relativism, during the inward-looking 1930s, regionalism would become a third platform from which to resist standardization and Americanization. Regionalism was announced by two events: the publication of Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany (produced yearly 1929-1932) and I’ll Take My Stand (1930). A spate of conferences ensued around the country, the first being held at the University of Virginia (1931), followed by others at the University of Montana (1932), the University of New Mexico (1933), South Carolina (1934), and Louisiana State University.

The regionalists rallied around their support of local folk cultures and their opposition to national standardizing forces, but they would come into conflict about their varied approaches to and understandings of the American “folk.”

In all discourse, some key terminology is over-loaded with meaning that slips and varies as groups contend over its definition, and certainly “folk” is one of those words in the nationalist discourses of the 1930s in America and Europe. The regionalists drew upon a popularization of Franz Boas’s ideas that the folk were a people whose culture had developed in a specific environmental and historical context. The regionalists would disagree about which groups were worthy to be ordained as folk, the particular value to be assigned to those groups, how change and intercultural contact affected folk-groups, the degree to which a folk was either adaptive or static, and the arts’ relationship to the folk. But at the heart of the controversy was an argument about the chthonic essence of national identity—that identity which was-what-it-was before becoming part of the social order, which it became the duty of the social order to recognize and preserve, even if in a museum. In Josiah Royce’s philosophy that folk essence served as the “city out of sight, the homeland” for America, in which interpretation might be grounded (The Problem 152).

On one extreme, regionalists included “cosmopolitan” progressives such as Lewis Mumford and B. A. Botkin, who sought to acknowledge an evolving, adaptive pluralism. On the other extreme stood the Vanderbilt Agrarians—including John Crowe Ransom, David Donaldson, and their students Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren—who sought to conserve rural Southern values against the industrial North’s intrusion. Balanced between the extremes were the practical regionalists—sociologists out of the University of North Carolina under the leadership of Howard Odum—who sought to bring modernization and equality into the South while maintaining regional cultures.

Hedwig Hintze, in his article “Regionalism,” laid out its origins as a reaction to nationalization in Europe. Coming into use in Europe during the 1890s, regionalism involved

26“Regionalism” appeared in the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (1930, 1934), which was a detailed fifteen-volume composed by cutting-edge social scientists. Alvin Johnson, president of the New School for Social Research, was the associate editor and insured many of its entries were composed by scholars from the New School or other allied institutions such as Columbia. In his editing, Johnson became familiar with European social scientists. In 1933 when many of them were expelled from Germany, Johnson “seized the opportunity to recruit the most distinguished of these refugee social scientists for the New School. In the process he created an autonomous ‘University in Exile,’ which in 1935 became the Graduate Faculty of the New School” (Rutkoff and Scott 66). The
restoring the political and cultural life of cultures suppressed by the nation state. Federal control and national standardization contended against regional self-government and cultural autonomy. Hintze noted that regional “problems” arose when isolation and group identity—“geographical isolation, independent historical traditions, racial, ethnic or religious peculiarities [such as language, tradition, or culture] and local economic or class interests”—compounded to resist nationalism.

Hintze claimed that regionalism “has never really appeared” in the United States, mentioning only Fredrick J. Turner’s theory that “economic interests are sectionalized” and reporting a “small southern literary coterie, which has sought to redirect southern life into the old and abandoned pre-Civil war channels.” Hintze saw the regeneration of cultures suppressed by nation state as a “problem,” but for American regionalists folk cultures were the reason to oppose America’s cultural standardization, crass nationalism, and economic exploitation. In the 1930s, debate about American regionalism—its realities and its possibilities—raged between social planners and literary artists at university conferences and in the pages of national publications such as The New Republic, The New York Times, and The Saturday Review of Literature.

The movement was supported by author-activists such as Mary Austin, Carl Sandburg, Percy MacKaye, and Willa Cather. Resisting New York as a defining center, such nationally known authors worked along with a wave of self-consciously regional magazines founded in the 1920s: Midland in Iowa City (1915-1933), The Frontier in Missoula (1920-1939), The Southwest Review in Fortworth (1924- ), The Prairie Schooner in Lincoln (1927- ), and New Mexico Quarterly Review in Albuquerque (1931- ). Publishing literature and essays, these university quarterlies took regional validation as their ambition. Paradoxically, those journals founded in the southeast downplayed the idea of region, even as they forwarded regional writers: The Double-Dealer in New Orleans (1921-1926), The Reviewer in Richmond (1921-1925), The Virginia Quarterly Review in Charlottesville (1925- ), and The Southern Review in Baton Rouge (1935-1942). However, the most persistent and radical spokesman for regionalism was B. A. Botkin who was born in Boston and led regionalism from Oklahoma with the publication of Folk-Say.

School eventually brought in 167 scholars (and with their families) who influenced the shape of America (“History”).

Cosmopolitan Regionalism: B. A. Botkin and Lewis Mumford

While he would become Folklore editor for the FWP, direct the Writers Unit of the Library of Congress (1937-41), and head the Archives of American Folksong (1941-44), in 1921 Botkin began professional life as a professor of English at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma. A Harvard undergraduate, he studied with George Lyman Kittredge and Francis James Child; both were famous scholars, the first of Shakespearian English, the second of English balladry. With them, Botkin learned to read folklore as literature, but, after receiving his MA in English from Columbia, he began to understand literature as living folklore. This adaptation was perhaps forecasted by the fact that, like Horace Kallen, Botkin was also the child of immigrants, a Jew, attended Harvard, and lived in communities off campus.

After his parents had emigrated from Lithuania, Botkin was born in East Boston in 1901. As a child, Botkin said he “never sank my roots” since his father regularly had to move shop (Kunitz 101). Although Botkin graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1920, John Livingston Lowes, a distinguished literary scholar, qualified his approval of Botkin in a letter of recommendation: “Mr. Botkin is a Jew although not of the obtrusive type. I have high respect for him; but of course his race [several illegible words] into account in recommending him” (qtd. in Hirsch “‘My Harvard’”). At Columbia, Botkin wrote a thesis on Thomas Edward Brown, a Manx poet. That thesis, which he said was “probably my introduction to folklore,” foretold Botkin’s own struggle to find a language that was connected to the people of a particular locale with whom, like Brown whose parents were Scottish, he did not share ancestry (Kunitz 102; Hirsch, “Folklore” 9).

Botkin arrived in Oklahoma as a double outsider, being an educated easterner and the child of immigrants. But his two means of becoming an insider—poetry and folklore—gave him the opening to become an intimate expert on and supporter of the region’s culture and literature. A poet himself, Botkin “inaugurated a series of Thursday evenings on modern poetry” and used the campus poetry society to “make Oklahoma culture-conscious and Oklahoma-conscious” (Botkin, “Folk-Say” 322). Nevertheless, Botkin’s mother corresponded to him in Yiddish, he found lodging at the home of an immigrant Jewish professor, and he never publicly acknowledged his ethnic connections (Hirsch, “‘My Harvard’” 317, 315). In 1923, he returned to New York and “drifted uncertainly in and out of the Columbia graduate school” and taught English to “foreigners” in their homes and shops in Brooklyn and the Bronks (Botkin, “Folk-
Say” 322-3). He also spent time at his brother’s art studio along with other avant-garde artists and his cousins (and good friends) George and Ira Gerwshin (Hirsch, “Folklore” 10). In 1925, he returned to teach at the University of Oklahoma with a bride, Gertrude Fritz (Hirsch, “‘My Harvard’” 315), and began his PhD at the University of Nebraska under the guidance of Louise Pound.

Upon his return, Botkin followed H. L. Mencken’s example, searched for a localized American poetry, and published an article called “The Oklahoma Manner in Poetry” (1925). That piece drew an invitation from Mencken to edit a selection of Oklahoma poetry for The American Mercury in 1926. Continuing his quest to learn about the relations between place and people, as president of the Oklahoma Writers in 1927, Botkin “diverted the programs from the usual shop talk of markets and technique to a consideration of Oklahoma background and materials” (Botkin, “Folk-Say” 324). Upon becoming president of the Oklahoma Folklore Society in 1928, he began to seek out a venue for a publication that would bridge his connections with community writers, the study of regional folklore, and his work in the academy. With Joseph A. Brandt, who had come to Oklahoma to direct the new University Press, he soon developed an idea for its first publication that would honor Oklahoma literature—Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany (1929).

Botkin’s forward for that collection was the first of his many essays on regionalism, “The Folk in Literature: An Introduction to the New Regionalism.” Therein, Botkin formulated the essentials that he would spend the next fifty years refining. Setting the foundations for the work of contemporary Americanists who perform cultural studies, Botkin noted the “arbitrary division between folk-lore and literature” (9), between orality and literacy, between popular and high-cultures. While Botkin did draw, at this point, a distinction between folk literature (oral) and culture literature (written), he noted their mutual, ongoing influence and created startling complexity when he specified the folk’s multiple nature, which avoided reducing cultural analysis to the binary of oral versus written. He agreed with Whitman who, in “Democratic Vistas,” divined that “the infant genius of American poetic expression . . . lies sleeping aside, unrecking itself, in some western idiom, or native Michigan or Tennessee repartee, or stump-speech, or in Kentucky or Georgia, or the Carolinas” (qtd. 12). However, Botkin points out that Whitman was too obsessed with self-conscious abstractions like “the people” and “America” to see that
American literature lay in the hands of those writers who . . . would find their materials and methods in their own regional culture—a culture, that is, with its roots in the oral tradition. For oral tradition is necessarily regional in that there is not one folk but many folk groups—as many as there are regional cultures or racial or occupational groups within a region. (12)

In synthesizing the visions of those cultures, Botkin calls his era “an age of taking root and of the resulting conflict and compromise, within a locality, of varied racial stocks and opposing orders of civilization” (17).

Following Mary Austin’s counteraction against the standardizing force of an ever more centralized social system, this New Regionalism “has its feet on the ground and hands in the soil” as a way to find “solidarity and unity in identifying oneself with the community, a need growing out of world unrest and conflict during and since the War” (14). Against the “first flush of romantic local color” in John Fox, Jr. and the “sentimental romanticism” of John Whitcombe Riley, Botkin calls for the study of history and lived systems—the discipline of folklore—to inform regionalist writing. However, one can feel the essentializing contradictions when he asks for the recognition of “the Golden Age of primitive art and ritual, of pagan fantasy and mysticism, with taboos and symbols imbedded in folk consciousness” in the “spiritual frontier” of select folk: “the Indian, the Negro, and the Southern Highlander (who of all Caucasian stocks in the United States comes closest to being, like the other two, an elemental and atavistic folk, exotic in difference)” (16). This summary of the spell that Appalachia cast over America is a bit grandiose but accurate—if not about the Highlanders’ atavistic folk-nature, then about how Americans exoticized them as such.

Botkin had no first-hand experience in the Southern mountains; instead, his concepts of the mountains (and literature’s relationship with its folk) were deeply influenced by Percy MacKaye. MacKaye was a nationally know dramatist and poet who dedicated himself to promoting a public and nationalistic role for the arts (Jason 276). He composed occasional poems, literary adaptations of folk culture (plays, poems, and stories), and community masques. In 1914, for instance, MacKay wrote and produced St. Louis: A Civic Masque, which used midwest history and legends as an allegory for human relations throughout the world (279). The masque employed 7,500 actors and attracted an audience of over 500,000 during its five performances. MacKaye had followed through on Royce’s lobby to idealize a region’s history
and glorify its “bounties” (Royce, “Provincialism” 55). On a national level in 1915, he composed a “civic ritual” called The New Citizenship, which was commissioned by the mayor of New York City to create a ceremony for newly naturalized citizens at the City College Stadium (MacKaye 8). The resulting ritual of American Citizenship sought to consecrate the symbolic and historical “basis of democracy,” such as Liberty, Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln (5).

After being appointed as America’s the first writer in residence at Miami University (Ohio) in 1920, MacKaye and his family explored the Kentucky mountains in 1921; they visited the Pine Mountain Settlement School and took extensive notes on the life they observed.28 From 1923 through 1932, six of MacKaye’s books drew upon this experience. Called The Kentucky Cycle, this group included four plays, short stories, an epic poem, folktales, and a folk-masque. The cycle served as a catalyst for Botkin’s melding of folklore, dialect, and literature in regionalism.

By 1930, Botkin had composed a book manuscript on MacKaye’s Kentucky Cycle, part of which he published as “Folk Speech in the Kentucky Mountain Cycle of Percy MacKaye” (Grover, Annals 281).29 Botkin undertakes an intensive linguistic analysis of mountain speech, whose “spiritual steam” he found had “been fully assimilated to the rhythmic and emotional texture of the poet’s [MacKaye’s] imagination” (264). Botkin uses MacKaye to demonstrate folk speech’s responsiveness and mobility: “At the same time emotional mobility, with its immediate response and appeal to experience, individualized and compared in a wealth of concrete, figurative, and allusive expressions—homely, forceful, and exactly suited to the occasion—helps give the impression, with each utterance of the fresh minting of the coin of speech, in contrast to the worn counters of the standard language” (266). Botkin proceeds to analyze and praise the cultural and expressive resources of this “illiterate speech” with its “archaic” idioms (268, 272). Ultimately, Botkin appreciated that a living speech in America had escaped the constraints of Standard English and enlivened and informed the literary arts (276).30

Although he would problematize the relationship between the artist and folk over the next decade, Botkin knew that the Southern highlander was and would continue to be a central resource in the fight over defining American identity. In “Folk in Literature,” Botkin explains,

28 The diaries of Percy’s wife, Marion Morse MacKaye, from this time were published in Graphic Survey 35 (1946): 288-93, 302 and 323-28.
29 The manuscript is held with MacKaye’s papers at Dartmouth College. Provocative chapter titles include “Local Self-Development: A Philosophy of the Environment” and “Creative Conversation: The Philosophy of the Kentucky Mountain Cycle.”
30 For an example from MacKaye’s epic poem, see Appendix B: Percy MacKaye’s The Gobbler of God: A Poem of the Southern Appalachians (1928).
“In this country, the speech of the Southern highlanders, who still keep ‘the salt, Old-fashioned ballad-English’ (in some cases more fully than the English themselves), comes nearest to Yeats’s ideal of the language of poetry and drama—‘abundant, resonant, beautiful, laughing, living speech’—which has its roots in oral tradition” (11). That is, the “folk” were a force of authentication, one in which the folk’s particular racial identity and heritage proved influential. Yet Botkin was not interested in the past but in current experience: “The difference between Folk-Say and folklore,” Botkin announces, “is the difference between poetry and history” (“Folk-Say” 324). Botkin claimed he had derived “folk-say” from a “homely Anglo-Saxon terms for preface, ‘fore-say,” but a much better known term, one in wide usage of the social sciences, was “folkway.”

Coined by the foundation-setting sociologist W. G. Sumner in Folkways: a Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals (1907), folkways are a group’s habits or customs, which “win traditional authority by becoming intertwined with cult practices and religious concepts” but nevertheless are always changing to meet new social conditions (Davie). From this base of communal habit arise mores, morals, and, eventually, laws—each layer progressively more removed from the ever-evolving folkways. Folkways and mores form an individual “before he is capable of reasoning about them. Rules of action and standards of ethics set before him an ideal of the man ‘he should be,’ and mold him by repeated suggestion in spite of himself and without his apparent acknowledgment” (Davie). Sumner’s concept of folkways—of how they shaped individuals and of civilization’s connection to and remove from them—would play a formative role in later understandings about the relation between America and her folk. The reach of Sumner’s articulations can be seen in that they merited extended explanation in the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences and influenced sociologists such as Howard Odum.

After the publication of Folk-Say, a debate began about the uses and possibilities of regionalism in the pages of The New Republic. On one side stood Lewis Mumford—a visionary cosmopolitan regional planner and future director of the FWP—and, on the other, Allen Tate—the once Fugitive poet, then Agrarian, and future New Critic.

31 Folkways prefigure Pierre Bourdieau’s term “habitus.” Important to Bourdieau’s thought is the relation between fields of cultural production, a matrix of authorizing discourses and institutions, and an individual’s habitus. Habitus can be understood as the social training that results in how people “become themselves” and engage in practices (Webb, et al. xii).
In “Toward a New Regionalism” (1931), a extended review of Folk-Say, Mumford devises the basics of the regionalist program he would develop in The Culture of the City (1938). Mumford begins his review by proposing two previous incarnations of American relation to region. In the early 1800s, when “the identity of the separate provinces and colonies was still well established . . . a deliberate attempt was made to pick up the strands of local history and legend” (157). With the Civil War, the haste of westward expansion, the expansion of the factory and railroad systems, and the influx of immigrants, “local differences were ignored and obliterated” as populations were displaced. He calls the literary regionalism of that time “sentimental” for attempting to catch fleeting customs and manners that may never have existed. Writers such as Sinclair Lewis and Edgar Lee Masters reacted against such nostalgia, “expressing hatred, repulsion, and reproach.” Indeed, in “Revolt from the Village: 1920,” a review of Spoon River Anthology, Winesburg, Ohio, Main Street, and Moon-Calf, Carl Van Doren declared that the “cult of the village” had been “broken” (407, 412). But on the other side of the restless 1920s, Mumford recognized that regionalism was “a contemporary fact that must be assimilated and consciously directed”: folklore scholars and regional historians, who once scoured the country “running down songs and proverbs,” were now working with literary artists and philosophers on contemporary culture and going beyond the “resurrection of a dead way of life or the mummification of local customs and institutions.” In the second Folk-Say (1930), for instance, Alain Locke and Sterling Brown published a review that analyzed the representation of Negro life in contemporary film. Their work appeared next to tales told by the Texan folklorist J. Frank Dobie, poetry by the Agrarian John Gould Fletcher, and a statement called “American Folk” by Mary Austin.

Austin defined the folk as those people “shaped in mind and social reaction, and to some extent in character, and so finally in expression, by one given environment” (287). Before her death in 1934, Austin conferred blessings upon Botkin and the new regionalists in their cultivation of a “spiritual quality in our people” through bringing art, the folk, and “the beloved environment” together (289). Fostering a wide variety of “Folk cultures and local influences” constituted a stand against politicians who sought to “make our Indians over into fractions of the lowest common American denominators; or lamenting our lack of American art on one side, and attempting on the other to reduce the Negro to social nonentity” (289). Mumford agreed and called for “an effort which recognizes the existence of real groups and social configurations and
geographic relationships that are ignored by the abstract culture of the metropolis, and which opposed the aimless nomadism of modern commercial enterprise . . .” (157). He also admired Folk-Say for recognizing that regional folk life continued along, and thrived within, the “conditions of modern life,” which were not merely vehicles of standardization but provided modes of self-articulation and intercommunication: “the telephone, the motor road, the radio, the airplane, the giant powerline.” Those technologies allowed local folk cultures to gain further self-definition and offered the chance to create an “intercourse and reciprocity” between them as “equals.”

In The Culture of Cities (1938) Mumford sketched detailed plans for a system of regional development that could create positive “human inter-relationship across the ethnic, ideological, and cultural boundaries that have been carried over from the past” (348). The “modern state,” he insisted with some vehemence, suppressed “regional characteristics, in the interest of national unity” (350) through a decontextualized, naturalizing education and the spread of fashion through metropolitan magazines and newspapers: “‘nationalism’ is an attempt to make the laws and customs and beliefs of a single region or city do duty for the varied expression of a multitude of other regions” (349). Yet when regions asserted their own authority and beliefs, they became associated with sectionalism and separatism (350). National centralization and regional diffusion were at odds.

Unlike imposed federal or state borders, the “face-to-face intercourse” of intimate “primary communities” flowed across artificial boundaries (352-3). Against the centralized “mythology of the nation state, with its egoistic schemes of conquest, domination, and belligerent assertion” (354), Mumford hoped that attention to region would develop citizens’ awareness of emerging economic and social facts so that all places, regardless of their size or power, might be equally valued and interlock in “social relativity” (354-5). To coordinate those disperse but interrelated communities, Mumford called for new “super-regional authorities” to be “based upon the geographical and cultural restraints of the constituent regions” (363). This “service state” would facilitate coordination and exchange of resources between regions and “those functions which transcend the immediate limits of local control and regulation” (365). Ideally, the service state would act, “through democratic pressure, to reappropriate the existing
balance of power within the ‘nation,’ to equalize the privileges of different regions and groups, and to distribute the benefits of human culture” (364).32

From European examples, Mumford found his model for the cycle of regionalism, which began with the revival of poetry and language. What followed was the “economic reinvigoration of regional agriculture,” the development of “autonomous political life,” and construction of “local centers of learning and culture” (359). In the United States, he saw versions of “regional political philosophy” being enacted by the Tennessee Valley Authority and Howard Odum’s Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina.

On the one hand, we might label Mumford an idealist or ideologue since such preservation of local cultures involved controversy over which aspects to nurture and which to deplete, for local folk cultures—no less than nation states or international empires—are constructed of problematic power relations. We might, on the other hand, call Mumford a visionary pragmatist who sought to articulate a social system that provides stability and equity while being able to value difference and adapt to evolving circumstances.

Mumford encapsulated his vision when he wrote, “The task of modern civilization is to live in a wall-less world” (370). That wall-lessness would be realized by using “variants on universal forms” that recognize, utilize, and honor their foundations in different “local literatures, local forms art and culture” so that education, for instance, rather than “trying to extirpate or standardize” local tongues would foster “living speech, with its slang, its colloquialisms, [and] its local variants” (371). By formulating adaptive cooperation and social coordination within and between localities, Mumford had brought Royce’s ideal of wholesome provincialism up to date.

What Mumford failed to address was how to solve the problem of valuing those cultures whose abusive power-hierarchies formed a central facet of their identity. Yet to negate those hierarchical relations (or to turn them into the subject of art) might entail the dissolution of local culture itself, or at least that was the contention of the Agrarian Allen Tate who published “Regionalism and Sectionalism” in The New Republic nine months after Mumford’s review.

32 Mumford’s proposal of a service state drew heavily upon the work of Howard Odum and the Institute for Research of Social Science, which are discussed later in this section.
Contrary to Mumford’s hope of coordinated action, Tate thought that the literary movement of regionalism was susceptible to becoming a “program” whereby writers would seek out a relationship with locality that did not actually exist. By digging through “documents, living and dead,” the new regionalists felt they might “grant self-expression to the whole community” (159). Tate continues, “Such writing is nearly always still-born, for it is documentary, and the author may be deceiving himself in believing that the material has some vital rapport with his own moral temper.” Contrary to the regionalism that found value in “local color,” Tate calls for a regionalism that means “only the immediate, organic sense of life in which a fine artist works,” wherever that life might be—regional or not (158). That type of regionalism, Tate calls “tradition.”

The word “tradition” comes loaded in Tate’s mouth. Tate was a younger member of the Agrarians who sought to conserve the values of southern culture, which they felt to be dissolving under industrialization, standardization, and commodification. For Tate, “tradition” is always private: “it is those ways of feeling, those convictions of propriety, those ways of speaking, of which the writer himself is hardly aware, and from which he cannot escape” and those “fixed procedures that we can rely on in the larger pursuit of a good life” (159). That personal tradition (one’s folkway or habitus we might call it) is sacrosanct, and the writer “should use it without ever writing about the society, the region, the nation, from which his tradition is derived.” To put it on a “billboard” in a “debauched conquest of the world” would make the writing “clumsy and sterile,” and such was “the plight of American fiction, the plight of Mr. Dreiser.” Tate’s label for mixing art and public action is sectionalism.

For Tate, literature concerns “human nature” rather than the “social system.” Writers, he holds, should undertake a “direct contemplation of character and emotion, of all the ideas and desires that sustain that character, and not the social structure itself” (160). Instead, the social structure, “the particular moment of society, with its unique balance of order and disintegration,” is but an “inevitable moment for the characters.” Therefore, while certain authors may implicitly share similar “traditions,” to forward region as the site of literary study and action creates a sectionalism that “falsifies the creative impulse with the motives of social action, with motives that are vaguely political.” Tate understood tradition as the liberator of the mind, while the “modern chaos” of combining action and contemplation was due to “a little politics in literature,
and a little literature, which is incapable of action, in politics.” Thus, “men of letters” should not “confound” their unconscious traditions with aggressive politics; if they desired action, they might use “criticism with its power of intellectual clarity” (161).

Even though Tate held that “tradition” was personal and “fixed,” he and eleven other southern writers carried out the preservation of tradition in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930). Its release heralded the emergence of another version of regionalism with John Crow Ransom at the helm. The twelve Southerners therein, while by no means unified, would develop their various positions on regionalism and literature throughout the 1930s. One strand eventually gave rise—through the leadership of Tate, Ransom, and Warren—to the New Criticism. Other contributors headed in different directions: Donald Davidson, a professor of literature at Vanderbilt, proved the conservative regionalist extraordinaire; H. C. Nixon joined with progressive forces to attack tenant farming and help build the progressive, cross-racial Southern Conference for Human Welfare; and Stark Young would be editing *The New Republic* by 1932 with Malcolm Cowley, John Dewey, Waldo Frank, and Alvin Johnson.

Although the Agrarians failed to bring about the type of cultural conservation for which their book argued, the influence of their manifesto was great both in its day and since. Released months after the stock market collapse in October 1929, *I’ll Take My Stand* was timely in its condemnation of industrialism and defense of human value from the perspective of southern tradition. It was reviewed throughout the country, and the Agrarians (and their influence on literature through the New Critics) have since been the subject of many articles and books. What chord did they strike, which resonates still? 33

Theirs was an argument about preserving human value in a rampant commodity economy. Consider Lyle H. Lanier’s definition: “By ‘industrialization’ is meant not the machine and industrial technology as such, but the domination of the economic, political, and social order

---

by the notion that the greater part of a nation’s energies should be directed toward an endless process of increasing the production and consumption of goods” (148). In their mutual struggle against the force of industrial capital, the Agrarians became allied with the very writers, such as Dreiser and Dos Passos, whose “documentary” style they decried. Although the Agrarians spoke as southerners, they also spoke for those who were critical of the industrial order, the consumer economy, and the fate of humanistic values.

Not surprisingly, in January 1931, The Nation’s review chastised I’ll Take My Stand as “the rationalization of a nostalgia for ancestral ways rather than a rational approach to a real problem” (Hazlitt 48). But most other reviews generally agreed with the values the Agrarians sought to defend. One appreciated their southern “qualities of character”—“agrarian opposed to industrial, traditional as opposed to rootless, human and individual, leisurely, courteous and composed”—and appreciated that education should “produce good men rather than turn out graduates” (Moore 21). Many reviewers felt those goals were to be lauded, even if they disagreed with particular aspects, but all recognized that the Agrarians lacked a plan to realize their goals.34

In her search for a solution against the dissolution of human value, Virginia Moore in New York Herald Tribune Books (Nov. 1930) called for a “literary renaissance” that would “crystallize in a new literature the best elements of the old South.” William Knickerbocker, editor of the Sewanee Review (the oldest southern journal of letters), in The Saturday Review of Literature (Dec. 1930) called I’ll Take My Stand “the most challenging book published since Henry George’s ‘Progress and Poverty’” (467). As with George’s populist rant, Knickerbocker recognized the Agrarians’ goal as an impossible ideal, calling their strategy “resistance by inertia,” although it gave earnest “intellectual treatment of profound questions.” For instance, Donald Davidson discussed the “impossibility of a genuine art in a capitalistic society,” and the novelist Stark Young created “an exquisite bit of prose” that convincingly rendered the subtleties of Agrarian values. However, Knickerbocker is quick to the sword and refutes the idyllic handcrafting of basic necessities. He remarks on the inevitable relationship of industry and agriculture as “reciprocal and interdependent states . . . two ventricles of the heart of western society,” neither of which could be done without (468). Knickerbocker emphasizes that point by

---

34 The critiques of the Agrarian nostalgia were not minor. Henry Hazlitt commented, “Reading them, one almost forgets that such culture as the old South had rested on slavery, that it was confined to a small privileged upper class, relieved of the more menial duties” (48).
calling the Agrarians, whose book was dedicated to Dean Flemming of the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University, “a group of economic protestants (chiefly products of a university whose principal patron was the northern industrialist, Cornelius Vanderbilt)” (467). Like other reviewers, Knickerbocker recognized the problem was not how to defeat modernity but how to “integrate by hard labor, industrious experiment, and contingent thinking the forces of industrialism with those of agriculture.”

In The New York Times (Jan. 1931), Arthur Krock was not so far off in characterizing the book’s vision in Homeric terms: “here is but Cassandra predicting the dismal fates in store. There is no Hector visible in the foreground. The Greeks have landed from their ships; the topless towers of tradition, considerably obscured by the fogs of time and imagination, are threatened” (3). Even when the Vanderbilt Agrarians would retreat to the defensive position of literary journals and then eventually into academe, their defense was a brilliant one, since their version of history and values has been a powerful force in how American poetry has since been understood, and we are still recovering the poets and work that their criticism dismissed. Even then our recovery, such as of Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry, has yet to acknowledge the broader range of regionalist literary action. For when Agrarians transformed into the New Critics, they transformed and preserved their values through effacing their origins—origins shared with communist preachers, labor activists, community poets, and radical academics such as Don West and B. A. Botkin. In short, the Agrarians fought to gain control of the Elysian wells and then poisoned the peasants’ groundwater.

The Agrarian with the highest profile was John Crowe Ransom, who would edit The Kenyon Review (1939-1959). In “The Aesthetic of Regionalism” (1934), originally a speech for the Graduate Club of Louisiana State University, Ransom ironically demonstrates his distance from the very people who “live as they always have lived.” He describes Indians from the pueblos working on “the threshing-floors, evidently of homemade concrete,” with “the old and young, of both sexes” who were “beautifully arrayed” and laughing “because the harvest was a success” (45). The irony is that Ransom viewed the threshing, as did many local-color writers, from the removal of an “eastbound train out of Albuquerque.”

For Ransom, the Indians serve an example about how a “community slowly adapts to the geography of the region” such that “they cease to be merely economic and become gradually aesthetic” (49). No regionalist would disagree with Ransom’s assertion that “nature itself is
intensely localized,” and few would reject his claims that a people’s relationship with region is more complex than that portrayed by sociologists who “suppose that the local peculiarities in life and custom, for example in the Southern highlands, are due to the fact that population is old and deeply inbred, and has developed a kind of set because it has been out of communication with the world” (48). He also decries the “eclectic” metropolitan centers that collect, synthesize, and market “patterns from too many regions,” because their art becomes disconnected with ways of life, serving instead “a function which is strictly economic and gross” (51).

In between those two extremes lies the regionalism that Ransom values: “the work of many generations, of which the earliest ones must live and die in war with the region, exploiting it, trying to impose their own economic wishes upon it, not yet knowing the sort of peace that would be everlasting” (51). He acknowledges that such “indigenous” culture can “scarcely” be discerned in America and that we are obliged to “borrow” selectively from “all the foreign modes that now conglomerate in what we call our American culture” (53). Against the slowly evolving and carefully selected relationship with landscape, which moves from exploitation to culture, stands the “machine economy,” its object of “maximum efficiency,” the “multiplicity of goods for consumption,” and the “aesthetic torpor” of money (54-55). In contradiction to the mode of analysis he promoted as a New Critic, Ransom concludes, “Aesthetic character does not reside in an object’s abstract design but in the sense of its natural and contingent materials” (55).

As for more the problematic traditions invented to deal with landscape, such as slavery, he comments, “the peculiar institution of slavery set [the South] apart from the rest of the world, and gave a spiritual continuity to its many regions.” In addition to climate and year round farming, regional continuity is maintained, he adds, by a third commonality: “The darkey is one of the bonds that make a South out of all the Southern regions” (56). Here we witness the Agrarian’s untenable petition to conserve unjust lifestyles. Against standardization’s value-drain, recognizing the South as a unique culture valorized the power system that dominated tenant farmers and blacks. Their cultures were appreciated by explaining them as appropriate adaptations to circumstance: to remove them from the hierarchy in which they had evolved would be—so the Agrarians’ logic claimed—a depletion of aesthetic relations where art, cultural practice, and economics danced in organic relation. When should modernization be enacted to raise a people’s standard-of-living and, hence, change their way of life? To alleviate the suffering caused by social disparity demanded the renovation of the entire power hierarchy.
In response to the Agrarians’ regionalism, W. T. Couch, director of the University Press of North Carolina, edited *Culture in the South* (1934), an anthology which defined how the South was understood for years afterward. In his preface he charges that I’ll Take My Stand “reveals clearly the fallacy of expecting a better way of life as a result of merely bigger and better business; but it falls into even the more serious error of interpreting southern life in terms of industrialism vs. agrarianism” (vii). He reminds the reader that agrarian life in the South consists of “1,790,000 tenant farmers, white and black. One finds the last stronghold of child labor. One finds women who have to cook, sew, wash and iron, who have to work regularly in the fields planting, hoeing, and harvesting and who are not protected by any laws or customs regulating their hours of labor” (viii). Couch identifies the lack of scholarship on the great variance in class, politics, economics, race, education, and religion: “The interests of the great mass of the white population have not been adequately studied by leaders in the South either of the present or of the past. The history of the South as it has been written deals almost exclusively with the larger slaveholder, his slaves, and his other interests” (ix). Holding his own approach accountable, he admits the paradox that the study of how small farmers can “raise themselves out of bankruptcy” was made possible by “financial aid from foundations that have gained their wealth in industry.” The essays collected, he hopes, will help to “sound” the depth of the “broad stream of southern life” and “measure its strength, discover its complexity, and ultimately find ways to remove the debris which now infests its waters” (x). The collection therein brought together varied visions of the South, including essays by the Agrarian Donald Davidson on southern literature; another by B. A. Botkin on southern folklore; one called “Appalachian America” by J. Wesley Hatcher, who was the head of Berea College’s Department of Sociology; and a piercing piece about coal exploitation by Bruce Crawford, a Virginia journalist and member of the Dreiser Committee which had investigated “terrorism” in Harlan county.

Davidson, who professed literature at Vanderbilt, was a leading Agrarian who refused New Criticism. In “The Trend of Literature: A Partisan View,” he deployed the language of cultural pluralism to defend the South as a separate and distinct culture. Akin to Kallen’s and Botkin’s critique of Whitman, Davidson declares, “America is an abstraction” and adds that this abstraction only takes power under an “industrial régime”: “Its government in no accurate way represents the heterogeneity of its parts, which are grouped in a loose spiritual confederation”
The language of “confederation” is a southern spin on William James’s statement that proved so central for Kallen: “The pluralistic world is . . . more like a federal republic than like an empire or kingdom” (James 145).

The “old character” South, for Davidson, was a repository and example for Americans who wanted to preserve the arts against the “industrial blight” by looking to the “diverse regions or sections for centers of resistance to the national malady” (185). When pressed, Davidson is not able to define that “old character” of the South; instead, he gestures, “the southern character is easier to recognize than define, and has much more variety than is commonly supposed” (199). He found that most post-reconstruction southern writers, betraying their heritage, were “over-anxious to avoid the charge of sectionalism. They were either critical or despairing in their rendering of southern life” (193). About Ellen Glasgow’s Barren Ground, he writes, “She is torn between what her heart cleaves to and what her intellect has been persuaded to disapprove” (200). When not despairing, white southern writers wrote of the Negro or the “poor white and mountaineer,” both of whom were in vogue—one in Harlem, the other in national folklore circles. He found that writers such as Julia Peterkin (Black April), Paul Green (plays and stories), and Howard Odum (Rainbow Round My Shoulder) all wrote of a modern “rendering of Negro life,” just as Elizabeth Maddox Roberts (The Time of Man) and Maristant Chapman (The Happy Mountain) romanticized “poor whites” who were “rich in folk-ways that the civilized could only admire” (191). What gave rise, Davidson asked, to this “new myth, which apotheosizes and exalts the rich primitiveness”?

Davidson put the situation simply: while these authors built bridges to “enlarge [readers’] understanding” of Negroes and mountaineers, “in this field their creative powers are stimulated and elsewhere they are blocked” (204). They move into escapism and “revive an old romantic subject.” The more successful books, such as Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, “showed how skillfully a troubled and imaginative soul could adapt a modern technique to southern materials; but unlike some of his contemporaries, Mr. Faulkner displayed no animus toward the South” (193). Even though Faulkner “conducts us into the abyss” of “the degeneration of a southern

---

35 Davidson’s critique also reformulates the work of Harold Laski, a professor of political science at Columbia University. In Studies on the Problem of Sovereignty (1917), Laski held that the American voter system separated and debilitated bodies of social association. As explained by Gregory McLennan, “A franchise based on individual rights and territorial representation within the sovereign state, pluralists argued, inadequately reflects our collective social existence, and sets up a structure whereby an all-powerful state stands over against a mass of isolated individuals” (33).
family” where “the moving glitter of life is ruled by demons of pain and despair,” he creates a tragedy with “disinterested artistic performance” (205). But Davidson found Faulkner to be atypical.

In addition to the social pressures felt by southern writers, Davidson notes the lack of publication venues in the South. Without “communication and fellowship among themselves,” southern writers had to reach their southern audience through “the bottle-neck of New York” where their writing was “financed and interpreted” (197). But rarely did groups of writers—such as the Fugitives out of Nashville—manage to gain voice on their own terms. Davidson proclaims a “war of cultures” between “urban civilization—which is industrial, progressive, scientific, anti-traditional—and rural or provincial civilization—which is on the whole agrarian, conservative, anti-scientific, and traditional” (198). And urban, standardizing culture was encroaching upon the South. Against that trend, Davidson proclaimed:

[W]e should gladly defend the conditions of life which permit the free and natural growth of a genuine southern art. The rebellion against uniformity in American life, which in the literary field has now taken the name of regionalism, and the general dissatisfaction with the rule of centralized metropolitan culture that seems to have brought us to sterility and chaos—these new phenomena suggest that a movement toward self-determination in southern letters may prove a battle for the right, a cause that is in the nature of Americans to support, an exciting phase of a wholesale reanimation of American life and art around its provincial and sectional strongholds. (210)

Compared to mainstream authors, Davidson lauded southern writing as “restrained and conservative” and “nearer to the English tradition,” but he did not predict the outburst from mountain writers whose “genuine art” portrayed how their culture was being savaged by the reaping of raw resources.

As the thirties wore on, politically progressive and financially savvy publishers in New York and the northeast caught wind of changing national sympathies that they had long fought to change. Essays, poems, and stories by southern mountaineers began filling the pages of The Atlantic, The Yale Review, and Forum and Century. E. P. Dutton brought out Jesse Stuart’s Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow (1934) and Herbert Byron Reece’s Ballad of the Bones and Other Poems (1945); Covici·Friede published Harriet Arnow’s Mountain Path (1937); Viking Press
issued Jame’s Still’s *Hounds on the Mountain* (1937) and *River of Earth* (1940); and Harcourt and Brace released Louise McNeill’s *Gaulry Mountain* (1939). All these authors described the violation of their mountains in less than “restrained” tones. Yet their sallies might not have been launched had not Howard Odum and William Terry Couch helped to establish regionalism as a national paradigm known by social scientists, educators, and government officials.

**The Science of Regionalism and the University of North Carolina**

In large part, national publishers began to bring out mountain authors because of the University of North Carolina Press’s (UNCP) success in cultivating a critical southern audience. Founded in 1922, the UNCP quickly became the only major non-religious publisher in the South, and it generated an audience of middle-class readers. This success provoked similar changes in other university presses. The UNCP’s influence also led universities throughout the South to establish well-funded presses at schools such as Louisiana State and Vanderbilt (Singal 266, 278). Couch was the UNCP’s assistant director in 1927 when a controversy broke out over the introduction to a collection of black folktales, *Congaree Sketches* (265). The introduction was penned by Paul Green, a playwright and professor at North Carolina who had just won the Pulitzer for *In Abraham’s Bosom*, a play about the life of southern blacks (266). In the introduction to *Congaree Sketches*, Green recognized the deep interrelationship of the races—“black and white are inextricably mingled in blood and bone and intention” (qtd. 266)—and asked whites to break the power-hierarchy that allowed them to stand over blacks, who labored “in the ditch doing the dirty digging” (qtd. 266). After the press’s Board discovered the introduction, they wanted to destroy all of its copies, but Couch had already sent them to national reviewers (267). When no backlash resulted from the book’s release, Couch began a publishing program that featured critical discussion of southern social realities and problems.

When the UNCP was established, the only other state university presses were at Illinois, Washington, and California, and none but the University of California Press was engaged in substantial publishing beyond the occasional imprint (*Books* xiii).36 Privileging professors from their schools, university presses published for other national scholars, but Couch came from a

---

36 “University presses in this country date back to the Cornell University Press, founded in 1869, and The Johns Hopkins University Press, founded in 1878. For the next five decades nearly all of the university presses in this country were established at the great private universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and Chicago” (*Books* xiii).
generation of newly minted professionals. Having been raised on a struggling family farm and working his way through high school and college, Couch’s education allowed him insight on local racial and social difficulties, so he began what he called “an experiment in ‘cultural’ publishing” (qtd. in Signal 277): his goal was not to engage national scholars but to awaken the southern middle class. Almost a third of the UNCP’s books published under Couch addressed about (and were distributed throughout) the South itself. Because a publisher at a prominent southern university had published them, these regional texts held great authority with southerners (266). Major regionally centered volumes included Rupert Vance’s Human Geography of the South (1932), W. T. Couch’s Culture in the South (1934), Odum’s Southern Regions of the United States (1936), Donald Davidson’s Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States (1938), and in 1944, Rayford W. Logan’s What the Negro Wants, which stayed in print into the mid 1970s (although as we shall see in Chapter Four, Couch opposed this book).37

In his portrait of Couch and the UNCP, the historian Daniel Joseph Signal adeptly demonstrates why these books succeeded. Seeking to overcome both the New South’s blind lauding of economic development as well as the reticence of southerners to enjoin in critique, Couch encouraged authors to take a position and to represent it with potent description rather than mere facts (Signal 279, 282). He also “insisted . . . upon candor” about social circumstances (283), which is demonstrated in his critique of I’ll Take My Stand. When unable to find editors who would follow his goals, Couch took up the lead and edited Culture in the South (1934), which portrayed the life of southern cultural institutions—from universities and labor organizing to literature and folk-life—and engaged in spirited debate. Moreover, Couch acted upon his values and gave his press’s prestige and monetary support to the founding of the Southern Conference of Human Welfare in 1938 (Signal 291-93), whose interracial coalition’s fight against social injustice and economic inequality would lead to the publication of Don West’s Clods of Southern Earth.

37Out of 104 the first titles by the University of North Carolina Press, only six dealt exclusively with North Carolina. But from 1931 to 1934, six books a year—on a range of topics, including natural sciences, history, and racial issues—were published about the state, and by the 1940s they had become an established part of the Press (Books x-xv). At the time, no books were published purely on Appalachia, but the region was a consideration since the Blue Ridge Mountains compose the western third of the state. This regional focus has continued, and the UNCP published Henry D. Shapiro’s Appalachia on Our Mind (1978), a foundational text for Appalachian studies, and Robert Dorman’s Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945 (1993). Both texts have been central to my study.
The liberal politics and regional focus of the UNCP developed under the influence of Howard W. Odum. Head of the Department of Sociology at Chapel Hill and founder of the Institute for Research in Social Science (IRSS), Odum’s name was synonymous in the 1930s and 1940s with the study of the South as well as with regionalism. Odum and the IRSS used the analytical tools of the social sciences to evaluate regionalism, document inequalities, and engage regional cooperation to solve regional problems. This approach synthesized the Agrarian desire to conserve southern culture and the cosmopolitan vision of an equitable, adaptive, and mobile pluralism. In Odum’s hands regionalism hoped to bring regional resources to bear in practical ways to increase the standard of living for millions.

A skillful administrator, team-builder, and advocate, Odum served on the boards of regional and national social service programs. President of the American Sociological Society (1930) and of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (1937), Odum also directed the North Carolina Welfare Commission, sat on the Advisory Committee on Southern Education for the General Education Board (1937), and helped found the Southern Regional Council (1944). To gather support, he wrote for the public as well as for scholars and published in magazines such as The Saturday Review of Literature, American Mercury and The Nation. On the one hand, Odum can be seen as a pragmatist who strived to shape a pluralist democracy of equity through orchestrating the interests of cultural resources, including academics from around the South in all disciplines, service programs (non-governmental organizations), northern philanthropists, and government agencies. On the other hand, Odum was besought by his desire to foster non-threatening and incremental change within the South whose complex social organization—biased and unjust as it often was—gave rise to folkways that Odum felt would reject any direct approach. Thus, he was careful not to take quarrelsome positions and guided the coalitions he led to improve the status of blacks without opposing segregation. Yet what those who critique Odum have failed to see was that he fertilized and reseeded the soil in which those very folkways grew: Odum’s promotion of education and race relations helped to set the context for segregation’s dissolution.

38 According the Rockefeller Archives Center, “The General Education Board was established in 1903 by John D. Rockefeller to aid education in the U.S. ‘without distinction of race, sex or creed’” (“General Archives”). While emphasizing support of southern education and the education of blacks, schools all over the country received “grants for endowment and general budgetary support of colleges and universities, support for special programs, fellowship and scholarship assistance to state school systems at all levels, and development of social and economic resources as a route to improved educational systems.” Notably, Berea College received the GEB’s first grants and received the GEB’s last appropriation (“General Education Board”).
An evaluation of Odum’s life and scholarship—moving from his study of “Negro” folklore and sociology, to his articulation of a “folk sociology,” and culminating in regionalism—reveals the frame through which Americans and regionalists understood the relationship between the folk, the state, and civilization. Odum was born in 1884 and grew up on a small farm in central Georgia, from which his family moved in 1897 in order for Odum and his siblings to attend Emory Academy and College. Graduating in 1904, Odum taught school in Mississippi and collected folklore as he observed Negro life and worked on his Masters in classics at the University of Mississippi, which he received in 1906. In 1909, he took a PhD in psychology at Clark University and another PhD in sociology from Columbia in 1910. Odum focused on Negro folk songs and studies of Negro town life. His understanding of the relationship between race, folkways, and environment informed his later social principles.

At the start of his career, Odum’s held a Lamarckian view that understood learned behavior to be genetically coded and passed on as traits to descendants (Singal 148). Elongated exposure to a particular environment influenced one’s genes and, hence, one’s offspring who were designed to fit into particular niches. Change was possible but gradual because behavior, environment, and heredity reinforced one another. In 1910 Odum published Social and Mental Traits of the Negro: Research in the Conditions of the Negro Race in Southern Towns, and his concept of the folk, echoing Du Bois, came in the first sentence: “To know the soul of a people and to find the source from which flows the expression of folk-thought is to comprehend in a large measure the capabilities of that people.” In his discussion of “folk-thought,” Odum voiced racial theories that were commonly held among social scientists: the Negro’s mental and moral state, if not making them inferior to whites, nevertheless meant that they should live according to those differences in appropriate environments. Nevertheless, Odum conducted his work with sympathy and understood uplift as desirable and possible with proper scientific diagnosis.

In the second phase of his work, Odum promoted the study and development of community institutions. He conducted research in Philadelphia on black children in public schools and in 1912 became a professor of education at the University of Georgia. During his tenure, Odum strived to improve rural public schools, and in 1918 he became Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Emory. But his attempt to turn the school into a southern version of Columbia came into conflict with the administration (Singal 119). Two years later, a frustrated Odum was grateful to be hired by University of North Carolina, where he organized the Department of
Sociology, the School for Public Welfare, and the Institute for Research in Social Science, which would train a cadre of progressive sociologists.\(^{39}\) From that base, Odum edited the journal *Social Forces*, which evaluated southern social problems. By 1924, the journal had over 1,700 subscribers (123), and to that audience, Odum voiced fierce opposition to the Klan, which he described as “un-American, un-democratic, and un-Christian” (qtd. in Singal 123). The Klan was a violent symptom of the South’s broken and inequitable social situation, but that situation, Odum held, could be rectified through promoting institutions of community, such as schools that socialized and protected individuals from their reactions to rapid change. Through building community institutions, Odum wished to slowly reform social disparity by developing a credit system for farmers; promoting food crops over cotton; increasing commodity consumption; building electrical, travel, and communication infrastructure; developing small industries; and creating equal facilities for blacks (O’Brien 67).

Odum’s most radical vision of race is articulated via his own creative work. Odum authored texts on the welfare system and introduced race issues with *The Negro and His Songs* (1925), a folklore study that drew on his Mississippi research. A second volume, *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), went beyond his earlier examination of songs as curiosities and began “to consider their aesthetic, practical, psychological, and contextual significance” (Sanders 55). In 1928, 1929, and 1931 Odum authored a semi-fictional folk trilogy, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder: The Blue Trail of Black Ulysses*, *Wings on My Feet: Black Ulysses at the Wars*, and *Cold Blue Moon: Black Ulysses Afar Off*. The protagonist, Black Ulysses, whose songs and stories filled the pages, was modeled on Leftwing Gordon, a black migrant construction worker who had lost his arm in World War One. It was through his friendship with Gordon and writing the trilogy that Odum began to understand folklore as a means of survival and as a critique of the South (64). Odum’s prose-poetry was so sympathetic that the black middle-class accused him of “glamorizing crudity and immorality” (Jocher xi).

By the mid-thirties, there were two versions of southern regionalism: the Agrarians out of Vanderbilt and the “modernists” out of Chapel Hill. In 1936, Odum authored *Southern Regions in the United States*, in which he conducted an elaborate, if at times baffling, statistical evaluation—with 700 pages, 340 maps, and 270 charts—of southern regional variance.

\(^{39}\) The list is long (see Singal 121-22), but important figures—whose names appear in Chapter Four—include George S. Mitchell, who worked with unionization, as well as Rupert Vance and Arthur Raper, both of whom conducted critical work to document and disband the tenant system.
However, Odum only minimally discussed 4,900,000 inhabitants from “the hill country of the Southern Appalachians”: “These millions represent the original gateway to the west; they continue a gateway [sic] between the past and the future; and they constitute one of several blocks of the population of the Southeast, which afford abundant evidence to support the conclusion that . . . [the] blanket classification, ‘southern people, no longer constitutes an authentic characterization” (91). Going through four printings, *Southern Regions* provided statistics enough to fuel debate about the South and its relation with the nation for decades (O’Brien 63).

In articles and sociology textbooks over the next decade, Odum clarified his basic social concepts—the folk, folkways, regionalism, stateways, and technicways—upon which he could justify and gather aid for programs of social change. In 1947, Odum would define the folk as arising from “the interaction of people and environment and of the interactions of people with people . . . . who, integrated through various units within a regional culture, are inseparable from the regional environment which produced them” (Odum, “Folk Culture” 224). These groups were essentially homogenous but adapted to new influences. Drawing upon the work of William Graham Sumner (author of *Folkways* [1908]), Odum clarified that a folk group “symbolizes human society’s process in the framework of a given time, areal [sic], natural, and cultural configuration, possessing and conscious of a common heritage and consistent traits which result from the incidents of the folkways and mores of group behavior” (Odum, “Folk Sociology” 316). In this formulation, heritage, traits, and culture combine to produce behavior—“folkways”—that was adapted to specific contexts.

Unlike Botkin, a folklorist who studied how the folk lived in society, Odum’s sociological theories understood the folk as the foundational tier from which society grew. Odum defines folkways as the “habits of the individual and the customs of the group that have arisen over long periods of time largely from non-identifiable sources to meet needs . . . . The mores, then, are the matured folkways that have been sanctioned through the continuous long time process of trial and exploration and have come to assume the nature and power of folk wisdom” (317). From mores arose moral codes and eventual legal systems (“stateways”), each level more abstracted from ongoing and evolving folkways. Much like the Agrarians, Odum deemed that the decreasing power of morality resulted from the “quick changing customs and behavior, which we characterize as technicways” (318). Odum theorized a divide between folk
culture—characterized by a rural group’s moral solidarity gained from their long-term adaptation to particular circumstances—and state civilization—characterized by technology, urbanization, cultural specialization, centralization and power (314-15). For Odum, “the State” was a complex of institutions that provided protection and services while “enforcing uniformities and stability of desired behavior” (319). Severed from folkways, the state ultimately culminated in cultural apathy and totalitarianism (315). Social upheaval and repressive power hierarchies resulted when folk cultures were removed from their environment to participate in state civilizations whose urban members had developed “technicways” and “stateways” to survive within “the technological secularized society,” the order of which resulted from the “power of penalty and coercion” (319).

Odum offered regionalism as a solution for the South’s own disjunction. Quoting the small town newspaper editor William Allen White, Odum identified America as such a state out of balance: “Justice for one region is not justice for the other. Yet a rough approximation of justice for each region must be worked out if all these regions are held together in the bonds of a continental commonwealth” (qtd. in “The Implications” 147). In 1938, Odum and Harry Estill Moore published their manifesto, American Regionalism: “First of all, of course, we assume certain broad societal implications of regionalism such as that it implies ‘the regional framework of civilization,’ ‘the pluralism of America,’ the natural origins and quality of all folk-life and culture” (“The Implications” 144). Resting on an awareness of the divide between American folk-life and the forces of civilization, the goal of Odum’s regionalism was a decentralization of responsibility and power as well as a redistribution of resources. Drawing together the various social sciences in “co-operation and co-ordination,” the “science” of regionalism was the functional means to realize those goals (144-155). Not only would an “economy of abundance” (as opposed to one of scarcity and competition) allow access to the necessities of life and redistribution of wealth, but regionalism would create an equilibrium between regions, groups, industry, and agriculture. Democracy could then realize the pluralist goal of granting “each demotic group full opportunity and representation” (149-150). “Full opportunity,” for Odum, did not mean economic opportunity gained via Americanization: it meant a chance for people “to recognize and give full credit to their folk personality or culture.”

Odum laid out that program for the readers of the Saturday Review of Literature in his article “The American Blend: Regional Diversity and Cultural Unity” (1949). The development
of America, he explained, had resulted in “a nation of multiplied diversities as well as conflicting ideologies and powerful differences to be resolved” (193). That resolution would not be realized by the dissolution of conflict but by increasing the “knowledge and sympathetic understanding” between various folk-regions and, ultimately, weaving “a construct that will give living physical areal tabernacles for the folk cultures of the world.” Odum hoped that such a “diversity of folk and region” might thrive in “the architecture of universal culture and made increasingly articulate through communications and the ideologies of one world inter-cultural relations” (194). Thus, through “democratic process,” we might realize “cooperative regionalism rather than economic nationalism” (201). However, by September 1950, Odum’s focus on valorizing the folk became dated when Berea College again granted admission to “Negro youth,” if they were from the southern mountains (“Berea College”). The Day Law had been revised because federal courts had begun to protect the rights of African Americans to attend those institutions of white higher education that chose to admit them.

In his attempt to build a non-threatening strategy of political equality, Odum’s biggest mistake was, as with the case of most pre-war southern liberals, to downplay race—the primary building block of American pluralism before and after. On a philosophical level, he turned away from integration because he believed that racial folkways included violent protections against amalgamation (much akin to Judge O’Rear); furthermore, Odum understood southern civilization as a complex, organic matrix of relations, and he feared that interceding to change some behavior, without modifying the structures that gave rise to that behavior, would result in catastrophe. On a more literal level, Odum desired for his ideas to be accepted rather than rejected. Distrusting the literacy and entrenched ways of the folk, he recruited academics and bureaucrats to organize regionalism from the top down. Seeing the split between the folkways of blacks and whites, he sought out a “bi-racial elite . . . to, in effect, ‘invent’ a new southern identity embracing both races and inculcate it in the ‘common people’” (Carlton and Coclanis 54). But the members of those organizations that Odum helped to build (such as the Southern Regional Council), who were once reticent about confronting segregation, soon found themselves bypassed by the fight for Civil Rights whose varied actors confronted both unjust state law and negative folkways. As shown in Chapter Four, in the 1940s, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and Don West used region to validate their focus on race and promote interracial connections between working-class
groups. But in the 1930s, other regionalists were also thinking about how to mobilize the folk in ways that forecast West’s work. Seeking to stir the grass-roots, B. A. Botkin theorized how folk could be united and radicalized through art and literature.

Laughing at Locksmiths: B. A. Botkin and Folk Culture

In a series of articles in The English Journal (1936-1938), Botkin considered how intellectuals (artists) might renovate their removed roles as interpreters for a middle-class audience and cross the chasm of commodity-relations to become actors with and for a chthonic folk. From his early work as an anthologist in Oklahoma, in the late 1930s B. A. Botkin became well known by academic scholars, creative writers, New Deal administrators, and WPA personnel. By the 1940s and 1950s, millions of Americans would read his Treasury of Folklore books. To appreciate his later theories and enactments, we need to follow the evolution of his thought.

Folk-Say’s later volumes (1931-1932) had begun to investigate the contemporary folk life of urban communities and migrant workers. Given that Botkin published explorations of the earthier-side of their life practices, the President of the University of Oklahoma halted the publication of Folk-Say and ordered its fourth volume withdrawn from sale. Years later, Botkin would wryly relate that references to Marx, marijuana, and premarital sex “got a little too wild for them” (qtd. in Dorman 289).

Botkin’s next national appearance as an expert on the folk occurred in W. T. Couch’s anthology Culture in the South (1934). In “Folk and Folklore,” Botkin strikes a regressive stance and focuses on “three relatively uneducated English-speaking groups—mountain white, lowland white, and Negro” (570). Botkin was commissioned as a professional folklorist, yet his essay exemplifies common myths and misunderstandings about Appalachia. Although in the coming years he would critique the concept of cultural “survivals,” in “Folk and Folklore” Botkin explained that the folk, “like the primitive group, is one that has been cut off from progress and has retained beliefs, customs, and expressions with limited acceptance and acquired new ones in kind” (570). He also rehearsed the popular explanation of mountain settlement: attracted by the freedom of wilderness with plentiful game and given impetus by war bounties, “English, Scotch, Irish and French Huguenots from the piedmont and tidewater regions . . . , chiefly of the artisan and small farmer class, came seeking freedom—social, religious, and economic.” The people in
the most “remote fastness” became isolated during the time of accelerating industrialism and “constitute the true highland folk” (571).

To add allure, Botkin magisterially explains that the isolation was chosen: “they preferred a simple life, with occasional labor, in a hunter’s and fisherman’s paradise, to the larger rewards and steadier industry of the open country, from which, however, a new migration of business- and pleasure-seekers soon crowded in on them” (571). The Appalachians and Ozarks, Botkin continues, thus produced “a healthy, independent, if backward race of men living in a backward, uncapitalized, patriarchal, inbred society.” As a result of “religious orthodoxy and social anarchy,” they became a people who are “inwardly restrictive as well as outwardly exclusive.”

At other points Botkin takes away choice and blames the environment. Due to the difficulty of negotiating “peaks and low gaps and tortuous creek-trails,” the highlander is isolated even “from his fellows,” and his demeanor broadcasts “a suspicious, almost sullen sensitiveness and secretiveness” (572). These backward folk now saw “the stranger and his new-fangled world and ways as ‘furriner,’ ‘outlander,’ ‘yan side,’ down creek,’ ‘brought-on,’ ‘fotch-on’” (572). Their clannish virtues and vices led to “the frontier code of private justice and ingrown loyalties” that inspired romancers, “aroused detractors,” and “attracted the ballad-student, the folklorist, and the folk writer as to a museum of antiquities” (572). Botkin claimed to be sympathetic to the folk, but at this juncture, he seemed less interested in the folk than the lore, less concerned with lived experience than in ordained hear-say.

Botkin beheld the mountain folk in an awkward awe and presented them as untouched, while others, like the Negro and lowland white, were “partly segregated and partly intertwined” with the wider society (579). Nevertheless, Botkin shows little sympathy for ongoing exploitation in the mountains; he notes, “the industrialist is simply finishing the exploitation that the pioneer began.” But, “when all discounts have been made, the mountain folk’s hoarded wealth of songs, sayings, stories, and superstitions remains to demonstrate that the atmosphere of folklore is the atmosphere of the home ideal—the indigenous, the self-sufficient, and the permanent—the mold of true genius and culture” (572). Of course, Appalachian culture was neither self-sufficient nor permanent, but it is telling that Botkin dignified them as such. The rest of Botkin’s essay describes lowland whites and blacks, but he mostly focuses on examples of “Negro” conjurers tales and sympathetic folk magic. It is hard to say how much of this piece
Botkin wrote in anticipation of pleasing his audience and how much he actually believed, since he mainly reiterates truisms which people in the mountains and outside professionals—teachers, sociologists, missionaries, labor organizers—had fought to counter for decades.

Perhaps Botkin, like so many others, was lost under the spell of assumptions and associations for which the mountain folk formed such an apt screen. Although Botkin had written essays about the various versions of regionalism in the early 1930s—the northwest ‘localist,’ the southwest ‘naturist,’ the southern ‘traditionalist,’ and the metropolitan ‘culturalist,’ of which he counted himself one (“We Talk” 286)—one can but wonder if his later radicalism was not the result of the sharp dichotomies he encountered at the 1935 Conference on Literature and Reading in the South and Southwest at Louisiana State University. The conference was led by Charles W. Pipkin (dean of the Graduate School) and Robert Penn Warren (an assistant professor), the new editor and assistant editor of The Southern Review, which had been commissioned that February by the university president seemingly at the behest of Huey Long. (Cleanth Brooks was also an assistant editor, but not at the conference.) The conference drew forty figures from all sides of the regionalist movement: W. T. Couch (head of the North Carolina University Press), Allen Tate and John Gould Fletcher (Agrarians), B. A. Botkin, John McGinnis (editor of the Southwest Review), Lambert Davis (managing editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review), Ford Madox Ford, and many other editors, writers, and scholars, including the young Randall Jarrell whose poetry Warren was championing.

At the center of the debate that resulted was the relationship between writers and their audiences. On one side, Pipkin proposed that there were few readers in the South to “set” the problems that artists should write about; hence, without a “corrective public,” writers had become antisocial and self-indulgent, a problem amplified by the fact that writers in the South were held to the standards of culture in New York (“Conference” 43-45). Allen Tate pointed out that the writer had “no public of his peers” in the South but instead wrote for a removed “general public—which must buy the book as commodity” (46) a commodity that was produced and appraised in the New York. Their solution for how writers and the audience should interact was to abandon the game of appealing to a specific audience and, instead, write in what Tate called a “humane tradition that enables the writer to write things that are exportable” (63).

Against such a presumption, Botkin countered that “one of the things that strikes the outsider about Southern writing is that as soon as one stops writing prose and becomes a poet
One ceases to be a Southerner . . . . One of the first rules of Fugitive poetry as I understand it . . . is not to write about the South—at least not so that you can recognize it” (58). Botkin went on to praise the Fugitives as “a closely-knit, cooperative self-conscious group” who had set about creating “a taste and a public” (61), even if he felt that the best public was a regional one that had to be purposefully educated and cultivated. That idea was championed by John Gould Fletcher, an Agrarian now living in New Mexico, who cited statistics about library circulation to prove that the size of the reading public in the South was much greater than Tate and Pipkin had posited (50). Hence the problem of “creating a public is to publish regional books” to interest those readers (49).

Seeing themselves as intermediaries between the writer and the public, various editors discussed the difficulties of realizing that goal. Couch outlined the pragmatics of publishing cost, distribution, and sales, but at the same time, he held that intellectuals should encourage culture by writing “books that would enable people in the region to know the region” (69). John McGinnis, editor of the Southwest Review and book page editor for the Dallas News, concurred that publishers were “slow to wake up to the markets” in the South (55). Conversely, the literary editors felt trapped between a provincial “patriotic” public, who was not open to criticism, and those regional educated readers, who wanted “New York approval” that debased southern life too freely (54). In the end, when Ford Madox Ford spoke, his words carried a feeling of impatience and fatherly wisdom: “You do not grow up as a writer until you have to write for someone else, that writing is a communication with an ideal reader or class, not necessarily a large public” (75). And while Ford praised New York as a necessary distribution center, he ended by proclaiming the “inevitability of folk art” (76), which would soon return to prominence because civilization “is now crumbling into its final decay” (78).

It is impossible to say what exact influence the conference had on Botkin, but from 1935 to 1938, in a progression of articles in The English Journal (1936-1938), he would theorize ways of bringing together the artist (the writer) and a dynamic, non-sentimentalized folk (the audience). In “Regionalism: Cult or Culture” (1936), Botkin investigated the claims that critics of the new regional literature, such as Robert Penn Warren and Howard Odum, had made. Essentially, the critiques, like Tate’s earlier one, identified the application of a formula for what Odum called “sentimental romanticism for the local area” (qtd. 182). Botkin agreed and turned the critique on the Agrarians whose “program of reform is shrouded in the mysteries of Agrarian
economics,” which they accepted “as final a certain social order” (183). Instead, Botkin—acting as a pragmatist—called for attention to contingent specifics. Rather than putting literature aside, he forwards it as another tool in the cache of Odum’s regional science. Because the new regionalist literature drew on “native traditions growing out of local cultures,” it was capable of “capable of solid, contemporary and forward looking significance” (183-184). When the broad array of “regionally differentiated and interregionally related cultures” was acknowledged, Botkin claimed, one would see a “way from belletristic—pure literature and absolute poetry—toward a social and cultural art—from literary anarchy to literary collectivism” (184). In other words, if one were to acknowledge the cultural context in which the writing occurred, one would see how it reflected not only the situation and values but how it made sense as a tool for local cultures to interact with the world and each other. But what did Botkin mean by “folk” and “culture”?

Botkin hints at his answer in “Regionalism and Culture,” a paper presented to the Second American Writers Conference and published in Writing in a Changing World (1937), an collection of papers presented at the Second American Writers’ Conference. Botkin etches out his definition of the “folk” by critiquing the view of culture proposed by Mary Austin and the Agrarians. Austin, he maintains, is searching for an order of “sentimental primitiveness” to compensate for her own rootlessness by retreating into “the memory of their aboriginal and ‘native’ forerunners”; however, he respects Austin’s and other southwestern regionalists’ efforts to resist “the forcible assimilation of the Indian” (141-2, 143, 147). Next he provides a fourteen-point list of how the Agrarians, who “retreat ‘into the memories of their forefathers,’” view culture (147). He sees their solution as compensating for race and class anxieties of the “Anglo-Saxon, white, democrat, Protestant and landed” (151): “The world of reactionary and regressive regionalism is a private world and a static one, individualistic and aristocratic, viewing culture as the aim of life and identifying culture with private or individual well-being and sensibility” (152). Counterposing those approaches to culture, Botkin draws upon Howard Odum’s definition of the folk as “basic to regional society, being dynamic and transitional rather than static” (154). The point is that “social structure . . . underlies individual character”—a social structure influenced by geographical relationships but not determined by them—for “one does not change one’s soul with the sky.” In “The Folkness of the Folk,” also published in 1937, Botkin develops this explanation.
He starts by examining the current use of the term “folk” by W. W. Newell, Louise Pound (his dissertation director at Nebraska), Mary Austin, and Howard Odum. Botkin identifies the anthropological theory of “survivals,” which had become associated with “the primitive,” as informing the thinking of folklorists (464). This focus on the primitive restricted “the folk to the backward, the ignorant, and illiterate members of society” and emphasized their anachronistic and static nature. Counter that view—and perhaps admitting and revising his own version of the southern folk—Botkin adapts a “functional point of view”: folklore should be “germinal,” “adaptive,” “transitional,” and present in all civilizations (466-67). He quotes Odum: “folk society is definitive of all transitional societies and of all those social processes and products which are extra-organizational and extra-technological.” In short, folk society and its folkways transcend—or rather come before, after, and beyond—the symbolic order of a civilization with its state organization, laws, and technicways. Within the United States, the clearest examples of such folk societies are aligned with those groups which are “separated from society” due to geography, language, or occupation. (Notably, Botkin does not include race or ethnicity as isolating factors.) Geographical isolation, as in the mountains, gives “a folk group regional basis” because their adaptation to regional circumstances “leads to local variations in lore” (467). In a gesture towards Kallen’s grounding of culture in terms of family influence, Botkin again quotes Odum, who comments that even as folk culture adapts, it nevertheless has “social prepotency and persistency and continuity in the power of transmitting biological and cultural qualities from one generation to another.” Essentialism is saved.

And primitivism is saved as well, or rather it is explained as the “folk wisdom or imagination” that underlies “superstition, magic, and religion.” Against the hyper-rational and scientific urge of his day, Botkin explains the “illogical and unscientific” nature of folk wisdom, which exhibits the “fallacies of analogy and false causal relation” (467-468). Herein he demonstrates awareness of how a folk’s symbolic order operates beyond the symbolic order of Western enlightenment, although he is unable to explain its social function: “from its unreflective or intuitive faith in the unknown and the unseen, the abnormal and the fortuitous, the folk mind is seen as symbolic in its thinking and naïve, if you will in its integration of experience.” Botkin’s use of passive voice suggests that he is reciting evaluations with which he is not in agreement, for he valued symbolic thinking that worked outside of but in relation to mainstream America.
In 1938, Botkin published a final essay on the folk in *The English Journal* before losing his professorship at Oklahoma. The Governor of Oklahoma had given the university’s president a list of professors who might be “disloyal.” Botkin’s name was first due to the paper he gave at the Second American Writers’ Congress (Dorman 303-04). Botkin might have remained had not students unfurled banners that falsely labeled him as a communist (304). Like other cultural theorists of the time, such as Kenneth Burke, Botkin took part in a wide conversation with other social activists, yet reactionary forces throughout the country found support of labor unions or desegregation tantamount to complicity with communism. Thus, while he had associated with communists at the Second American Writer’s Congress, Botkin was also condemned for his involvement with another extra-curricular radicals: the Federal Writer’s Project. In 1937 under the auspices of a Julius Rosenwald fellowship, Botkin had begun a study of southern folklore, collecting research through the region at the Library of Congress (Hirsch, “Folklore” 17).

Botkin was already involved in public events and acting as an advisor to federal reports. He was one of the writers who authored the section on “Cultural Diversity in American Life” for the 1938 Federal report, *The Problems of a Changing America* (which introduced this chapter), and he had helped shape the pluralist nature of folk festivals that had begun in the mid-1930s. After hearing of the purely Anglo make-up of the first National Folk Festival, he wrote its director, Sarah Gertrude Knott: “Do you intend to limit the festival to Anglo-American lore, including the Negro but excluding the Indian and foreign-language-groups?” (qtd. in Dorman 252). For the guide to the 1938 American Folk Festival, he composed a short essay, “The Function of a Folk Festival.” He explained that America’s diversity had been “menaced by aggressive nationalism and standardized mass culture. . . . This heritage must not be allowed to stop with the past or with a public performance. It must be allowed to grow and function as a liberating force for our art and society” (qtd. in Dorman 253). That performative pluralism, enacted on the grassroots level, would facilitate the “fuller and freer social participation” of the ethnic and racial groups involved.40

---

40 After leaving the academy, Botkin melded folklore and creative writing by organizing Living Lore Units with the FWP to record the living history of Americans. “If we admitted no impediments to a marriage of true minds between folklore and history,” he incanted at a 1939 conference on the cultural approach to history, “the product of their union would be a folk history” (“Folklore as Neglected” 308). In 1945 he brought out *Lay My Burden Down*, a compilation of ex-slave narratives. This book was closely followed a sequence of best-selling *Treasury of Folklore Books* in which he assembled materials gathered when he directed the Archive of American Folk Song (1942-1944). The first two among them were *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People* (1947) and *A Treasure of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions and Folkways of the*
Just before being pushed out of the academy, Botkin expounded his theory about how to revitalize the relationship between artists and their audiences in “The Folk and the Individual: Their Creative Reciprocity” (1938), his final publication in The English Journal. Considering writing from the perspective of “the folk,” he found fault with the academy for analyzing texts as vehicles of pure rapport between a learned audience and an abstracted writer. In its place, Botkin tried to find a way beyond the distance between author and audience, which seemed inevitable when texts were published as national commodities. Citing Louise Pound, Botkin submits that the folk group is a “plural convened audience,” where any member of the “audience” might become a participant artist (125). Against the misconception that folk life precluded individual expression, he urged an understanding of the folk as a collection of individuals who should be recognized only as a “specific culture and with specific events” rather than being read in terms of “expression of the soul of a race or nation.” The “nationalist theory of folklore,” he stressed, is “rooted in the myth of a pure national cultures and pure races.” And while a “[f]alse national culture, with its delusions of purity and superiority,” might “require closed doors,” maintained by gate keepers, “the true folk culture . . . like love laughs at locksmiths” (131). Folk culture, while accounting for the imposition of national culture and ideology, was not subservient to the discourses upholding mainstream society.

Instead, those authors and audiences who considered themselves “modern” worked under the illusion of freedom. Even though they felt “self-acting” and “freer to change, to experiment,” this “freedom” was a result of being liberated from the work of maintaining and preserving the past, because information technologies and mechanical reproduction granted “a foreshortening of time and space” (126). Such reproduction gave “the privileges of a larger audience, permanence, and privacy”; however, the artist or writer then surrendered contact, “centrality and solidarity,” with their audience.

Building toward his finale, Botkin proposed how authors and audiences could regain that solidarity. To build a “socialized literature,” authors would first have to lose their “sense of authority” and assume the culture of the people about whom they write (126, 134). Authors, that is, should become participant-witnesses and not function under the misconception that the educated, mainstream audience—catered to by New York publishing houses—were the people in

---

*People of the South* (1949). Those Treasuries documented “the interaction between oral tradition and print and other media, and between different levels of culture” (Hirsch, “Folklore” 26). Botkin continued bringing out these books, melding scholarship with popular writing in the 1950s (24-26).
“times of intense social and cultural conflict” to whom they wanted to write for or about. Instead of being “an interpreter” to some wider public, writers should “take on” a culture’s way of life and become “a voice—their voice, which is now his own” (132). Expanding upon Locke, Botkin calls for writers to switch their “focal center” to the people around them: “Below the surface of the dominant pattern are the popular life and fancy of our cultural minorities and other nondominant groups—nondominant but not recessive, not static but dynamic and transitional and on their way up” (126). The most important result of breaking the “isolation” between writers and audience would be to “conserve and strengthen” the heritage of the group with which the authors wrote and make it “a living force for differentiation within an integrated society” (131).

Playing off Ransom’s appeal for a living aesthetics, Botkin proposed that an “integrated society” would also seek to integrate aesthetics, lived experience, and work (128-129). Reestablishing these connections would promote a “pattern” and guide social action toward a people’s interest rather than interests offered under the current system of dissociated commodity consumption that served the owners of capital:

> In the last analysis the folk is the bone and the muscle and the flesh, and the individual is the blood that feeds it. Together they give pattern, structure, response, and continuity. And these are the values that folklore can restore . . . a sense of continuity of human nature, a sense of art as response instead of a commodity, a sense of social structure, based on social intelligence and good will; a sense of pattern, in its primitive use as a model and guide rather than a limit, which, to quote Goldenweiser [an anthropologist at the New School], “points the road one is to travel.” (135)

That Botkin’s words might still feel foreign is no surprise, for 1938 saw the establishment of the Iowa Writers Workshop and the publication of Warren and Brooks’s Understanding Poetry, which helped to shape how poetry has been read in the academy. Their influence not only promoted a method to read (and write) poetry but also advanced an implicit, corporate compliance to a commodity system of material relations between poet, publisher, and audience, under which their tools for reading best functioned. This humanistic, seemingly private, encounter between reader and poem was a veil for the distance between poet, culture, and audience.
Yet there were publishers in New York City who both utilized the commodity system and fought against its standardizing outcomes. While many publishers and writers of the time sought to critique and offer an alternative to that system—from A. and C. Boni and Alain Locke to Allen Tate—their very use of that system complicated their resistance. Often writers and publishers who sought to speak for and about their particular place and “folk” found themselves blending into the social system; however, such conformity which was neither plotted nor absolute. Botkin articulated this dilemma in his 1935 talk at Baton Rogue when he observed that in order to generate a public, writers and editors need the support of commercial financing: “Here the regionalist is confronted with the ethical problem of asking the plutocrats to support a propaganda that is definitely aimed against the society that has produced them” (“Conference” 62).

With regionalism, poets proved central actors. In “Americanization” (1924), Horace Kallen, who was known primarily as a philosopher of aesthetics during his work in the 1940s, provides an explanation that still bears consideration. Writing of Robert Frost, Conrad Aiken, H. D., Carl Sandburg, and Alfred Kreymborg, Kallen remarks,

> Poetry has the spontaneous localism, the responsiveness to the intimacies of community, caste and class which the other disciplines seem to lack, and without which the workmanship necessary to turn the noblest or most enticing matter into the substance and form of art does not seem to eventuate. In poetry, race, locality and cultural atmosphere work out more obviously than in prose into beautiful patterns of sound and meaning, and it is to poetry that the enrichment from these diversities has first accrued. . . . Out of their fusion of geographic locality and cultural nationality, with its solid and sustained rhythm and timbre of attitude and feeling, the poets enter into the national letters, and they are the more national in the degree that they attain to the perfect utterance of their race and place. (225-226)

In Kallen’s explanation, the intimacy of the poet and their particular world-place (Tate’s idea of “tradition”) provides the substance of national attention.

If Kallen understood poetry as the genre best able to speak the spirit of a people, then it had particular power when combined with the southern mountaineers, who were considered both the most pure and degraded version of America. As we have seen, the mythology that Anglo-
Saxon pioneers had survived into a modern era of industrialism and immigration was a centerpiece of American nationalism. In the next three chapters, my investigation will reveal intricate and interlocked systems of institutions, actors, and cultures that both manifested and mediated conflict over how America was best to be understood in the dark prelude and aftermath of its emergence as a super power. I will ascertain how and why publishers mobilized Appalachian poetry to support their cultural projects and also ask how the authors, reviewers, and varied audiences deployed them. In exploring the circuit of the generation and transition of value, I will focus attention on how the texts were mustered to stand against or perpetuate standardization, both in terms of textually representing the issues of pluralism and in terms of materially participating in the very system of standardized reproduction. In doing so, I reveal that in addition to coal, timber, and labor, another potent and unstable force was also being extracted from the mountains: poetry.
Chapter Two

“‘Authentic Folk Feeling’” and James Still’s Hounds on the Mountain

Introduction

This chapter traces Hounds on the Mountain (Viking, 1937) from its generation and production through its reception and use. James Still first came to the Appalachian mountains as a student at Lincoln Memorial University in 1926. After earning his MA in English at Vanderbilt in 1930 and his MS in Library Science at Illinois in 1931, Still began work at Hindman Settlement School, serving as a librarian and educator for the next sixty years. He authored seventeen books and became Kentucky’s first state Poet Laureate in 1995. By the time of his death in 2001, scholars and writers from Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky recognized Still as their literary and cultural primogenitor. Still was raised in east central Alabama, but one might say that over the last fifty years the Appalachian mountains have grown up around him.

Most well known for his fiction—particularly for his novel River of Earth (Viking, 1940) which has gained comparison to works by William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson—Still’s poetry has been less well considered, although his collected poems were released in 2001 and appreciative essays have been composed by writer-critics such as Fred Chapel, Jeff Daniel Marion, and Jim Wayne Miller. Published by Viking Press, one of New York City’s leading, progressive publishers, Hounds on the Mountain sings the tense contradictions of America’s desire to behold its premodern innocence, the last vestiges of which were understood to be dissolving in the remotes of Appalachia. As Still relates, “I had an early awareness that, at least in my area [in the mountains of eastern Kentucky], something was there that would not last much longer. The poems in Hounds on the Mountain will verify recognition of that period. We were living in the nineteenth century, so to speak, and the twentieth would not long be denied” (Interview with J. W. Williamson 54). The book’s contemporary reviewers and editors described Still’s poetry as “authentic,” a word informed by the valorization of the mountaineers’ ethnicity. Thus this chapter begins by discussing the discourse of authenticity in Part I, which sets the stage for considering how Appalachia and the literary field interacted with that racially informed term.

After establishing an overview of Hounds on the Mountain in Part II, I examine how the discourse of Appalachia related to authenticity, deriving conventions from which the book’s
value was constructed. Looking back from 1988, Still hints at the difficulty of realizing the value in terms of personal wealth: “People hereabout have long known I scribble, yet it’s easy to see that it hasn’t been profitable. . . . It might be a comfort to some to learn that of the ten books I’ve published, every one cost me in time and travail more than I earned in royalties” (“I sometimes tell” 141). Indeed, Hounds on the Mountain sold only 773 copies from its publication in June 1937 to October 1940, generating a mere $113.90 (“Royalties”). Even over the next decade as Still’s name became better known from his fiction, Hounds would only sell about eleven copies per year.

Yet just as a book’s worth cannot be reduced to its volume of sales nor its monetary value, neither can its value be deduced from attempting to discern the immanent meaning of its text. An important revision to the later approach has been to study how a text manifests discursive positions and debates. My study grounds and contextualizes that method by examining how the poems were generated, as Still learned the conventions of Appalachian authenticity through his work at Hindman Settlement School in Part III and knowledge of contemporary literature from The Atlantic Monthly in Part IV. Parts III and IV establish the discursive history of Appalachia upon which actors in the cultural circuit drew their particular vision of the book’s value. These parts refocus and particularize the history of Appalachian ethnicity that was outlined in Chapter One. I undertake this reconsideration because each book considered in the last three chapters draws on remarkably different (and often contentious) aspects of that history.

Hindman and The Atlantic were two key institutional participants in shaping the national understanding of Appalachia. Through his familiarity and work with them, Still was able to reproduce conventions that allowed his work to be recognized as authentic. I study three of Still’s poems from the first section of Hounds to show both what he learned and how his poems were used in turn by those institutions to validate their own work. Specifically, I show how Hindman’s strategic fostering of dulcimers as an authentic mountain instrument attracted and trained Still. I then examine one of Still’s poems that The Atlantic Monthly valued for its authenticity, placing it within the line of writing about the mountains that The Atlantic had been cultivating since 1875. In the process, I demonstrate how The Atlantic linked the promotion of mountain literature with its position on progressive American imperialism. These sections focus on Hounds on the Mountain’s generation through discussing how Hindman (and other
institutions associated with the mountains) harnessed the cultural capital generated by Still’s book. These considerations set the stage for a more complete understanding of how Still negotiated relationships with editors, publishers, academics, and other writers, which resulted in the book’s production and influenced its reception.

I trace *Hounds on the Mountain* on its cultural circuit by uniting a study of the discursive history of Appalachia and the biographical survey of individuals and institutions that affected and were affected by that discourse. This focus gives us the opportunity to examine an interlocking set of actors in whose responses the book’s lived meaning can be found. The relation between individual action and institutional power is critical, for individuals (such as reviewers) only generate transferable value when functioning as part of an institution, whose historical momentum and association with particular discourses generate and direct that value as well; that is, publishing a review in *The Atlantic* carries the particular prestige, investments, and embroilments of that magazine.

Part V focuses on the production of *Hounds on the Mountain* by showing how Still entered into and moved through the literary field to gain publication with Viking. In doing so, this section also addresses the history of Viking Press and their valuation of poetry, for not only the text (as in the overview in Part II) is at issue but so is the actual book itself, including all its “matter,” (blurbs, cover, biographical statements, and front material), which influenced how the book was valued by readers. Thus, Part VI focuses on the reception of the book by reviewers from distinct and conflicting segments of the literary field. Their responses show the range of differing interpretations that can be brought to a single text, the ability of the book’s design by the publisher to guide those interpretations, and the power of “authenticity” to demand attention. Because my goal is to demonstrate the interconnection and influence of the literary field (its discourse, it actors, its institutions, its history) with other distinct parts of American history, Parts V and VI also focus on select moments in the literary field to show the institutional dynamics in the 1930s wherein *Hounds on the Mountain* generated meaning.

The chapter concludes with Part VII, which investigates Still’s inner conflicts as he began to gain accolades and meet figures in the literary field: writers, editors, professors, and

---

1 A term used by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “cultural capital” refers to how the value that a piece of art generated could be transferred to other “fields” of relation (such as economics, politics, or education). Hence, “capital” refers to the dynamic of generating transferable worth that could be remanifested to affect the generation of further value.
publishers. Still could now begin to turn his art into a profession—a situation which brought his commitments and morals into conflict with the actions that were asked of him. Scholars have questioned why Still’s work, which carried great regional repute, is not as well known as his contemporaries (and friends) such as Katherine Anne Porter. Part of the answer will be found by examining the roots that his first collection, *Hounds on the Mountain*, laid in the literary field, from which Still’s name would eventually rise as synonymous with the Kentucky mountains.

Part I: Getting Authentic

Praised by its contemporary reviewers, editors, and readers as “authentic,” *Hounds on the Mountain* stands as this dissertation’s most crucial example of regionalism. Just as the other types of early century pluralism (cultural pluralism and cultural relativism), regionalism was also a type of American modernism, as assertions about Still’s authenticity demonstrate. In *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (1989), Miles Orvell holds that the literary period of Realism developed during “an era of imitation” when commodity reproduction allowed the “democratizing of luxury” through the imitation of class accoutrement (xvi). Reacting to the popularizing of elite motifs, modernist literature was composed during “an era of authenticity” that “was based on a functionalist ethos that sought to elevate the vernacular into the realm of high culture.” In the arts, this meant that instead of representing the real world, artists attempted to produce works that were “themselves real things” (xx, 241), both commenting upon the process of representation and attempting to touch the real. One key debate in modernist literatures was over the effects of mechanical reproduction (Orvell 157-197). Artists in the early part of the century either hoped machines would produce an artful and egalitarian society (as with the Futurists and later with Bauhaus) or feared the production of a depleted society of the enslaved. This fear led to the valorization of artful handicrafts (with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement). When the depression exposed the failings of a commodity-driven economy, handicrafts took on new momentum, and Appalachian handicrafts rose into the spotlight.

Jane Becker, in *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (1998) outlines how market studies, distribution experts, and national companies sold

---

authenticity to consumers who were hungry to own objects that had origins outside the commodity marketplace, such as Appalachian quilts, blankets, or furnishings (194). This appetite for the authentic can be understood as a longing for what John Crowe Ransom called “the aesthetic”: those functional items whose use and beauty evolved in organic relation to economy, belief, and ecology (“The Aesthetic” 49). What made an object “authentic” was the consumer’s belief that craftspeople built it to fulfill their life needs and that such objects carried meaning within their native cultural traditions. Walter Benjamin refers to such “authentic” objects as drawing an “aura” of authority by being uniquely “embedded within the fabric of tradition” and by bearing “testimony to the history which it has experienced” (223-224, 221). Benjamin, however, is not referring to handicrafts but to Western high art, each piece of which gains its authority through “cults of beauty” derived from secularizing art’s “ritual function” established long ago in ancient societies’ systems of magic and religion (223). Appalachian handicrafts were generally believed to be used in their original ritual function as part of chthonic Appalachian culture. Rather than being made as art (as would be later be the case with outsider art), “authentic” items that were designed for sale mimed those functional items believed to be at use in the native culture.  

Opposed to items made by Native Americans, Appalachian handicrafts held white America’s attention because they were indicative of the nation’s origins. Handicrafts, that is, manifested the property that Horace Kallen called “natio,” that “inwardness of . . . nativity” standing “[b]ehind [one] in time” and in which one “lives, moves and has [one’s] being” (“Democracy 94). Marketers heralded these creations of southern mountain whites to be indigenous to America because of the folk’s isolation and adaptation to the mountain environment. That the mountaineers were believed to have maintained, even partially, the life style of America’s pioneer forefathers held powerful sales seduction during the Depression, particularly because millions of Americans had recently left their farms to enter the wage-labor force. That heritage could now be partially renewed through the commodity eucharis of Appalachian wares. Americans sought to protect themselves (consumers) from themselves (modernity in America) by consuming themselves (their natio). Yet such an explanation belies the power relations implicit in assertions of authenticity. In The Predicament of Culture (1988),

a critique of twentieth-century Western ethnographic study of primitive cultures, James Clifford highlights authenticity’s relational nature: “Questionable acts of purification are involved in any attainment of a promised land, return to ‘original’ sources, or gathering up of a true tradition. Such claims to purity are . . . always subverted by the need to stage authenticity in opposition to external, often dominating alternatives” (11-12). As will be discussed later in the chapter, outside benevolent workers were struggling to help impoverished mountaineers gain necessities by fostering their production of select mountain crafts that would sell in the modern marketplace. Such acts support Clifford’s assertion that “authenticity is relational [and] there can be no essence except as a political, cultural intervention, a local tactic.” Such tactics, however, do not necessarily denote consciousness of authenticity’s contingency. This precise dynamic occurred when the Hindman Settlement School cultivated mountain crafts that the American mainstream could recognize as authentic, and that produced authenticity quickly became accepted as being natural to the mountain culture.

This chapter considers how Still’s book produced cultural capital by drawing upon and reproducing belief in the aura of such “authentic” folk arts: by the quality of the book’s design and typography, by its vivid representation of such authentic items and mountain culture (and the threat to them), and by its association with poetry, that most cultish and ritualized of literary genres. The contradiction of reproducing the “aura” of mountain life in a commodity art form (the poetry book) is reflected in Still’s ambiguous stance toward both the literary field and the Appalachian folk. This tension is heightened by Still’s entrance as a newcomer to both the literary field and Appalachia. Hounds on the Mountain, more than any of his later works, represents Still’s early belief in “the elemental and atavistic” Southern Highlander (Botkin, “The Folk in Literature” 16).

On one side, Still succumbed to the seduction of apparent “primitiveness” that Donald Davidson claimed had stimulated the imaginations of other white writers. Yet, on the other, Still was an artist whose understanding of mountain life and work in Knott County, Kentucky, was ever deepening. Still certainly witnessed the evolving vestiges of the native mountaineers’ belief, ecology, economy, and art whose culture was rapidly changing under the pressures of the modern “machine economy” that sought “maximum efficiency” in order to produce a “multiplicity of goods for consumption” (Ransom “The Aesthetic” 53). Hounds on the Mountain represents Still’s stance as an outsider whose sympathy for the mountain condition resulted from
his own agrarian background, from his artistic empathy as an artist, and from what he had learned of the mountains from other educated outsiders.

These considerations grow more complex when we realize that few regional natives knew Still’s writing. While Still wrote about their experience, he did not write to them nor imitate their tongue or manner. Still’s writing was designed for a national readership familiar with the literary conventions in *The Atlantic*, and his book was published (as well as “financed and interpreted,” Donald Davidson might point out [197]) by Viking Press in New York for a national readership. Inspecting Still’s relation to his audience and subject shows him in a simultaneously intimate and removed relationship with the people about whom he writes, as opposed to Muriel Rukeyser (an outsider who wrote for a select national audience) and Don West (an insider who wrote first for rural working-class readers). Yet Still was invigorated by his moral loyalty to his art, the mountains, and his work at Hindman. This energy quickly earned him a high profile in the literary field, but he was confounded by the relations that the literary field demanded he assume to capitalize upon his early success and make his name (i.e., writing for readers of *The Atlantic*, self-promotion, and greater production).

Still’s understanding and relationship to regional natives was also mediated by his relationship with the Hindman Settlement School and the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW). Founded in 1902, Hindman assumed the role of an intermediary institution to provide mountain children with educations in order to aid their integration and success in modern America. As with other settlement programs, a large part of Hindman’s work involved affirming the native (mountain) culture but did so through affirming those parts of the culture that the school’s teachers valued. For instance, the traditions of folksong, which were “discovered” by scholars such as Harvard’s George Lyman Kittredge, had been strategically selected and nurtured by the mountain workers. As we will see, no less can be said for Still’s selection of poems which were held up as examples that validated, through their authenticity, the visions, hopes, and work of members of the CSMW. While mountaineers might be said to have had a common circumstance (at least that strata of mountaineer which was the focus of benevolence work), that commonality had not taken shape as a common consciousness. Ethnic consciousness took shape primarily through organizations and activists in the CSMW who were defining just who they were trying to help, why they were worth helping, and what should be done to help them. In doing so, the CSMW necessarily constructed beliefs about the
mountaineers that upheld the values of middle-class benevolence workers. By the time of James Still’s arrival, Hindman teachers had been instilling those values and beliefs within their clientele for a generation. Thus when Still made friends with a dulcimer maker who exemplified the native tradition, Still could only do so because dulcimer-making had been promoted by the settlement school. At debate is just what the word “authentic” meant and to whom.

Still gained access to the mountains and validation for his art by serving in the hegemonic system that was forming mountain identity. By “hegemony,” I refer to the network of cultural workers striving to articulate the mountaineers’ circumstances and bring about change. The connection of such work with a wider American system is demonstrated through showing that editors, intellectuals, and readers recognized Still’s work as “authentic” and aesthetically successful, awarding him national prizes (such as the O. Henry Award) and fellowships (such as the Guggenheim). However, even as Still gained clout from this affirmation, he resisted participation in the national literary field. This difficulty was partially the result of the difference in the demands of the literary world and Still’s agrarian, southern upbringing. Yet it was also a moral conflict for Still. He may not have written directly for the mountaineers among whom he lived, but he underwent a sustained battle of conscience because he felt himself in service to them, both as a librarian who hailed from the rural South and as a writer whose art took its inspiration from the folk, with whom he was slowly becoming one.

The following chapter explores the vicissitudes of Still’s development as a poet and a hegemonic worker during the writing and publication of Hounds on the Mountain. In the process, we will see how Still’s path was shaped by the figures who validated his work, and I will give account for how various people and institutions manifested, harnessed, and utilized the value of his work to affect the status of pluralism. This examination will show that although the hegemonic cultural field is a national (and international) network, it is also localized, various, and often in conflict. Thus, the story of Hounds on the Mountain’s travel around the cultural circuit is a window through which we can examine the dynamics of the literary field’s histories and intrigues, discern its disciplinary mechanisms, and witness its role in fostering cultural change.
Part II: An Overview of Hounds on the Mountain

One of James Still’s greatest proponents was W. S. Knickerbocker, editor of the Sewanee Review, which published more of the poems in Hounds than any other periodical excepting Poetry (both published five poems). Centering on the poems that Knickerbocker published, this section establishes an overview of Hounds on the Mountain and provides a common ground from by which we may gauge how reviewers selectively rendered their description and evaluation of the book. Of course, as with any reader, Knickerbocker’s selections were informed by his investment in a particular perspective, which is discussed below. Nevertheless, Knickerbocker’s selections were central to Still’s own artistic development and the design of the book. Still’s poems in the Sewanee Review were published one at a time from January 1936 to April 1937. Moreover, the book takes its title from the poem “Hounds on the Mountain,” which was also first published in the Sewanee Review. As discussed later, Knickerbocker provided essential guidance for Still about operating within the literary field, and he wrote to Still that “I have watched with increasing satisfaction the growth of your reputation” (14 Sept. 1937)—no doubt because regular publication in the Sewanee Review had given a particular flavor and strength to Still’s value.

While I do not attempt to render the particular readings that Knickerbocker might have given the poems, which he admired for their “quiet luminosity of phrase and line” (11 March 1937), their rhetorical value for him may be approximated by examining Knickerbocker and the Sewanee Review’s relationship to criticism, poetry, regionalism, and the Agrarians. The tale of the Sewanee Review is an important anecdote, representative of the discursive shift in the academic study of literature brought on by the New Critics, whose histories efface Knickerbocker’s long editorship.4 Founded in the University of the South in 1892, the Sewanee Review was (and is) the oldest continually published critical quarterly in the nation. The journal first began publishing poetry along with literary criticism in 1920, and Knickerbocker took over editorship in 1926. At that time, the Sewanee Review was the most heavily cited journal of criticism in the new MLA bibliography. Knickerbocker began publishing (and writing

---

4 See The Critics Who Made Us: Essays from Sewanee Review, ed. George Core (1992), which anthologizes the critical reminiscences the then living New Critics published in the magazine in the 1980s. Similarly, the historical essay on the Review’s website only mentions Knickerbocker in a series of names at the end of the essay (Bradford). Articles narrating the journal’s history by its later editors infallibly dismiss Knickerbocker. George Core, editor from 1973 to present (2004), writes, “Knickerbocker, who was behaving erratically at best, was a burnt-out case” (71). Monroe K. Spears, editor from 1952 to 1961, describes Knickerbocker as “a small, feisty, voluble rather silly person who was certainly offensive” (9).
editorials) on contemporary culture and poetry, juxtaposing these to his own scholarly focus on Victorian literature (Turner 25-27). His program was to revalue the South’s role in American culture and the humanist tradition. After writing evaluative essays on the Fugitives in 1928, Knickerbocker provided the central platform from which the Agrarians trumpeted their creed; indeed, “Reconstructed But Unregenerate,” John Crowe Ransom’s lead essay for I’ll Take My Stand, first appeared in the Sewanee Review as did other essays about the New South, many by those who forcibly disagreed with the Agrarians. In his review of I’ll Take My Stand for The New York Times Book Review, Knickerbocker appreciates the essayists’ skill but dismisses their deprecation of modernity and idealization of the past: the job, Knickerbocker held, was not to dismiss industry but to “integrate by hard labor, industrious experiment, and contingent thinking the forces of industrialism with those of agriculture” (467). What Still represented for Knickerbocker was not rejection of modernity but the value of maintaining humans’ ever-perilous intimacy with landscape.

Hounds on the Mountain contains 35 relatively brief poems, and has five sections. (The particulars of design, typography, and matter are analyzed in Part V.) The first section, “Hounds on the Mountain,” takes its title from the final poem in that part, which was published in the April-June 1937 issue of the Sewanee Review immediately before the book’s release that June. This section’s eight poems establish the essence, if you will, of the mountains in poems such as “Child in the Hills” and “Mountain Dulcimer” (which are evaluated in Part III about Still’s relationship to Hindman). The other six poems in the section strike similar essentialist chords, including the description of a mountain marriage in “Infare,” the description of a hunt with hounds, and one about “Horse Swapping”—all of which summon English and Anglo-Saxon associations to the seemingly premodern events described. The section concludes with two poems questioning the cost of abandoning such a culture. Evoking the intrusion of industrialism and cost of migration, “Journey beyond the Hills,” which was published in The Yale Review, ends:

Down the mountains lanes,
  Down the heavy-hipped ridges stricken and unforested
  They have gone with streams unhalted and draining
  The narrow valleys of the flesh of earth. (13, 7-10)
Notably, only two of the 36 reviews of the book mention Still’s recognition of cultural clash and change, perhaps choosing not to dare associations with the high-profile labor conflict in Harlan County that was written about by Theodore Dreiser and the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners in The New Republic and Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields (1932). Rather than condemning the danger of industry, most reviews highlighted those poems that portrayed an unsullied mountain culture.

“Hounds on the Mountain,” the final poem of the section, invokes the form of a sonnet. Its speculative breaks, evolving transformations, consistency of rhythm and pace, and tenuous slant-rhymes manifest mountain life’s ephemeral connection to the edge of the symbolic order. The first section (lines 1-5) begins by rendering the ongoing “agony” of “hill on hill” which join “dry roots” and “the wet lattice of morning” in their “Slow dull fulcrum, slow arched leanings,” all the while “witless” of any living “stark eyes” (p. 14, l. 1-4). The hemistich of the first line (“Slow dull fulcrum, slow arched leanings”) is also manifested in the stanza’s form, which is cleft by an end stop in the middle of the fifth line and continues in a new sentence on the sixth line indented far enough to recognize the absent-presence of the fifth:

\[ \ldots \text{and keen the agony of dry roots} \]

\[ \text{Questing beneath the earth.} \]

\[ \text{LEAN AS BROWN STRAW} \]

\[ \text{The hounds of day tread out} \ldots (4-7) \]

The second section (6-10) displays the latent intrusion of humanity via “The hounds of day” which appear from “thickets of darkness” (7). The interlinkage of the poem’s progression demonstrates the interconnection of the earth with the animal. “Lean as brown straws,” these hounds give the grass their bodily dampness and proceed to roam beyond any human “thoughts that cream the tongue unspoken” (6, 8, 10): they are, “Thinner than fly-wings, heavier than words in a cavern” (9). These hounds mark the natural world with human presence (“heavier than words in a cavern”) which is nearly untraceable in its passing (“fly-wings”). The lines are flush with syllables and stresses, always pushing just beyond the bounds of iambic pentameter regularity. With a stanza break, the third section begins slowly and then erupts:

\[ \text{HOUNDS ON THE MOUNTAIN} \ldots \]

\[ \text{Grey and swift spinning the quarry shall turn} \]
At the cove’s ending, at the slow day’s breaking,
And lave the violent shadows with her blood. (11-14, ellipsis in original)

Without warning, the first ten lines of the sonnet have described the emergence of a hunt, which ends with a sudden confrontation and sundering. It is as if only a portion of unobservable nature (the quarry’s blood) can be brought forth from “the violent shadows” as the hunters (the hounds) catch up “at the day’s slow breaking” (the known world). This sudden “turn/ at the cove’s ending” symbolizes the mountains’ promise, where encounter with what is vitally real--one defined as much by the prey as the landscape or the hunter--inhabits a sublime liminality always just beyond sight. The poem represents a place where an ever-evolving, continuously-renewed gift of nature to civilization is realized through a ritualized relationship: that which lives beyond human civilization can replenish it only through a properly rendered sacrifice. As the ultimate poem in the first section, we can read this ritual as the unspoken center for the following poems that more firmly portray mountain culture.

The second section of the book, “Creek County,” more calmly renders the harmony of mountain farmers with nature. The first two poems in the section were published in the Sewanee Review, and I discuss the second, “On Redbird Creek” (18). This poem (and section) directly considers the limits of what can be heard within purposeful cultivation. Written in thirteen lines and two stanzas (7 and 6 lines long), the poem hints at the Petrarchan sonnet but combines it with an Anglo ballad form (A-B-C-B) of the first quatrain with solidly-wrought, iambic pentameter lines. Forming the first sentence, these lines detail the “cloven soil,” which “has penned acres up/ With greenness prim” (3-4). The second sentence makes up the next section, which, instead of providing the expected quatrain, includes only three lines that rhyme A-D-D. These lines point toward the “mist grown stark and tall” beyond the farm’s edge to “the west/ Of Redbird Creek where crows and blackbirds call” (5-6). The missing fourth line of the quatrain perhaps represents that which rests beyond the bounds of what can be perceived from the folds of the farm. Until this point, the images and syntax are clearly rendered. However, the second stanza (lines 8-13), through use of unspecified antecedents, points out the “foils of clouds” which “men and plows attend” (12):

The vibrant canes crowding marshy ground
Are tuneless pipes heard by bleeding ears
Through blighted chestnut cankered to the heart
And rousing all of memory’s ancient fears
These foils of clouds that men and plows attend
Are tares and thistles strewn upon the wind. (8-13)

Composed in one flowing, abundant sentence, the stanza is perhaps Still’s finest formal showing. This sextet’s rhyme hints at the shape of a Shakespearian sonnet, joining a ballad quatrain and an ending couple (E-F-G-F-H-H). On the edge of the human ordered world, one must question just what causes the “ears,” which hear the “tuneless pipes” of canes by the streambed, to be “bleeding” (8-9). The reference to blood is akin to the corporal rupture on the edge of the visible world as in the final line of “Hounds on the Mountain.” The “ancient fears” (11) that are raised have less to do with the sound of “vibrant canes” than the fact that sound passes through “blighted chestnut” (8, 10), where the natural world is torn by human manipulation. Thus, “these foils of clouds” in the final couplet might be read as referring to both the “pipes” that have not been given human meaning (they are, after all, “tuneless”) as well as to the consequence of not undertaking the rituals which are required to partake of substance from outside of the civilized world. To dispel such fears, “men and plows attend” to the tamable (and tunable) precincts of cultivated land. The “foils” become the “tares and thistles strewn upon the wind” and cannot be constrained via such purposeful cultivation (13). Yet the farm Still describes is vigorous from its proximity to the inhuman. Conversely, over cultivation and raw exposure dehumanizes both farmers and the land. In “On Double Creek” (22), the final poem in this six-poem section, Still relates the consequences of such forced labor and misshapen poverty:

Across the creek I saw the paupers plowing
I can remember their plodding in furrows,
Their palsied hands, the worn flesh of their faces,
And their odd shapelessness, and their tired cries.
I can remember the dark swift martins in their eyes. (5-9)

With the first use of first person in the collection, Still contrasts his own childhood on a cotton farm in the deep South against the experience of nature and farming in the mountains. This emendation is not shared with readers, which led many reviewers to take the poem as proof that Still was “mountain-born.” Rather, Still was an immigrant who discerned in the mountains much of what the lowland South had lost (or had never had).
Such poverty, of course, existed in the mountains. The third section, “Earth-Bread,” contains three short poems that depict, with compression and symbolic agility, experience in mining towns. Even though these poems gain strength through contrast with others in the volume, only two reviews mention (without quoting) these poems. The first poem in the section, “Mountain Coal Town” (25) was published in the Sewanee Review’s July-Sept. 1936 issue. Hinting at the dilemmas he would explore in greater depth with his novel River of Earth (which Knickerbocker was advising him to write rather than poetry if Still wished to succeed in the literary field), the poem is a straight-forward portrayal of “stark houses hung upon the hills” that act as a “pool of daylight” for the miners (1, 3). Unlike the other poems that Still published in the Sewanee Review, “Mountain Coal Town” reduces difference to simple opposition:

A sweeter dampness rises from the river’s flowing
Than leaks from the black caverns of the earth. (7-8)

These poems play a critical role in Hounds on the Mountain, demonstrating the debilitation of raw resource extraction. Consider the concluding lines from “Earth-Bread,” which appeared in Poetry May 1937, a month before the book’s release:

Bent into flesh-knots the miners dig this earth-bread,
This stone-meat, these fruited bones.

This is the eight-hour death, the daily burial
In a dark harvest lost as any dead. (26, 10-13)

These lines catch the false death and depletion brought on by the rife search for wealth. The negotiated, ritualized dance with meaning displayed in the first two sections of the book is sacrificed to the irony of equating the miner’s muscles and search for wage to the “earth-bread” of coal.

The book’s fourth section, “Death on the Mountain,” provides a metaphysical plunge into mortality, in which human and mountain meld and wherein demise takes a meaningful, if fraught, relationship with life. These poems of solitary contemplation were the most heavily quoted in reviews. Although none were published in the Sewanee Review, a representative example is “Death in the Forest,” which appeared in the Saturday Review of Literature and was wholly reprinted in four reviews. The poem begins, “I was born humble. At the foot of the mountains . . .” (p. 37, l. 1). Here, humility is equated to one’s nearness to “the immensity of
earth” (2). Through such a posture, the narrator discerns the promised meaning of the natural world: “There is so much writ upon the parchment of leaves” (4). The speaker cannot capture such unbearable plenty under “the mute trees,” but learns, instead, to immerse himself with surrender: “I can but fold my hands and sink my knees/ In the leaf-pages” (6-7). Yet such a determined act of resisting the urge to cultivate or analyze nature scientifically (i.e., to capture meaning) is not an act of joy: “My heart grieves/ Beneath this wealth of wisdom perished with the leaves” (10-11).5 This grieving is not sadness but acceptance of a situation beyond one’s control. The narrator’s hope is that he will learn to stay present with that which resists human understanding. In the context of the other poems in this section, perished “leaves” refer also to figures like Nixie Middleton, who bemoans the death of her lover in the poem that immediately precedes “Death in the Forest.” Other poems, such as “Passenger Pigeons” (39), first published in The New York Times (Feb. 5, 1936), meditate upon the act of extinction:

Here were red feet of pigeons spilling
Like blood through the trees, breaking the forest down
In the dense roosting wild with guttural cooing.
Here in this weight of wings were folded dust and death. (4-8)

No matter the weight or sheer volume of life, death itself rests as the unconquerable wilderness against which human civilization always lies, even if, more often that not, people remain in denial.

The final section’s title, “Hill Born,” refers to the book’s first poem (“Child in the Hills”) and attempts to synthesize the tension between continuity and contingency, between pure presence and inevitable loss. The mountains are reaped for their metaphorical resonance as Still develops a poetic metaphysics to resolve the dilemma of the modern promise. On the one hand rests the mainstream guarantee to provide a high standard of living for all people through standardization, dislocation, and extraction of natural resources. On the other hand stands the mountaineer, whose culture of spirit and handicraft was crafted from negotiating the proximity to nature where loss and ending were constant companions. Reviews choose to highlight Still’s attention to the later rather than his quiet critique of the former.

5 Hinting at one reason that the Knickerbocker as a scholar of Victorian poetry valued Still, “Death in the Forest” resonates images from Gerard Manely Hopkins’ “Goldengrove,” which begins, “Márgarétt, áre you grieving/ Over Goldengrove unleaving?/ Leáves like the things of man . . .” (1-3).
“The Hill-Born,” the lead poem of the section, was Still’s earliest publication in the *Sewanee Review* (Jan. 1936). Like the hounds from “Hounds on the Mountain” the mountaineers appear at dawn “astride their bony nags/ In the gaunt hours when the lean young day/ Walks the grey ridge” (p. 43, l. 1-3). Appropriately, this poem seems to roam across the page, and a third of its first twenty-one, odd-footed lines end with the resonance of “-ing” (“curving,” “breathing,” “spawning,” etc.). Rising from their “wall-darkened beds” that are bathed “with the crickets’ chirping” and “cicadas’ song,” the mountaineers appear from the early morning’s “leprous mist” as figures joined to the landscape (5, 6, 7, 8). Such predawn melding allows them to walk without a “trace in aftergrass” on their way with “broadax and with adz and fro” to “hew and flay among the patriarchs/ And bring their strength and aged glory low” (11, 12, 14-15). In such an envisioned harvest, this reaping of “ancient wilderness” with swinging “scythes” and “wildly singing” blades is no less than

A song echoing from earth’s dull throat.

A sweep of years will bring them all to lie

Wrapped in strange flowering of earth and sky, (19-21)

The antecedent for “them all” who will “lie” (and hence live) among “flowering of earth and sky” is not just the trees, but also the men who cut them down. Amid “the shallow amblings of Squabble Creek” and “broad hills,” “earth-born lays are sung” without being entrapped in civilized rancor. By referring to the “earth-born lays” of the mountaineers, Still generates a feeling of authenticity in his readers without actually portraying the lays and hence being accused of disingenuousness (and of interfering with the reader’s fantasy associations). The existence of such unseen, ideal lays was Still’s early idyllic fantasy as well. A distilled version of Wordsworth’s vision lives more strongly in “The Hill-Born” than in any of Still’s later writing, which demonstrates his growing intimacy with the complexities of mountain life. Still includes the poem in *Hounds on the Mountain* to set an ideal, one which the next nine poems of the section would contest, revise, and attempt to realize.

“The Hill-Born” can be read as Knickerbocker’s hope that humanism and Southern life might live together. Writing for *Contempo* in 1932, Knickerbocker had called the particular vision of southern life advocated in *I’ll Take My Stand* “the most backward, least intelligent, most wasteful, most bitter and unrelenting of any pattern of life evoked in these States of America” (qtd. in Jessens 275). It is testimony to the spell of Appalachia that Knickerbocker felt
there was a place in America where the ideals of agrarian life might live without injustice or violation of human dignity. “The Hill Born” might also be read has his fight for an alternative type of authenticity, differing from the modernist poetic techniques enunciated in the late thirties by Warren, Brooks, and Tate. Although Still gained value from his association with the *Sewanee Review*, the time of Knickerbocker’s benign, humanist regionalism was waning.

In 1941, Andrew Lytle (one of the authors in *I’ll Take My Stand*) worked with Allen Tate to depose Knickerbocker as editor (Janssens 276-79). Both felt the time was ripe for a new critical quarterly to take up the reigns of the New Criticism because Brooks’s and Warren’s *The Southern Review* had just ceased publication in 1942. As intoned by Allen Tate in “The Function of a Critical Quarterly” (1936): “The ideal task of the critical quarterly is not to give the public what it wants, or what it thinks it wants, but what—through the medium of its most intelligent members—it ought to have” (72). Tate’s driving point is that readers must be lectured to rather than communicated with: “A sound critical program has at least this one feature: it allows the reader no choice in the standards of judgment” (65). Sensing the changing status and role of the university in America and recognizing an outmoded editor, the Vice Chancellor of the University of the South agreed with Lytle that a change was needed, and Lytle took the post in 1943. Tate took over editorship in 1944 with the express purpose of continuing “in the South the recent service to letters performed by *The Southern Review*” (qtd. in Jassens 279). While Tate only worked as editor for two years, he catalyzed a transformation. In 1992 (100 years after its founding) the *Sewanee Review* published an essay about its history that commented on “the sad state of decline” brought on by Knickerbocker and the great increase in the quality of scholarship and quality of literature published after Lytle’s and Tate’s editorships (Spears 658-59). Even as the journal published a tributary issue to John Crowe Ransom in 1948, it would efface its origins in Knickerbocker’s committed editing that gave the Agrarians room to stand on the same platform with the regional likes of James Still.6

Part III: “Dulcimores,” Settlement Schools, and Modernity

For the last century, the most well recognized cultural symbol for the Appalachian region has been the dulcimer, which proved a potent and cultivated icon for James Still and for the

---

6 Ransom was then the editor of another upcoming critical quarterly, *The Kenyon Review*, that would also define contemporary American literature for decades to come.
Hindman Settlement School. Still’s early encounters with and poetry about dulcimers display
the tensions and hopes underlying *Hounds on the Mountain*, both for Still and for America.
*Hounds*’s second poem “Mountain Dulcimer” concisely illustrates the contradictions and
tensions of outsiders’ beliefs about seeing Appalachia as a premodern space where contemporary
Americans felt that people still lived in vital proximity to nature.

In “Mountain Dulcimer” no human voices are heard. Divorced from the human tongue,
Still’s “dulcimer sings,” seemingly of its own accord, “of the doe’s swift poise, the fox’s fleeting
step/ And the music of the hounds” (p. 5, l. 1-2). Indeed, the poem’s ambiguous syntax
strategically refuses to locate actors, and thus its music blurs the distinction between the human
and non-human world. The dulcimer’s “fretted maple throat” allows the “creak of saddle-bags,
of oxen yoke” to sound out next to the “wild turkey’s treble” and “dark flight of crows,” for the
dulcimer has been crafted in the “quiet” by “the carver of maple” (1, 9, 10, 19, 20). This fine
line between the human and natural is the “keen blade’s edge” that carves the body of the
dulcimer, that instrument whose “breast that sounds hunting horns/ Strong as clenched hands
upon the edge of death” (20, 7-8). And after the distant drumming of the “anvil’s strength,” that
dulcimer vocalized the “silence” that “aches and cries unhushed into the day” (4, 5, 6). For in
the mountain reaches where machines are silent, when one takes “Long drinks from piggins hard
against the lips,” one can hear “breath of the lark” (15, 14). In this poem, a mountain dulcimer is
the implement of an unseen people who, due to their minimal use of systematic technology, live
next to and can see through the valance between life and death, between the human world and
the natural.

First published on July 4, 1935, in three newspapers in North Carolina and Virginia (and
later that month in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*), the poem must have soothed anxiety over
the Depression, which was felt acutely on the most American of holidays. In the age of modern
artifice and industry at the turn of the century through 1929, Americans had poured into the cities
to seek the promised shelter of higher standards of living under the fabric of civilization’s
umbrella. However, the Depression suddenly revealed to millions the failed tools of civilization,
upon whose trappings they had become dependent. Given the economic struggles most faced,
newspapers readers in the Southern cities of Durham, Greensboro, and Norfolk took sympathetic
solace with the soul-life that “Mountain Dulcimer” portrayed in its remove. Or so many
regionalists and Agrarians would have claimed.
Still wrote about mountain dulcimers because his closest friend at Hindman, Jethro Amburgey to whom *Hounds on the Mountain* is dedicated, made them. This encounter with “authentic” culture was one of Still’s defining schemas. In June 1939, Still moved to a two-story log house between Dead Mare Branch and Wolfpen Creek in Knott County, Kentucky, where he would work on completing his novel *River of Earth.* Built by immigrants from the Black Forest of Germany in 1837, this dwelling was Amburgey’s birthplace. Amburgey was a renowned dulcimer craftsman, who after the death of his mother asked Still to care for his birth home (Still, “James Still” 239-40). At the time, Still was serving as librarian for the Hindman Settlement School at which Amburgey taught manual training and carpentry. Still had first come to Hindman because a friend from college, Don West, sent him a dulcimer in 1930 which was made by J. D. Thomas, whose brother had taught Amburgey how to do so during his own student residence at Hindman. The single stipulation was that Amburgey would sell no dulcimer until after Thomas had died (Creighton 25). By 1965, over 700 of Amburgey’s dulcimers, famed for their “craft and care and precision,” had been sold to co-insurers around the world. Such was the international reputation of Still’s closest friend and cultural ally who produced the objects with which Still’s writing closely parlayed.

1965 also saw the founding of the Appalachian Regional Commission as part of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, and the magazine *Mountain Life and Work* celebrated its 40th anniversary with the republication of James Still’s poem “Dulcimer,” which first appeared in the magazine in October 1935:

The dulcimer's three strings are the heart's cords.
Tune them carefully, turn the pegs slowly,

\[\text{\ldots\ldOTS
Play love's first waking, play the yielding light,

Play life, play death, play eyes that cannot weep. (1-2, 13-17)

The poem manifests the beliefs of the Council of Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW), of which Mountain Life and Work was declared “the official organ” in 1933 (Dingman 2). Consisting primarily of home missionaries, charity workers, health reformers, educators, and social workers, the CSMW sought, even as they aided the mountaineers in becoming modern, to honor the interconnection of handicrafts, culture, and environment, through which the human spirit might faithfully discern, render, and appreciate the world.8 “Dulcimer” served as no less than a manifesto of preservation even as CSMW struggled to help the mountaineers adapt to modernization. The poem articulated the myth around the dulcimer that a people’s unspeakable and unquantifiable intimacy with the environment was realized and deepened through their relationship with their handcrafted music. But the final phrase of the poem—“play eyes that cannot weep”—proposes the mountaineers’ inability to grieve for the passing of their ways.

In response, the CSMW coordinated efforts of school boards, state and regional colleges, federal agencies, and foundations to assemble the 1935 federal survey Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Appalachians. This study represented one of the greatest realizations of regional planning and facilitated New Deal efforts in the region (Messinger 337-39). Appalachia had become a region whose common social characteristics, now recognized and charted, could help coordinate aid. In the multi-year project of assembling and discussing the repercussions of this study, Mountain Life and Work served as the common ground to a diverse set of mountain workers, wherein dialogue might be facilitated (327). Moreover, libraries throughout the nation subscribed to Mountain Life and Work, which served as CSMW’s most effective means for disseminating their efforts to define the meaning of Appalachia (16). And if there were doubt of the CSMW’s affiliation with regionalism, Olive D. Campbell—the wife of John C. Campbell who established CSMW in 1915 and directed it until his death in 1919—published an article titled, “Testing Æ’s Philosophy” demonstrating how regionalism as practiced in Europe could be practiced in Appalachia. A moderate Irish nationalist, poet, and friend of W. B. Yeats, Æ (or George Russell William) articulated many essential philosophical positions on regionalism. As editor of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society's journal, The Irish Homestead (1905-1922), and its successor, The Irish Statesman (1923-1930), Æ would

8 See Chapter One for the early history of CSMW.
write, “New arts and industries would spring up under the aegis of the local associations. Here we should find the weaving of rugs, there the manufacture of toys, elsewhere the women would engage in embroidery or lacing making, and perhaps everywhere we might get a rival of old local industry” (qtd. 5). His thinking was inspiration for the CSMW, which had a central role in forming the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild (SHHG) in 1930.

By 1932, the SHHG was promoting the efforts of 27 craft production centers and assisting them in creating a national market for mountain handicrafts (Messinger 406-08). In Selling Tradition, Jane S. Becker demonstrates the American marketplace’s exploitative influence on cultures whose authenticity was for sale. But many articles published in Mountain Life and Work promoted handicrafts as a way of fostering culture, reclaiming human relations, and forwarding self-sufficiency.9 The key phrase repeated throughout these articles was William Morris’s dictum to unite “use and beauty.” In the 1930s, Appalachia was perhaps best known in terms of the “traditional” objects it was selling to rest of the country (even though many of those had only recently become produced in the region).

In this context, Still’s poems reinforced (and drew upon) conceptions about the nativity of handicrafts to the mountain folk and their role in sustaining the folk’s organic relations with the mountains. From 1935 to 1939, Still would publish four poems and three stories in Mountain Life and Work (more than any other author) and become a contributing editor from 1939 to 1947. In 1936, Ann Cobb, a poet and teacher at the Hindman Settlement School, praised his work. Noting Still’s work as librarian for Hindman and listing his publications in national literary and monthly magazines, Cobb concludes, “Mountain people are noted for their sound judgment. The fact that they read Mr. Still's beautiful poems with enjoyment and appreciation is a proof of the truthfulness of his portraiture.” As a figure of no little cultural authority, Cobb valorized Still’s poems as items, like handcrafted dulcimers or quilts, which were worthy because of the common people’s admiration. While a powerful claim for authenticity, it was not the “mountain people” who read and valued Still’s poems but members of the CSMW and readers in the mainstream literary establishment.

Cobb had served a similar role for an earlier generation of mountain workers. Representative of other women who worked in mountain settlements, Cobb had graduated

---

9 Among the myriad articles on handicraft published in Mountain Life and Work, see: Allen Eaton, “Mountain Handicrafts: Their Importance to the County and to the People in the Mountains Homes,” Mountain Life and Work July 1930: 22-30 and Mary Ela, “Made by Hand,” Mountain Life and Work Fall 1940: 1-9.
Wellesley in 1894, became a teacher at Hindman in 1905, and authored a book of poems in 1922 called *Kinfolks: Kentucky Mountain Rhymes* (Houghton Mifflin). Appropriately enough, the first poem is titled “‘Dulcimer over the Fireboard’” and mimes mountain diction: “Dulcimer over the fireboard, handing sense allus-ago,/ Strangers are wishful to buy you, and make of your music a show” (page 3, 1-2). In a footnote to the poem, Cobb instructs, “To the accompaniment of [the dulcimer’s] plaintive drone are sung the ancient English and Scottish ballads still handed down from father to son.” Thus did Cobb, whose vivaciousness and care were praised by students and whose book had been upheld by Hindman as representative of the positive virtues of its Settlement work, befriend Still and pass on to him the literary mantel when she retired in 1938 (Stoddard 125, Lynn 50-53). In a 1937 pamphlet advertising the school, Hindman administrators gave a one-page list of books that would grant “vivid understanding of the mountain country and a better appreciation of its people”: the literary work of Lucy Furman, Ann Cobb, and James Still. Still’s section announced the forthcoming publication of *Hounds on the Mountain* and carefully listed all the magazines in which his poetry and stories “of this section” had appeared (“Hindman Settlement School”). Quotes from Still’s stories were also used in fund-raising letters in 1938.

As pointed out by David Whisnat in *All That’s Native and Fine*, such appeals to cultural survivals like English ballads were anachronisms that mountain settlement workers created to appeal to the values that they wished to foster: “Child ballads and dulcimers were good; banjoes and the newer music [played on fiddle and guitar] to be heard at the railheads and county seats were not” (56). In highlighting such anachronisms (along with other survivals such as “ballads and baskets, archaic speech and manners” [57]), the Settlements brought in scholars and collectors, such as Harvard’s George Lyman Kittredge, who reinforced the idea that those items were an original part of the contemporary mountain culture. Indeed, Still first came to work at Hindman Settlement School in Knott because he was sent, as he would send out to others, a dulcimer. This moment rests at the heart of Still’s poetics vision of Appalachia, and it sets the stage for his friendship with Amburgey.

Originally from the hills of east central Alabama, Still attended Lincoln Memorial University from 1925 to 1929, then went to Vanderbilt to get his MA in English from 1929 to 1930, and in November 1930 was working on his Masters of Library Science at the University of
Illinois. A fellow student from north Georgia named Don West had attended both LMU and Vanderbilt, and Still and West became close friends in Nashville. West was working on his Bachelors of Divinity in the School of Religion at the time and had gone to the Hindman Settlement School to work and collect data for his thesis on rural social infrastructure and its effect on values. West wrote to Still that he had “at last captured one of those old instruments known as the ‘Dulcimore’” [sic], and he sent it to Still along with testimony as to the “hopeless” case of the mountain youth (29 Nov. 1930). West had first written to Still in October after hearing of his mother’s death. As a young man trained in the Social Gospel, West also related his despair at the “undersized and student” boys “without legal fathers,” everyone of whom “smokes, swears, and drinks” (25 Oct. 1930). In an impassioned fourteen-page letter, West relates his “feeling of helplessness” and his desire to serve the suffering people who “will be a bunch of degenerates within a few more generations.” He appeals to Still to honor his recently deceased mother “like a real man” by coming to Hindman to uplift the people by helping them to be as clean and beautiful as the mountains they live upon: “These people are so selfishly destroying themselves. The worm of destruction is boring at the heart of the best that is in the mountains” (23 Dec. 1930). Moreover, knowing his friend’s interest in writing, West repeatedly promises that “I could give you material for stories and lots of them” (7 March 1931) and describes getting to know old men in the back in the hollows and how he manages to reform some of the boys.

West would undergo a moral crisis, leading him to discount settlement school methods, but the language he used portrays how many outsiders at Hindman Settlement School understood the mountaineers who they sought to reform: victims degenerating morally and physically under the forces of modernity. Still’s work gained notice by association with such uplift understandings, but he never waged such judgments upon the people of Knott County. Still was able to make not only a home at Hindman Settlement School, which was located in the country seat described as Still as “a village of some two hundred souls,” but he also saw the people

10. That Still would find Hindman a comfortable home after attending Lincoln Memorial University (LMU) is not a surprise, for LMU was founded by Congregational Missionaries in 1898 and gained its early funding primarily through the auspices of General O. O. Howard, who had headed the Freedman’s Bureau and founded Howard University. There is not room here to share the compelling and important story of the cultural contradictions imbedded in LMU’s history, but “Appendix C: The Ghost of Lincoln and Light in the Mountains” investigates the relationship between the founding of LMU, the Spanish-American War, and Mark Twain’s role in a 1902 celebration of Lincoln’s birthday, the funds from which went to support LMU. This appendix holds significance as well for Chapter Four on Don West.
among who he lived and worked with an appreciative (and sharp) eye (“A Man Singing” 17). Like other modernist poets at the time such as William Carlos Williams, Still sought to represent the reality that American culture had blinded Americans from seeing—in Still’s case, the reality of life in the mountains. To appreciate fully Still’s vision one needs also to understand the history of Hindman Settlement School and its relationship to Appalachia, which influenced how Still saw the world, the world itself (as noted above through the cultivation of dulcimers), and how the world understood Hindman, which cited Still’s work as authorizing testimony. In mutual validation, Still’s association with Hindman taught Still the conventions of authenticity, and Hindman converted Still’s cultural capital to help the folk survive in America.

Hindman Settlement School had been founded in 1902, an era of great progressive hopes and uplift efforts. One of the first settlement schools in America was the Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889, and by 1911 there were 413 settlements in the nation (Stoddard 13). The first settlement houses worked with immigrant populations and sought to ameliorate impoverished conditions by teaching immigrants American social codes and preserving as much as possible of their original customs, so they might form healthy, adapted communities (Davis 85, 88-89). The best of the settlements adjusted their teaching and practice to the immigrants’ culture and needs, but settlement workers were, of course, bound by the contemporary understanding of race and ethnicity, which caused both harsh judgments and attempts to preserve often stereotypical aspects of the culture. As with other settlements, Hindman had to negotiate the paradox of affirming and preserving Appalachian culture while at the same time preparing its students for a life in modern America. However, unlike those Settlements that served immigrants or African Americans in cities, Hindman worked to uplift Americans who still lived, as one 1909 encyclopedia article on Southern social settlements put it, “the pioneer life” (Neve 617). While only about one-tenth (42 in number) of all settlement schools were located in the South in 1911, between 1875 and 1920 over 200 missionary and settlement schools were founded in Appalachia (Stoddard 15, 4), generated, in part, by the retreat of benevolence workers from assisting blacks.11 The hope of these schools was to preserve the mountaineers’ “natural force of character” (i.e., independence and self-respect) while giving them the “moral training to render them valuable citizens of the republic” (Neve 621). The best way to do so, the article prescribes,

---

11 It is worth noting that the NAACP was founded by three settlement workers in 1909 (see Davis 100-102).
was through the industrial school and fireside industries, which would market items such as weaving and basket-making to consumers (619).

First attracted to investigate mountains after reading of the feuds reported in eastern Kentucky, Katherine Pettit, the founder of Hindman Settlement school who hailed from central Kentucky, sought to alleviate the conditions that lead to behavior contradictory to participation in American democracy and wealth (Stoddard 10-12, 27). Pettit was soon joined by May Stone. They shared the mutual influence of the Presbyterian church’s social gospel, popular fiction (see below), northern settlement schools, southern industrial schools for blacks, and the ideas of progressive social work and education (Whisnat 20, 41; Stoddard 17). They were supported by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union until 1917 and contrasted their work to the Home Missionary Movement, which failed to overcome their outsiders’ cultural biases (Stoddard 4, 17). Stone and Pettit, of course, had their own biases, and appealed—as Frost did with Berea—to funders to help those mountaineers of “‘Pioneer Stock’” and Anglo-Saxon heritage adjust to the new industrial works habits of the day (22-3). Much as Don West did in 1930, Pettit in 1899 emphasized the folk’s “truly wretched lives” and the decrepit work attitudes of males who merely hunted and talked while the women worked (qtd. 29).

After visiting Berea College, Hampton Institute, and the Elizabeth Russell Settlement at Tuskegee, Alabama, the school melded the approach of racialized industrial education with progressive (white) early childhood education via kindergarten (Stoddard 48-49). By its second year of operation, the school had over 200 students with four teachers—two of whom were paid for by the county—and four other staff members, including a nurse and industrial arts teacher (56). Pettit and Stone also attended the first meeting of the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers, and in 1934 Pettit was only one of three original members still helping to guide the Conference (F. McVey 4). Due to the lack of roads and transportation in the 1920s, the school had over 100 boarders. With a belief in a family-like environment, the school allowed boarders to pay for their enrollment by working three to four hours daily. The mind was educated in academic essentials along with the hand and the heart, which taught students to value their heritage in the face of imposing change (Stoddard 113-17, 141). The results of the reform, however, were ambiguous: on one side, modern America values of consumption and celebrating Christmas through gift giving were fostered, while on the other side, students were educated and community health was improved. “The settlement women,” relates Al Stewart, who attended
Hindman in the 1930s and later founded the journal *Appalachian Heritage*, “taught us to appreciate our heritage and value our own talents” (qtd. in Stoddard 141).

As David Whisnat points out, the particular aspects of heritage which the Settlement workers taught their student to value were based on the workers’ own cultured “late-nineteenth-century, upper-middle-class, Victorian consensus” (47). Moreover, the version of culture they taught was influenced by those who invested money in and supported the school: Stone’s father—an official with The Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which had been making nefarious business investments in the region since 1890—was one of six board members (76). And after its first decade of operation, 76% of Hindman’s “endowment was in coal company money” (74). To help mountaineers adapt to the threats of industrial (and modern) intrusion, the Settlement promoted the preservation of mountain culture, yet the forces of industry also helped to determine which culture would be preserved. Asked about these accusations of cultural imperialism, Still related that although the school administrators and staff had a certain “noblesse oblige,” the school’s program “consisted in teaching students how to read and write effectively, and in equipping them with good habits and practical training” (Miller 11-12). The effect on literacy was palpable, making Knott one of the most literate counties in the region.

Hindman’s work was so successful that Josiah Combs, the school’s first graduate, wrote his dissertation at the University of Paris in 1925 on American folksongs, but part of his work engaged the contradictions of his childhood education. In the chapter “The Highlander’s Music,” Combs held that folk music was not something that could be taught: “As soon as the trained singer attempts to reproduce it orally, it ceases to be folk-music, and becomes in a way property of the artist—and the folk-singer is certainly no artist” (85). Similarly, he discusses the prevalence of fiddling jigs and the influence of the Negro folksong via the Banjo (91-93), which were outlawed by the Primitive Baptists (94). He notes that the dulcimer too was falling into disuse along with the folk-song, due to the forces of modernity (94, 97). First, education caused

---

12 After inviting Still to Hindman, West undertook a severe critique of its educational practices, which he understood to encourage modernization and removal of its students from the mountain region. Hindman released information to counter this critique, one which is often still made. For details, see [Appendix D: Don West’s Critique of Hindman](#).

13 Literacy levels in Knott county decreased by 17.5-20% from 1910 to 1930, compared with an over all drop of 5.5% for the entire state (Kentucky 65), leaving only a 1-3% illiteracy level in those 10 to 30 years of age and 9-12% illiteracy in those 21-years-old and up (United States, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 99-100). However, only three in every one-hundred people in the county subscribed to a selection of ten national magazines used to rate education levels—five times lower than those Appalachian counties with the highest subscription rate (167).
the Highlanders to be “ashamed of his folk songs, considering them ‘old-fashioned’” (98).

Second,

One of the curses of the civilization which is now invading this simple, pure-minded folk is that its vanguard is made up of a type of men who have little or no interest in the welfare of the folk they are despoiling and dispossessing. These jackals of civilization are abusing the confidence of the hillmen, even debauching them in many instances, and possessing their timber, coal, and mineral wealth, without according to them the right to share in the development of the resources of their own native hills. Many a community of once simple folk, formerly enjoying the simple pleasures afforded by their songs, had several years since heard the clank of the colliery on the hillsides, the shrill notes of the factory whistle, the roaring of the furnace, and the rattle of the locomotive reverberating through the Highland valleys. (98-99)

It will come of little surprise to learn that Combs supported the development of the regionalist movement. After serving as a Professor of French and German at the University of Oklahoma, 1926-1927, and being head of Foreign Languages at Texas Christian University, 1927-1947, Combs contributed songs to B. A. Botkin’s Folk-Say (1930) and The American Play-Party Song (1937) (Wilgus xii). It’s hard to say what Combs reaction to Amburgey’s production of the dulcimer (or Still’s poems) would have been—admiration daring to maintain tradition or condemnation for producing, as Whisnat claims, “romantic cultural artifacts for a selected public predisposed by the settlement to a certain view of a culture in the mountains” (100). Nevertheless, such work testifies to the strength and insight of the ethnic-rejuvenating (ethnic-generating?) intervention performed by Hindman’s workers, students, and community. As Still would write in “When the Dulcimers Are Gone”:

When the dulcimers are mingled with the dust
Of flowering chestnuts, and their lean fretted necks
Are slain maple stalks, their strings covered with rust,
Where shall the mellow voice be heard upon the hills,
Upon what pennyroyal meadow, beside what rills? (12, 1-5)

Although formed from the harvested tree, dulcimers—conveys Still—are a living part of the organic cultural context, whose very fabric was disintegrating under the great chestnut blight and

118
massive industrial deforestation. What then could be done to stave off this loss? Still’s answer was poetry.  

Part IV: “Folk Feeling” in The Atlantic Monthly

The hope to catch this fleeting “mellow voice” of a passing culture (and the sure belief of its presence) is exemplified in “Child in the Hills.” The poem begins Hounds on the Mountain, and Hindman Settlement School republished it in a four-page pamphlet of Still’s poetry, seeking to harness both the ideas conveyed in the poem as well as the prestige of Still’s publication with Viking. The poem was first published by The Atlantic whose editor, Edward Weeks, wrote to Still: “the stanzas are remarkable for their impulse, their authentic folk feeling, and for a diction which will appeal to readers far removed from your hills” (5 Sept 1936). How could a poem appropriate for publication in The Atlantic also express an “authentic folk feeling,” and why was such a feeling valuable to both to Still and Hindman?

“Child in the Hills” (3-4) presents the traces of an unnamed child from the mountains who has been swept away by the tides of civilization and has “Drifted into years of growth and strange enmeshment” (l. 25). In the first stanza, the narrator asks where in the hills he can find the “tracks a small foot made” and “the echo of his voice” within “tall trees,” “fallow earth,” “sleeping years,” and streams that flow before “his darkened door” (1-6). The narrator claims to hear the unseen child’s “Shrill imperious” voice among “rain in the beechwood trees” and in the “dark hours” whence his voice creeps from “the mountain silence” (7-10). In the quiet, “deep night,” the child’s heart can be heard “ebbing and returning” (12-13). Against this ghostly presence encountered in moments of stillness and seclusion, the next two stanzas create the vigorous wonderment of the child who “once” (a word that begins five of the next ten lines) merged himself with the earth as he “thrust” his toes into the “gladness of soil” and “waded the clear stony waters of the Carr” (14, 16). The fourth stanza, however, is filled with concrete experience, and the child witnesses the world, listening “open-eyed” and “breathless” to unseen “geese flying over” in the night (18-19)—the same world where he listened to the echoes of horses upon his brother’s death (20). Perception, in this poem, is no sure guarantee of encounter, for the thing perceived always surges just beyond the line of sight. And upon hearing the

---

14 “When the Dulcimers are Gone” was published first in Poetry October 1935 along with “Mountain Fox Hunt” and “Mountain Infare,” which appear in the first section of Hounds on the Mountain under the titles “Fox Hunt” and “Infare.” Muriel Rukeyser also had five poems included in this issue, although they do not appear in U.S. 1.
“swelling voice of the water’s strength,” the child too flees away and is “Swept with the waters down the winding mountain valleys” to the civilization beyond. The last stanza returns to the start of the poem, where the buried, “lost,” and “drowned” child becomes a living presence only through his absence:

He is waiting under the shadows of these hills,
In the damp coolness of laurel and rhododendron;
He is lost in the mossy coves, in the lynn’s late sighing.
His voice is drowned in the waters of the Carr. (26-30)

The form of the poem is haunted with its own lost fullness. Written in six stanzas whose line count slowly dwindles (6, 6, 5.5, 5, 4.5, and 4 lines), each of the 30 lines runs from ten to thirteen syllables and is fretted by an unfilled iambic hexameter, with five to six beats per line. Yet even that search fails in the final four lines (quoted above), which are the shortest in the poem. What did Hindman Settlement School appreciate about this poem? The call to save the lost child, or the need to preserve him? For an answer, we might examine what feature of the poem led Weeks to praise its “authentic folk feeling.”

“Child in the Hills” appeals to the concept of a chthonic innocence that preceded the abandonment of the farm in the first stanza, whose door is “darkened” and whose fields lie “unfurrowed” (6, 4). Even though the literal child, who is now “shod against the earth,” has migrated with his family in search of work, the innocent child—the one not yet encumbered by the “strange enmeshment” of modern civilization—remains in “the shadow of the hills,” the “coolness of the laurel,” and “the lynn’s late sighing.” Paradoxically, this child whose presence now rises from the earth only does so because he has been buried, lost, and drowned—as if there had been an awful sacrifice. Hindman’s ideal was the commitment of redeeming those whose unencumbered phenomenal relations with the nature, of honoring those who had died, and of protecting the remaining children from such sacrifice. The “folk feeling” to which Weeks referred seems a revision of the classic American trope of the earth as either woman or man: in the Appalachian mountains, America’s children and their communal innocence have emerged from/with the earth. Hounds on the Mountain and Hindman’s 1937 pamphlet of Still’s poems that featured “Child in the Hills” both include a poem about the preacher Uncle Ira Combs, which demonstrates the premodern patriarch into which the lost child might have matured:

---

15 Lines 14 and 26 are amputated half lines, drawing attention to their missing parts.
So long upon the hills
Of faith his soul had calmly leaned
He was a bulwark firm within his God,
A mountain rising high.  (“Epitaph for Uncle Ira Combs” 35, 4-8)

A well-known preacher in Knott County, Ira Combs had sermonized against following “Social Gospellers” who believed in fostering material gain (Stoddart 39). The promise is that innocence, uncorrupted by civilization, matures into wisdom.

The Atlantic saw fit to publish “Child in the Hills” partially because of the magazine’s long investment in promoting the southern mountains to its readers. Although Still had been previously published in such prestigious literary journals as Poetry and The Virginia Quarterly Review, in a 1988 interview Still called the appearance of “Child of the Hills” in The Atlantic Monthly his first major publication (“I sometimes tell” 135). The story of how Still came to encounter and value The Atlantic is an essential part of understanding his (and Appalachia’s) place in the literary field.

Born in 1906, Still had grown up on a small farm as the first boy in a family of ten children (Still, “James Still” 232). Yet Still was not mountain born but came from Chambers County in east central Alabama near the Georgia border. In a classical story of the deep South, he describes his childhood as picking cotton and having a “black wet nurse” named “‘Aunt Fanny,’” who he loved “with all his heart.” When he was a senior in high school, Still came across a catalogue for Lincoln Memorial University, which had some 800 students mainly drawn from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Because the school was predicated upon the fact that students paid their own way by working and Still’s family had no extra funds, he decided to attend: “I had made a genealogical circle. Up the road in Virginia was the site of the Still’s pioneer home” (235). After working his first year in the limestone quarry, Still was too fatigued to study, so he became the janitor for the library where he discovered a decade’s worth of donated Atlantic Monthly back issues (Still, “A Man Singing” 12). Still relates,

I kept scores of them and at the end of the term shipped them home. Those were the times of the Great Depression, and I had no employment, so I spent the summer reading. All of them. Every article, every poem, every word. I practically ate the paper. I learned more from them than I could ever state. Even the art of composition, if it can be said I ever obtained it. I decided to write for
The Atlantic. First and foremost. The odds were great however. ("I sometimes tell" 135)

With consideration of The Atlantic we begin to examine the structure, linkages, and operations of the literary field’s distinct structure and influence upon pluralism and Appalachia. Still had been consistently submitting poems to The Atlantic since late 1932, and it took three years for him to become published. Such a process is common for writers who do not have connections with magazines. When the editor’s attention finally came to his work, it came in large part because of The Atlantic’s central role in establishing popular American knowledge of Appalachia.16

In his correspondence with Still over the next year, Edward Weeks explained, “The Atlantic has always had a soft spot in its heart for the Old Primitive, and your mountaineering sketches come to fill a place which has not been occupied since Lucy Furman last turned our way . . . [And they] will have a bearing upon those many households which have grown crowded in these lean years” (23 April 1936). In a letter he sent along in acceptance of Still’s story “Job’s Tears,” Weeks pointed out that “The Atlantic helped to lead the way to the literature of the mountains. Walter Page began the exploration and contributors such as Lucy Furman, Olive Tilford Dargan, and Maristan Chapman continued the good work” (25 August 1936). Weeks found Still to be the next step, but he underestimated the role The Atlantic had played.17

In 1875 William Dean Howells—editor of The Atlantic and canon maker of American Realism—first published Mary Murfree (then under the pseudonym Charles Egbert Craddock), granting her a high enough profile that her 1884 novel In the Tennessee Mountains would go through 23 editions in her lifetime (Boggess 151). Murfree went on to publish nine more novels

---

16 Contacting Still in 1940 after publication of his first novel River of Earth, Paul Hoffman inquired if Still would be interested in publishing with Knopf and said that he, as assistant to the editor, had been the one who, upon salvaging it from the slush pile, had argued for inclusion of Still’s first poem in The Atlantic (Still, “I Sometimes Tell” 135-36; Hoffman 16 Sept 1935; Hoffman, JS Morehead 10.11).

17 First, Louis Menand’s The Metaphysical Club (2001) conducts a brilliant intellectual history of American pragmatism and its influence on pluralism starting with a discussion of The Saturday Club, which included such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He might have expanded consideration to The Atlantic Club, a gathering of the magazine’s original editors, publishers, and contributors, which included many of the same members. Indeed, the groups were often confused. Second, the contributions of the Atlantic went far beyond either the literary authors Weeks mentioned and the ones discussed below. The following essays about “the Southern Mountain Whites” were published from 1929 through 1933, an influential time of growth for Still: Charles Morrow Wilson’s “Elizabethan America,” August 1929: 238-44; E. T. H. Shaffer’s “Hereditiy,” Sept. 1929: 349-54; Eleanor Risley’s “Wildcat Settlement” (story), January 1930: 67-77; Alfreda Worthington’s “The Mountain Doctor” (the most well written and informative of any article published), Sept 1932: 257-67, Oct 1932: 469-72, Dec 1932: 768-774; Wendell Brooks Phillip’s “Students in a Hick College,” April 1933: 412-18.
and 35 stories set in the region. In his 1906 memoir about editing *The Atlantic*, Howells proclaims his belief in Murfree’s “clear light” and proclaims, “She was the first to express a true Southern quality in fiction, and it is not less Southern because it rendered the strange, rude, and wild life of a small section of the great section that unhappily still remains a section” (194-95). In retrospect, Murfree has only recently been reconsidered and is recognized as the author who initiated wide interest in mountain fiction, followed later by James Lane Allen and John Fox, Jr. This first generation of writers was understood as local colorists. Their protagonists are outsiders to the mysterious, otherworldly, and spectacular landscape of the mountains, whose inhabitants’ noble oddities and irredeemable flaws were directly connected to the pioneer-like folkways of a people who developed in the isolation of mountain geography.

Appalachia also served as the critical catalyst for resolving Bostonian intraclass conflict in Howell’s own fiction. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Howells’s best-known novel, used Appalachia to solve the conflict brought on by the love of the Coreys’s son (a family of Boston Brahmins) for Lapham’s daughter (a family who had recently come into money and hence did not have culture). Marrying against their parents’ desires, the new couple ends up traveling to Mexico with the West Virginian company (which produced paint and owned railroads) that bought out Lapham’s dying business, thus allowing the melding of old wealth and new wealth via the bonds of imperialistic capital expansion—both inside and outside America. This connection, partially explaining Appalachia’s presence in *The Atlantic*, was furthered by *The Atlantic’s* posture toward the Spanish-American War.18

At the turn of the century, *The Atlantic* came briefly under the editorship of Walter Page (cited by Weeks above) who had grown up in North Carolina and argued that the solution to Southern poverty was a progressive education via training in handicrafts and liberal arts (see “The Rebuilding of Commonwealths” May 1902). Moreover, he saw fit to publish William G.

---

18 In *Reading for Realism*, a careful history of *The Atlantic Monthly* from its inception and its influence on Realism, Nancy Glazener relates that “literary nationalism emerged in Atlantic-group periodicals [such as Putnam’s Monthly or Lippincott’s] as a means by which a northeastern, urban bourgeoisie legitimated its cultural authority by exercising it in the name of the nation and on behalf of less privileged populations” (57). With the closing of the frontier and expansion of the United States interests overseas, the difference of power relations between classes became set into racial essentialism, which developed into the modernist nostalgia for authenticity. Glazener explains:

In keeping with the imperialistic functions of Anglo-Saxonism . . . the local-colorist proclivity for making the mores of a depicted population seem static and unchanging conducd to the idea that subordinate ethnic and social groups lacked the flexibility and ambition of the self-styled Anglo-Saxons who read about them. Justifying not only the United States new island possessions but also white (Anglo-Saxon) supremacy at home demanded that ‘racial’ traits be essentialized as much as possible. (194-95)
Frost’s “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains” in 1899, which makes the case for supporting Berea College’s uplift of the mountaineer without “making them conform to the regulation type of Americans” so their “unjaded nerves” and “independent spirit” might be preserved (106, 105, 102). That same year, Page authored front-page *Atlantic* editorials in support of America’s new role in world politics. Just as Frost appealed to salvaging those Anglo-Saxons who the mountains had isolated from progressive America, so Page portrayed America’s urge to become benign “colonizers” who promoted democracy and freedom as inherent to “the fundamental temper and the ancient traditions of our race” (“Wholesome” 289).

Writing of America’s new relations to the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, Page held:

> . . . the duty is laid on us so to direct and control the helpless political life of these old Spanish colonies as to bring it as fast and as far toward self-government as may be, relaxing our hold as their advancement permits. . . . It matters little whether it be ten years or a century before we can be rid of the obligation to control and direct their political life; but it matters much whether we recognize in the beginning that we have not the right of conquerors, but only the duty of protectors. (290)

This opportunity to engage in “Wholesome Stimulus to Higher Politics” (the title of the editorial, which leads one to ask if Royce’s “Wholesome Provincialism” [1902] did not allude to it) would allow Americans to overcome the sodden “lethargy” of Americans toward their own democracy, a lethargy which promoted corruption: “in the indifference of the larger pubic to it [the progress of civil service], the spoilsmen have found their opportunity and encouragement” (291). In an editorial-essay from the previous year on the Spanish-American War, Page blamed the closing of the frontier for the stagnation of American politics: “The decline in the character of our public life has been a natural result of the lack of large constructive opportunities” (“The War” 726). The chance to train new civil servants in colonial administration would grant the “cure” of “action” to American lethargy and develop “the health of the republic” by “activity in public discussion and administration” (“A Wholesome” 292). Thus the Philippines; thus Appalachia. These two foci—one radically interior, the other radically exterior—were not opposite at all but were bound in the progressive urge to train citizens (and all those in contact with the U. S.) as
able participants in democracy which would lead them and the country to social and economic gain.¹⁹

Continuing to support local color in the 1930s, The Atlantic had published Maristan Chapman (a pseudonym for Mary Ilsley Chapman and her husband John Stanton Chapman) in the late twenties and early thirties. Moreover, Viking Press had also published their first three novels, The Happy Mountain (1928), Homeplace (1929), and The Weather Tree (1931). Literary innovators, Chapmans attempted to bypass the presence of an outsider entirely and write the story from the perspective of mountain characters, but these characters prove brittle and fail to break the mold set by previous authors. A new vision of the mountains had also arisen with the work of Olive Tilford Dargan, who published in The Atlantic from 1919 to 1924, meaning that Still had read her work since his collection went back at least until 1917. Dargan was an outsider to the mountains but had moved to Asheville, North Carolina, after the death of her husband and had become intimate with the locale and working-class people, who she defended in her four later proletarian novels. She began the work of cross-class sympathy in the mountains, portraying complex characters whose stories she relates as a first-person narrator, including their ribald humor, their compassion, and their tolerance, which even goes so far as to accept outsiders.²⁰

Another outsider, Lucy Furman was even more directly involved with the state of the mountains. Furman published stories and novels based on her experience at Hindman from 1907 to 1924, so it is in her shadow that Still most directly walked.²¹ Critics are divided about Furman’s work, with some such as Whisnat seeing her portrayal as setting the outsider as savior while others, such as Carol Boggess, see Furman as having “brought the reader within the mountaineers’ world even if not within the minds of the people” (170). In a sequence of stories

¹⁹ “Appendix C” also demonstrates the racial link between the Philippine-American War and Appalachia. In addition, Page’s imperial trajectory can be seen in two other editorial-essays written the year before, which display that the American attitude toward democracy is not at all a counter to imperialism. For instance, in “The End of the War and After” (Sept. 1898, 430-432), Page writes, “The complete conquest of the island [Cuba] by civilization will be accomplished through American industry and commerce, which will now follow American arms” (431). And in “The War with Spain, and After” (June 1898, 721-727), Page calls on Americans to realize “the forces of inheritance and events” and honor their Anglo-Saxon forefathers “whose restless energy in colonialization and conquest, in trade” resulted in “the spread of civilization” to “every part of the world” (727). How? By capitalizing on “the opening of the Orient, for one the greatest changes in human history.”

²⁰ The discussion of mountain fiction in this paragraph and the next takes it lead from the three stages set out by Carol Boggess’s discussion in her dissertation “Following River of Earth from Source to Destination,” 162-174. Boggess is currently working on Still’s biography.

²¹ Furman’s novels include Mothering the Perilous (1910), Sight to the Blind (1914), The Quare Women (1923), The Glass Window (1925), and The Lonesome Road (1927).
published in The Atlantic in 1922 and 1925, Furman portrayed the role of the “Quare Women” (the mountaineers’ word for the Settlement workers) in helping feuding families overcome their vendettas through engaging in the Settlement’s manners, games, and dances (see “Quare Women,” The Atlantic May 1922). Boggess claims that Still is part of the third stage of writing about Appalachia, during which authors from the region began to write, such as Harriette Simpson Arnow and Jesse Stuart. As the first example of such writing, Boggess cites Arnow’s novel Mountain Path, which was published in 1936 by Covici-Friede who would also vie for Still’s attention, as the first example of such a text. In this work, the outside protagonist is a teacher, like Arnow herself, who becomes briefly interlinked and intimate with a mountain family and their ways when she undertakes her own self-discovery. However, the first mountain writer to generate national attention was Jesse Stuart, a deep insider who made his fortunes writing as a mountaineer. In Stuart’s book Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow (1934), which consisted of 703 sonnets, simply stunned the reading public. Reviewers’ praise led it to sell out the first edition of 1,500 copies in under a month (“Book Notes”). To understand the value that The Atlantic, others presses, and magazines placed on Still’s poetry, one has to understand his contrast to Jesse Stuart’s Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow, against which Still would be regularly compared.

Jesse Stuart was Still’s classmate at LMU and, like him, attended Vanderbilt to receive his MA in English (Still attended in 1929-30 and Stuart 1931-32). Unlike Still, however, Stuart idealized the Agrarian poet, Vanderbilt professor, and regionalist demagogue Donald Davidson. After publishing a series of sonnets in American Mercury, Virginia Quarterly Review, and Poetry, for which he won their Jeanette Swelle Davis Award for his “Young Kentucky” sonnets, Stuart was approached by an editor for E. P. Dutton. The editor was stunned when he received over 700 sonnets in the mail and quickly granted Stuart a contract (Brosi 80-81). The savvy of the editor was demonstrated when reviewers in national newspapers and magazines began to tout Stuart’s Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow.22

22 It is important to note that in the 1930s almost every newspaper and magazine in the nation publish and wrote about poetry, and critics who were held in literary and popular esteem conducted vigorous reviews of poetry. For instance, The New York Times published 370 poems in 1930, 416 in 1940, and 446 in 1946 (Spaulding 149). The reasons for this increase are debatable, but perhaps it was a reaction to media glamour of radio and film as well as an increase in American literacy. From the Depression until the Cold War, millions of readers were conscious of poetry. Radio listeners were also conscious of poetry. As John Spaulding points out in “Poetry and the Media: The
The New York Times Book Review heralded Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow as the “Rubáiyát of Jesse Stuart,” who with his “inexhaustible” “fertility of expression,” richly conveys the “primitiveness” of the “life of Kentucky’s soil” (Jack). Similarly, in the New York Herald Tribune, Horace Gregory (about who we shall learn more next chapter) called Man with A Bull-Tongue Plow “among the spectacular events of the season.” Gregory explained that Stuart wrote with “the general outline of a sonnet and used it as a stanza for a rambling narrative which is at times pure autobiography and at other moments pencil sketches of Kentucky scenery.” Gregory points out Stuart’s lack of focus and repetition but praised this poet from “provincial America,” whom those tired of the “‘intellectual’” poetry of the last ten years could read with “genuine relief” as well as being someone “the average man can understand.” In The Saturday Review of Literature William Rose Benét points out that such attention to “Stuart’s picturesque origin and place” had led some critics to ignore the “loose and rambling . . . . diary in loose jointed-verse” whose monotony tried one’s patience. But he ends by praising the book as “a human document” that is “worth reading for what it says about a genuine man.” What is more, he shares that although one might put it down, one keeps picking it up to partake of its “fresh-tang” and its “the flesh-and-blood reality.” The Nation’s review called Stuart “the only kind of a [Robert] Burns we can grow” (Walton). The review continues, “We have no true folk background, no folk song save a sectional folk song” and so is glad that Stuart’s “folk exuberance” shows through “that thing called poetry.”23 In agreement, The New Masses lauded Stuart’s book as “authentically a proletarian epic, though not a class conscious one” (Johns 25). But the savviest review was Malcolm Cowley’s in The New Republic. Cowley recognized that Stuart’s was the first book written about the mountains by “a poet who lives inside the cabin,” and so it allowed outsiders to gauge mountaineers for the first time: “he is always speaking in his own words about his own people, and he doesn’t know how to lie. He shows us mountaineers, huge families of them living in one-room pine-pole shacks on the hillside . . . .” Cowley beings by recounting how Stuart’s life and poems demonstrate the living inheritance of the “pioneers themselves” who were “always driven on by their poverty,” but like other reviewers he calls Stuart’s poems “careless, trite, or perfunctory” and says the collection should be one-seventh its original length. Yet John

---

Decline of Popular Poetry,” every broadcast network had at least a fifteen-minute prime time poetry and were rebroadcast five or six times a week (149-150).

23 Alternatively, the Agrarian John Gould Fletcher panned Stuart in Poetry. Fletcher wrote that unlike Burns, “this modern Kentucky version of a folk-poet has apparently no previous models to go on. . . . The result is monotony and blind confusion” (218).
Chamberlain, writing in his *The New York Times* book column that December, held up as exemplifying the cultural life of the mountains. It was precisely lack of inhibition, that lack of “fetish for elegance” and Stuart’s loose “garrulousness” as a “cracker-barrel sonneteer” that Americans wanted.

In addition to becoming part of the tradition of mountain writing that appeared in *The Atlantic*, Still’s quiet, well-crafted poems were considered against the backdrop of Stuart’s pastoral, frenetic Kentucky. And to a person, critics consider Still an insider to Kentucky mountain life; however, in the 1930s being an insider was an identity (and perhaps at that time a mask) that Still chose to cultivate. Still originated from an area of much further removed from the mountains than did Lucy Furman, who was born in Henderson, Kentucky, and attended high school in Lexington, Kentucky, where she was classmate of Pettit’s at an elite private school. Yet, if further removed in distance and geography, Still came from a plebian agrarian background that allowed him to overcome the judgments of outsiders who wished to transform the mountaineer. Similarly, he first gained contact with mountain culture as a student at LMU for four years, which was populated with peers who hailed from the mountains. Still reached the point of being unquestioningly accepted as an Appalachian by first moving through the stage of writing the poems in *Hounds on the Mountain*, which idealized the culture and spirit of the mountains. Still’s lyrics, that is, nativized their author by authenticating (and hence modernizing) the lurid mystery local-color writers had granted the peaks.

Part V: Boarding the Viking Press’s *Drakkar*

*The Atlantic*’s interest was reflected throughout the country, and Still’s poems were widely published. Attention to such publication is critical since this recognition formed the foundation from which Still’s value in the literary field was generated. In addition, the editors of these publications also conducted reviews, acted as conduits to publishers, and wrote recommendations for Still. From his first publication in *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Saturday Review of Literature* in July 1935, over the next 18 months Still’s poems appeared in *Esquire*, *Poetry*, *Frontier and Midland*, *Household Magazine*, *Kaleidograph*, *Literary Digest*, *Mountain Life and Work*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Yale Review*. The same poems were often republished in newspapers along the eastern seaboard, ranging from the New York *Herald-Tribune* and *Times* in the North to the Louisville
Courier-Journal in the South. Special-focus magazines, such as Mountain Life and Work or Scholastic, published both original previously released poems. These venues represented three separate spheres, and a poem’s original appearance in a journal of note such as the Sewanee Review authenticated its reproduction in newspapers. Mindful to building his literary prestige, Still first sought publication with national weeklies or monthlies, such as The Atlantic, then the critical literary quarterlies, followed by newspapers and special focus magazines. A few poems were published in true “little” magazines as well, such as The North Georgia Review, but Still did not admire most little magazines’ aesthetics nor they his.24

The person who helped Still convert his sudden prestige into a contract with a publisher was Edwin O. Grover, a literary “Professor of Books” at Rollins College, Florida, where he served as vice president. Grover was the father of Frances Grover, who had come to teach at Hindman Settlement School after graduating college (Boggess 87). When Frances wrote to her father about Still’s success, Grover wrote back to Frances about having met Theda Kenyon, a member of the executive board of the Poetry Society of America, who had written Grover about Still. Kenyon relates that she had just become aware of Still’s poetry when she dined with his “patron” who provoked her to inquire into Still’s writing: “When the list of his publications reached me, I [Kenyon] heaved a sigh of joy—it is so seldom that a young poet, however fine, gains the recognition that he deserves” (qtd. in Grover to Frances Dec. 17, 1935). The conversation between Still’s patron and Kenyon, which occurred in New York City, exemplifies the close network between literary and economic fields. Still’s “patron” was Guy Loomis, a wealthy New Yorker who sponsored students at Lincoln Memorial University. Although Loomis had sponsored many LMU students, Still was the first to write in thanks, beginning an exchange which led to Loomis attending Still’s graduation and offering to pay for a year of graduate study anywhere in the South. Still chose English at Vanderbilt.

From examining Loomis’s letters to Still, which continued in volume until Loomis’s death in 1951, their relationship was one of paternal intimacy. Still could share his worries and fears and Loomis could give advice and talk about health problems. Appropriately enough, Still would dedicate Hounds to “G. L.,” Guy Loomis, as well as to Jethro Amburgey. On January 18, 1936, Loomis wrote Still that he had met Miss Kenyon and that she had spoken of her interest

---

24 For a complete list of venues where Still published poetry prior to Hounds on the Mountain see “Appendix E: Venues of Publication.”
and desire to help Still. It is unclear if such interest was stimulated by speaking to a man of wealth whose support she hoped to earn, but Loomis did purchase a three-year subscription to the Society’s magazine for Still. In that same letter, he gives Still advice about seeking out a publisher after his return from spending Christmas with the Grover family: “Better get on a firmer foundation ere you try to publish a book of your poems and when you do ask Miss Kenyon for advice. The publisher must be a good one, who has a high class publicity department to push it.” Mr. Loomis clearly understood how names were gained in the publishing world. Similarly, Edwin Grover immediately suggested that Still begin writing short stories because prose, unlike poetry, “makes a man’s reputation” (17 Dec. 1935).

Important publishing houses soon began contacting Still, recognizing both the quality of his writing and the marketability of his subject. Still received an unexpected letter from Harold Strauss, an editor at Covici·Friede publishers, who wrote that someone had shown him Still’s poem “Mountain Heritage,” which “sharpened my editorial curiosity concerning your work” (Feb. 10, 1936). Published in The New Republic, a magazine with which other Covici·Friede authors such as Horace Gregory had ties, “Mountain Heritage” is the final poem in Hounds on the Mountain and expresses an American essence that could not be disintegrated by mining, deforestation, and the subsequent environmental consequences:

I shall not leave these prisoning hills
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.
Though the waters of Troublesome, of Trace Fork,
Of Sand Lick rise in a single body to glean the valleys,
To drown lush penny-royal, to unravel rail fences;
Though the sun-ball breaks the ridges into dust
And burns its strength into the blistered rock
I cannot leave. I cannot go away. (54, 1-9)

Given The New Republic’s and Covici·Friede’s decided support of the American left, Malcolm Cowley (The New Republic’s literary editor) and Strauss no doubt admired Still’s use of the pastoral to resist industrialism.

“Heritage” demonstrates the cultural continuity of Western culture that had taken root in America’s topography. The poem is structured as a Petrarchan sonnet in two stanzas of nine and
six lines, which “approximates a form,” as one reviewer noted about the poem’s rhythm (Holmes, “A Poet”). The first stanza, quoted above, contains three tercets (rather than two quatrains) that are structured by syntax rather than rhyme, an important nativization and modernization of the form. The poem begins with the narrator’s declaration against abandoning the earth even though it is being flayed with the resulting rampant floods and droughts. Each tercet beings “Though . . .” and sets the conditions of the narrator’s determination; the stanza ends with a halting, full-stop hemistich that gains intensification through that tercet’s variance with the first two: “I cannot leave. I cannot go away.” Still’s declaration of a naturalized Western cultural heritage as a point of resistance generated the interest of editors and publishers who had to account for the proletarian surge in the 1930s without exiling mainstream readers.

However, with “American reading habits being what they are,” Strauss explained that he was more interested in prose, but he would consider a volume of poetry, if Still had one prepared. Covici-Friede was looking to market mountain writing to a reading public that had testified its interest through the response to Jesse Stuart, whose first collection of short stories Dutton was preparing to release. Moreover, Covici-Friede was also preparing to release Harriette Simpson Arnow’s novel, Mountain Path. In a letter later in February, Strauss emphasized that while Still’s poetry publications were impressive, neither poetry nor short stories were profitable: “An author’s reputation is most substantially built today upon novel length fiction. This is no publisher’s whim but the judgment of the public” (27 Feb. 1936). Still asked his friend Frances Grover to write to her father for advice, which Dr. Grover provided in abundance—both about how to deal with publishers and to encourage Still to write fiction rather than poetry.

Edwin Grover was director of Banner Elk School of English in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains, one of the new summer writing programs that had sprung up around the nation in the 1920s that brought together an intersection of the literary field, including editors, writers, academics, and students. Grover considered himself a man in the know about literature and the mountains because he had also authored an extensive bibliography on the high-profile literarch Percy MacKay whose Kentucky Cycle (two plays, an epic poem, a novel, and a collection of stories composed after an extended visit to Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1921) had been a central inspiration for regionalism. Through Frances, Dr. Grover, from his high ground, advised Still to “keep Covici, Friede on the string without sending them any of his manuscripts” (March 4, 1936). Grover frowned on Covici-Friede because they were “a young house” that had been
“fined for putting out obscene literature”—and besides, it was reported that Mr. Friede was “a Hebrew.” Instead, Grover suggested that he might be of some help making contacts with Viking Press, “which is many degrees above Covici, Friede.” Here, however, Grover demonstrates his distance from New York—for not only had Friede left the house in 1935 (“Enterprise” 2428) but the founders of Viking were themselves “Hebrew.” In January Grover had taken the step of forwarding Still’s fiction to literary agents and in March had also begun advising Still about how to enter into the literary field’s networks, suggesting that he attend the McDowell Colony in summer 1937 and Grover’s own Banner Elk School in 1936. Then, in April The Atlantic accepted “All Their Ways are Dark,” and Grover began writing letters of inquiry to publishers in New York, helping Still to set up meeting times during his visit there in early May.

As a result of Grover’s letters, in addition to hearing from Viking Press, Still also heard from Dodd, Mead & Company, Farrar & Rinehart, Henry Holt & Company, and Charles Scribner’s and Sons (JS Morehead 10.11). Moreover, upon reading Still’s first published story in The Atlantic, an editor from Phillip Marrow also expressed his company’s interest in publishing Still. It is unclear why Still ended up selecting Viking as his publisher, but Grover had earlier praised them, and they were the publisher of Maristan Chapman’s three novels (which were further affirmed by the connection with The Atlantic) as well as being the publisher of Elizabeth Maddox Roberts’s six novels from 1926 to her latest in 1935. But Roberts’s reputation had been made as author of the popular The Great Meadow (1930) about pioneers crossing the mountains in the era of Daniel Boone and, thus, was widely known as the writer who spoke for Kentucky. In addition to publishing these authors, the Viking Press carried wide cultural and literary repute for the depth and variety of its whole list.

25 The book to which Grover refers is Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness (1928). Originally published in England, when the public reacted to the scandal over its portrayal of lesbianism, American publishers scrambled for rights—Donald Friede was first, having secured a $10,000 loan (an unheard of amount) to do so. It was a good investment. Friede describes the “sales as tremendous, and our profits huge. . . . Thanks to The Well of Loneliness we were off to a good start” (94-95).

26 Forming the material for his book River of Earth (1940), from 1936 to 1940, Still would go on to publish five stories with The Atlantic, four with Frontier and Midland, two with the Saturday Evening Post, two with Mountain Life and Work, one in Story, one in Better Homes, one in Household Magazine, one in Virginia Quarterly Review, and one in the Yale Review. Moreover, Still stories were also included in The O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1937, 1938, and 1939 as well as being on the Roll of Honor in The Best American Short Stories in 1938 and 1939.
The history of Viking Press demonstrates one of the primary sources of pluralist interest in the United States. If, as Nancy Glazener demonstrates in Reading for Realism, Realism took shape through a network of magazines and publishers centering on the initiative of a coterie of Boston Brahmin who founded The Atlantic Monthly, no less might be said for the networks of young Jewish men who met while attending college in the Ivy-League. Perhaps in reaction to the self-awareness these students gained from the Ivy League’s resistance to Judaism, the publishing houses they formed would modernized American publishing by championing pluralism.27 Harold Guinzburg (who had graduated Harvard in 1921 and attended Columbia law school for two years) and George Oppenheimer (who had gone to graduate school at Harvard and worked in promotions for two years at Alfred A. Knopf) founded Viking in 1925. By 1950, Viking was recognized as one of the two “most exuberant, progressive, and individualistic firms in this country” (“‘Enterprise’” 2426) and was praised by the American Library Association for its “concern for civil rights and progressive liberalism in ideas” (“The Viking” 494). The cultural saga and ingenuity of Viking Press is best caught by the story of its colophone.

Guinzburg and Oppenheimer had planned to call their house Half Moon Press and use Hendryk Hudson’s ship as a trademark. However, upon commissioning Rockwell Kent to design the colophon, he produced a Viking drakkar instead, so they changed their name to Viking (“The Viking” 493). Then in August before they had brought out their first books, B. W. Huebsch merged his own personally-run publishing house with them, bringing along those writers who are now considered core to the modernist tradition such as James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, and D. H. Lawrence (as well as Elizabeth Maddox Roberts). Moreover, Huebsch not only brought literary authors from overseas to America but also undertook publishing authors who were, as he relates in an autobiographical essay, “champions of oppressed minorities and propagandists for liberty” (407). During World War I, he was close friends with and the publisher of Lajpat Rai who wrote books on “Indian history, grievances, and demands,” and Huebsch became closely associated with the Home Rule League for India. Thus when he joined with Viking, he brought the reputation that his own colophon heralded: “a book that has some genuine reason for existence” (Morley). As the first Jewish publisher in the United States (and a radical one at that), his colophon was, appropriately enough, a menorah. Yet the colophon was inevitably referred to in The Saturday Review of Literature and The Publishers’ Weekly as a

27 The example of Albert and Charles Boni from the Chapter One also supports this assertion.
deracialized “seven-branched candle stick.” In short, in its literary sallies, the Viking Press’s **drakkar** sought, with a menorah on its bow, to enlighten America as to the reality of its pluralism. As formulated in their initial 1925 announcement: “Our aims are, briefly, to have the name of a symbol of enterprise, adventure, and exploration in the publishing field . . . to cultivate home soil, yet seek foreign lands [and] to acclaim treasure when we find it, but to avoid calling brass gold” (“A New”). Fittingly, the press’s first publications were *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, edited by James Weldon Johnson, and *Prairie*, the first novel by Walter J. Muilenberg.

Marshall Best, Viking’s general manager and secretary who was Huebsch’s protégé, corresponded with Still. While saying that Still’s poetry was admirable, Best noted that the press was “extremely cautious about taking on new poetry” but that Viking would publish poetry “with enthusiasm” if Still could show he was working on a novel, the publication of which would make up for the loss the publisher would incur on the poems (9 Feb. 1937). When Still sent Best two chapters from what would become *River of Earth*, Best wrote back with enthusiasm: “You speak of this as a rough draft; yet the language is always right, sometimes extremely beautiful. Your feeling for the setting and the people in their setting seems perfect. You manage to achieve . . . authentic color in every detail.” Best was also excited that one of the chapters—“Job’s Tears”—had just appeared in March’s *Atlantic*, furthering the value of Still’s work. In light of the promised novel, Viking and Best went to work to “find an audience for them [the poems], both in their own right and in anticipation of the novel” (5 March 1937).

To what degree, however, might we understand the particular value which readers lend a book to result from the press that published it? And given the scope of a particular publisher, how far can a particular book be read as reflective of their endeavors? First, as related below, reviewers often selected what books to review based on their publishers’ cultural clout. Second, we can read any particular book in a press’s list in relation to the other books published by the press.

The nativizing role of *Hounds on the Mountain* on Viking’s list is apparent in their June 1937 catalogue. Consisting of eight small pages, Still’s book appears across from *Star-Begotten*, a novel by H. G. Wells about a historian who discovers “strange beings” (aliens) walking unnoticed on England’s streets. Two other books also earned their own pages: Ludwig Beleman’s *My War With the United States* was a personal narrative about his immigration to the US in 1914 as an Austrian; and Herbert Clyde Lewis’s *Gentleman Overboard*, a novel of light
pathos, follows the predicaments of a passenger on a cruise through the Pacific ocean.

Appearing on a single page at the back are three “previously announced” works: a novel about a Roman plebian who rose to power, a book of “87 authentic Negro songs,” and a study called The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism. Still’s place is further accentuated by announcing its regionalist aspect (“they [the poems] spring from a single locale”) and highlighting his language: “His vocabulary is enriched by the mountain speech, which probably retains more Elizabethan English than will be found anywhere else in the world today.” Still’s poems grounded Viking’s books in an America that was as foreign as an Austrian immigrant, as exotic and unseen as aliens in Britain, and whose “pure and uncomplicated beauty” opposed German fascism.

Additionally, the catalogue’s designer capitalized on the fact that Viking only had six poets on its list and used half of the text to valorize them, including George Dillon (then editor of Poetry) and Robert Hillyer, both of whom won Pulitzers after publishing with Viking. By comparing Still’s work to them, the catalogue suggests that Still would rise to their stature as well. In a 1963 essay published in Dædalus, Marshall Best reflected that publishers brought out “marginal books” with “limited audience,” such as poetry, for two interconnected reasons. First, it was good for the “publisher’s soul” as well as “for the good of his pocketbook” to invest in the “imperfect book of the new creative writer who needs publication and an audience, however small, before he can develop his full powers” (“In Books” 32). Second, while such books were published at a loss, publishers “recognize them as pledges to the future, or as ornaments to their imprints, or simply as acts of benevolence which satisfy their egos.” In Still’s case, the publication of Hounds on the Mountain was both clearly an investment in the future and also an investment in the press’s image. In 1937 Viking brought out 51 other books (“Publishers’ Output” 205), including Erskine Caldwell’s and Margaret Bourke-White’s You Have Seen Their Faces, whose photographs and words document the privation of southern sharecroppers and whose images still hang in America’s mind. Poetry about the beauty of Appalachia’s poverty gains particular resonance against this stark comparison: the hardship and neediness of southern sharecroppers was modern manifestation of America’s grim Civil War heritage, whereas the scarcity of commodity plenty in Appalachia’s could be understood as a rediscovery of authentic American roots which yet grew in the southern mountains.

The particular place of poetry in Viking’s list was not abnormal for the time period. Of all new titles released, poetry and drama (which were categorized together by The Publishers’
Weekly) represented just over 7% of releases, compared to fiction which represented 15% of new titles with a resulting 25,454,135 copies published (“American Book”; Tebbel, A History 683)—although the high crest of the 1930s, that numbers was still five to ten million fewer than the number sold each year from 1923 to 1928. In the 1930s publishers rarely brought out even more than 1,000 copies of a first novel, and that Viking was willing to commit to 750 copies of Hounds on the Mountain is significant and not unexpected. However, the book was still played up as a potential “collector’s item” (1937 Viking Catalogue). Somewhat distraught at the number of issues produced, Still would call the book “a limited edition,” those highly wrought specialty releases that publishers sold as status symbols to wealthy coinsurers, enthusiasts, and other “innocent customers” of such “cultural chic,” as they were labeled by Robert Josephy, the era’s leading book designer (53).

Hounds on the Mountain, however, was not a limited edition, nor did Viking produce such books. Yet the book was well designed by Milton B. Glick, one of the best in the trade who believed that presses had to maintain a high standard of book design and production throughout their entire list: “With consistently high standards, his [the publisher’s] book over a period of time accomplishes some institutional advertisement which is not lost book buyers, nor on authors” (2247). This sense of a well-made item was expressed the clear typography of the volume, whose use of space emphasized both intimate yet removed clusters of text and the vastness of the surrounding page. The book is 8.25 by 6.25 inches, has eight pages of front matter, and is fifty-five pages long. Titles are italicized, and the poems are composed in the same sharp 11 pt. Goudy font with three pt. leading (the space between the lines), with a maximum of 23 lines per page (compared with an average of 32 lines per page of poetry in most trade books today). Moreover, Milton B. Glick had led Viking to dominate awards for best design in trade books in 1937 and 1939 from the Book Clinic of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, whose founder, Robert Josephy, designed Rukeyser’s U.S. 1 (“Viking Press Wins Book Design” and “Viking Press Wins Book Clinic”). In light of Still’s poems’ association with handicrafts, the quality of the typography served as an important affirmation of his reader’s associations with the “aura” of authentic art (Benjamin 221).

Viking functioned as a commercial publisher when there were few small presses and the university presses were just coming into their own. To gain some sense of the national volume of publication and Viking’s place within it, consider that 9,237 new titles were brought out by
the book publishing industry in 1937 (“American Book”). In 1937 the 238 houses that put out five or more books (including new editions) issued 78% of all books. Within that group, Viking was the smallest of the 39 largest US publishers, who brought out 45% of all books published in 1939, of which the twelve leading houses—including Grosset, Oxford, Harper, McGraw-Hill, Doubleday, etc.—brought out 35% of total production (“Publishers Output for 1939” 206). In this landscape, Viking was perhaps the highest profile liberal literary publisher. While Still’s book was but a drop in the ocean, Marshall Best saw it as a way to launch the literary career of a new novelist, as did Still’s patron Guy Loomis, whose secretary wrote Still hesitant words of comfort about the number of copies published: “Of course we realize that a first book of poem is something of a trial balloon, as far as publishers are concerned, and that poetry has more or less a limited sale; until you become a Robert Frost or Edna Millay” (Mount).

Harold K. Guinzburg, Viking’s owner and chief editor, elucidates the relationship between “serious” and “popular” literature for a publishing house in his essay “Book Publishing: A Dubious Utopia” (1951). Guinzburg states the need to succeed within “a competitive capitalist society” while at the same time realizing the “useful social role” and “responsibility” of fostering “serious,” new talent (7). Or, as he put it in another essay, “free speech” creates tension with “free enterprise” (“Free Press” 2, 19). The job of the publisher is to realize a productive “compromise” in “the struggle between private ownership and public interest” (6) by realizing profits that can be invested in maximizing the quality and variety of voices within a culture that economically rewards standardization (9). Or, put more bluntly, an entertaining best-seller makes the publication of poetry economically feasible: “A few successes make a great deal of money, most of the rest have short runs, and the number that never get written or produced because of the commercial difficulties is incalculable” (“Book Publishing” 7, 8). In the end, Guinzburg saw his mission as the promotion of those ideas for which “[c]irculation is not a synonym for importance” (41). Indeed, even as Viking published books on Negro folk-songs and the authors brought in by Huebsch (who was one of the first members of PEN and the ACLU), it proved financially successful when in its first years Viking gained massive profits from publishing the Ask Me Another quiz craze and the Boners books (“The Viking” 494); Guinzburg also founded a book club called the Literary Guild in 1927, which was one of the first in the nation (“Guizburg”). In addition to the stark dichotomy of popularity versus profundity, presses also gained credibility with members of the literary field more associated with
autonomous production (i.e., academics and the editors of little magazines and small presses) by their support of poetry. That credibility with restricted production was an important investment, since figures from it, such as Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams, often held great influence in the literary field.  

Part VI: Generating Authority for Hounds on the Mountain

Given the attention to regionalism in the 1930s and the revaluation of Appalachia and Appalachian literature, Viking’s interest in Still was strategic: they sought to help him realize his vision in a manner that would gain both Still and the press prestige. Best’s first step in doing so, in addition to pushing Still toward novel publication, was to gain prepublication recognition and blurbs from cultural brokers such as Edward Weeks, John Crowe Ransom, Mark Van Doren, and Robert Frost (letter to Still, 23 March 1937). The final three had been suggested by Dr. William S. Knickerbocker, editor of the Sewanee Review. Knickerbocker had been eagerly promoting Still to Simon & Schuster and Macmillan, with whom Still also was in negotiations (letter to Still, 25 Sept. 1936). Knickerbocker had conveyed to Still that Frost “faithfully read your verse in the SEWANEE REVIEW and thought you were one of the most effective poets in America” (11 March 1937). After the publication of Hounds, Knickerbocker shared, “I have witnessed with increasing satisfaction the growth of your reputation, especially this summer when I had occasion to read reviews of your book,” and he gave Still advice about how to secure a better contract with publishers. “My happiness,” he concluded, “comes chiefly in tying lovers’ knots between authors and publishers” (14 Sept. 1937).

But only one cultural broker, William Rose Benét, provided a blurb to support Hounds on the Mountain. Perhaps Edward Weeks did not do so out of competitive frustration. In December

28 Another way of thinking about Still’s transition to fiction, which everyone was pushing him to undertake, is to consider Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction between field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production. Bourdieu creates an instructive dichotomy between the two, and seeing Still’s work in terms of the interactions and tensions between them allows us to understand more clearly the relationship between poetry and fiction at Viking’s particular cultural juncture. On the one hand, prestige and success in large-scale production are judged by market sales and public appointments and awards within mainstream cultural institutions (Bourdieu 38). The economic field here is the greatest influence on the immediate value of art. On the other hand, the field of restricted production is more autonomous from the economic field, and the value of art therein relates to consecration by authorities within a group “who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize” (38). In a “perfect” autonomous field, the only audience is other producers (such as with Symbolist poetry); thus, “the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of ‘loser wins,’ on a systemic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies” (39). Within any culture, these two extremes operate in relationship to another—each drawing value from the tension with the other. The work of commercial publishing houses brought the two fields into operative relation.
1936, Paul Hoffman, assistant to Mr. Weeks, wrote to Still encouraging him to consider “incorporating some of your fine material in the larger pattern of a book” and, it was implied, submit it to Atlantic Monthly Press. When Weeks heard of Still’s book, he wrote with a “tinge of disappointment” and “regret” that Still would publish with Viking rather than with The Atlantic Press (29 March 1937). As for the lack of other responses, Still had taken classes with John Crowe Ransom while earning his Masters at Vanderbilt, but Ransom’s comments on Still’s papers show less than a lukewarm response, even on papers wherein Still reiterated Agrarian ideals.²⁹ Ransom did read his contribution to I’ll Take My Stand to Still’s class, and Still has called that book “a pioneering undertaking, a seminal work” (qtd. Stonebeck 5). However, Still’s MA advisor was Edwin Mims, whose The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction (1926) caused “considerable disregard” among the Agrarian professors (Still, “A Man Singing” 13). If Still found himself neglected by the Agrarians (as Jesse Stuart felt he had been), it was because he put their values into practice—including a rejection of the literary establishment to focus on his personal commitment to a locality and his own writing, which caused his literary reputation great harm. As related by H. R. Stoneback in “River of Earth and Troublesome Creeks: The Agrarianism of James Still” (1990), “Still’s version of Agrarianism, clearly, is not a call to political action, not a symbolic stance from which to go forth into the world of letters and a peripatetic academic career as it was for so many other Nashville Agrarians. It is a design for living” (7). While Stoneback’s observation about Still’s enactment of select Agrarian ideals is on target, Stonebeck idealizes this source as Still’s great inspiration for doing so, ignoring the larger literary and social context in which Still operated. Within that context, Viking secured a blurb from perhaps the most influential literary editor of the day, William Rose Benét, editor of the central Saturday Review of Literature whose weekly column on poetry was featured in the front part of each issue.

Benét’s blurb appeared on the book jacket after the text from the catalogue described above which added that “James Still writes only of his own Kentucky hills.” This move affirmed a deep identification with Kentucky for the recent immigrant from the deep South. For the blurb, Benét wrote, “Mr. Still has turned real life in the most picturesque part of our county into real

²⁹ In one paper for Ransom, Still wrote about “Progress” as “a slave to indulgences” that worshipped at the “shrine of hyper-organization and super-centralization.” He went on to praise his own Jeffersonian background: “The feeling of ownership, of being one’s own boss and of coaxing the crops along by plough and hoe brings its own reward in human satisfaction” (“Ways of Escape” 1, 3, 6). Ransom’s only comments written on the whole paper were that Still was “too general & verbose—it’s difficult & obscure.”
poetry. . . . We have had the homespun singer before in the South [referring perhaps to Stuart], but we have rarely had the poet who could blend homespun life and eternal beauty.” Benét’s use of “real” as an adjective for “life” and “poetry” links Still’s lyrics to well-documented poverty of the Depression. Furthermore, his use of “homespun” and “eternal beauty” rearticulates language common to the national marketing of mountain handicrafts (see Becker 193-203). If this attention to a blurb seems an odd part of evaluating a literary text in reviews, it is important to remember the distinct system of value in which Hounds on the Mountain and Viking participated.

Book reviews and poetry columns were daily and/or weekly presences in all major papers, each of which hired an editor to write them. Given the volume they were asked to review, writers often drew from materials provided by the publishers, both from cover descriptions, blurbs, and, as we shall see, from the author’s bio provided on the jacket flap. The importance of reviews in the 1930s literary field cannot be underestimated. As related by Marshall Best, who was also publicity director for Viking, “Taste in books, and the success of books, were determined to a large extent by recognized arbiters. The New York Times and The New York Herald Tribune book supplements held sway in slightly different sectors. Favorite daily reviewers had their responsive followers. Weeklies such as The Nation and The New Republic could make if not break a book aimed at their particular clientele” (31). In a 1938 essay for The Publishers’ Weekly, Malcolm Cowley related the history and limitation of book reviewing in the modern American press. The work of reviews was once, he explains, done by learned and interested amateurs in the 1920s, but in the 1930s “real professionals have taken it over” with daily book reviews in most major newspapers and weekly reviews in magazines such as Time and News Week as well as The New Yorker and Harpers (2090):

. . . books had been growing in importance both as commercial ventures and as topics of general interest; even the daily papers were beginning to get into them. It didn’t seem right any longer to have their fate decided by the casual critic who happened to ask for them. The public wanted to know who was passing advanced judgments on its reading matter; in other words, it wanted reviewers with names. The newspapers and magazines also wanted names, but what they wanted even more were reviewers who could be trusted to deliver printable copy every day or week or month. (2090)
Cowley’s essay goes onto attack these reviewers based on the volume of their work and their method of selection. Depending on recommendations from presses, the reviewer quickly selects and skims books, “getting just enough information to fill his column and protecting himself from censure by passing only mild and meaningless judgments that no one would care to attack” (2092).

This critique represents how national authorities on book reviews in the 1930s understood a split in the literate audience into those who read mass media and those who read more select journals. In defense, Harry Hansen—the reviewer for The New York World-Telegram whose year-end pieces evaluating the year as a whole were republished in The Publishers’ Weekly—responded that he had reviewed many of the same book as did The New Republic, which he felt also depended on its selections based on recommendations from publishers (“Mr. Cowley”). Hansen goes on to defend newspaper reviews as letting the public—“writers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, college undergraduates, businessmen and housewives”—simply know what is out there. The popular reviewer’s goal, he continues, is not to write with “finality” but to “acquaint his readers with the purport of books in special fields” (2210-11). This jousting was just one of many such debates about the purpose of reviews. Thus it is with attention to these varying readerships and the repercussions of particular reviewers’ connections that I examine reviews. Reviews are a distinct genre of writing, whose techniques and architecture it is necessary to explain in order to understand how particular reviewers when about using the genre to establish value.

In addition to the weight of the reviewer’s name and the authority of the publishing venue, reviews engender value by proposing associations and relations within distinct systems. First, they mobilized discursive associations with the Appalachians and Still’s biography, drawn from the “Autobiographical Notes” which appeared on the flap, including discussion of Still’s colonial heritage and his labor as a librarian at Hindman. The power of the flap to reinforce assumptions about regionalism and Appalachia proved critical to Still’s reception.30  Second, the flap

30 The bio is as important as any poem in the book. The first fourth of “The Autobiographical Notes” reads: “I was born on Double Creek in the hills of Alabama twenty-nine years ago. I am one of ten children. My ancestors fought in the American revolution and the War of 1812. The Stills came from England, landing at Charles Town (Charleston, S.C.) in 1636. My mother’s people were Scotch-Irish and sold mules to the Colonial troops during the revolution.” Similarly the other most cited section reads: “Last year, beside my work it the Settlement, I delivered traveling libraries on foot to nineteen schools having no books. I carried twenty books in a carton on my shoulder, often walking fifteen to seventeen miles.” Reviewers generally compounded his paid work as a librarian at Hindman with his volunteer work of ferrying books to remote mountain communities.
reviews discussed Still’s relation to regionalism and his difference from other mountain writers such as Jesse Stuart. Similarly, they compared his writing to other authors such as Robert Frost or Robinson Jeffers. Third, they discussed how the craft of his writing correlated with their conception of mountain culture and its Anglo-Saxon/Elizabethan associations. Fourth, they garnered value by discussing the press and Benét’s blurb, magazines where Still had published, and his 1937 O. Henry Award for his short fiction—all shorthand for literary anointment. Finally, as mentioned earlier, almost all reviews downplayed Still’s critique of modern culture, which was too easily associated with the Popular Front.

The reviews can be broken into four categories: weekly and monthly national magazines (five reviews), national newspapers (eight reviews), little magazines and critical quarterlies (six reviews), and regional papers (17 reviews) (Cadle, “Reviews” 208-211). The national newspaper reviews, which perhaps best represent mainstream taste, widely praised Hounds on the Mountain. All recognize Still as a successful regionalist rooted in the mountains of Kentucky, and the reviews in The Boston Evening Transcript, Herald Tribune Books, and The New York Times Book Review detailed his colonial heritage as an essential interface with the land. R. P. Harris in “Granite Appalachian Poetry,” a review for the Herald Tribune, reported, “The grain of James Still’s poetry is the grain of his ancestry and of the Appalachian range.” Interestingly, Percy Hutchison, writing for The New York Times Book Review, like most others, mistakes Still’s actual relation to the mountains, calling Still “a Southern mountaineer, born and bred,” going so far as to call Still’s diction “homespun from his ancestors, the warp from Chaucer, the woof out of the English Bible.” This diction, however, was learned and artfully applied from Still’s attention to diction in his Master’s thesis, “The Function of Dreams and Visions in the Middle English Romances.” Hutchison recognizes Still as “an individual voice of the mountains” (i.e., a successful regionalist) by his refusal either to “imitate the English and Scottish ballads that have been brought by his forebears” or to try his hand at modernist experimentalism. Similarly, the reviewer for The Chronicle (San Francisco) read Still as “neither picturesque nor precious” but as exactly describing people “living on their own natural, unassuming terms” (Wilson). The review immediately follows with the praise that the book does not seem to have “philosophical or political categories,” allowing it to appeal to all readers through its portrayal of “life itself.”
The influence of the cover description, the blurb by Benét (which is twice quoted in full), and Still’s front sleeve biography were the lenses through which the poems were read, reinforcing conceptions about Appalachia. Writing for the New York Post, Herchel Brikell, who Still had met at Grover’s Summer School of English in Blowing Rock, calls Still’s poem “Fox Hunt” “purely and singularly American”:

Call up the yawing hounds from the chimney’s warmth  
Beneath the puncheon floor. Call up the dusty hounds  
With a rasher of sow-belly and a greasy corn-pone  
While fog loiters in the valleys and dark coves  
Over blossoming elder and wine-red sumac,  
And a swollen moon rides the sky-orchards. (p. 6, 8-13)

This poem was the only one quoted from the first section of the book (besides eight lines from “Mountain Dulcimer,” which were quoted just once). This hunting poem—in which, through the proxy of hounds, readers bound down the mountain—is also quoted by Harris, where he emphasizes the hounds:

Hounds flow down the sloop in a narrowing sweep  
And up again in brown tidal strokes.  
Their voices are the wild trumpets  
Catching the night air for their blasting . . . (page 7, 20-23)

Perhaps “puncheon” (9) and “rasher” (10) represent the diction that evoked Hutchison’s comment about “the warp of Chaucer,” but it is clear that what these reviewers valued was a world where domesticity was interpenetrating with nature. In fact, reviewers quote no images of people in daily life from the book’s final three sections. Images of “mountain people” are even imported by Harry Hansen, whose review for the New York World-Telegram was republished in four other newspapers along the Atlantic coast. Rather than quoting Still, he summarizes, “His portraits of men are like those of the hills; these people are rooted and immovable, they take the weather as it comes, have capacity for endurance.” Hansen then substitutes quotes from Still’s essay about his work as a librarian where “Uncle Todd” and “Aunt Clotha” speak in a strong mountain diction that never appears in the poems. Speaking about Still’s hauling books into remote mountain communities (something every review mentions), Uncle Todd is quoted: “‘Hit’s a puore sight how he gits around fetching books and retching them back ag’in.’” Just as
Still brought literacy to the mountaineer, reviewers praised him for bringing the mountains to the literate.

John Holmes, writing an extended review for The Boston Evening Transcript (and a separate review for The Virginia Quarterly Review), begins by recounting Still’s colonial heritage and his work with mountain literacy. He explains Still’s “discrimination” and “craftsmanship” that treats words “with scrupulous honor,” opposed to the work of Jesse Stuart and Thomas Wolfe. Fully quoting the final two poems in the book, Holmes emphasizes the book’s last section where he could “see the man most,” in which the presence of an authorial narrator steps forth only to meld with the mountains. The penultimate poem is “Horseback in the Rain,” where the narrator writes (and implicitly speaks) a series of unspoken second-person imperatives that unite reader and narrator as being mutual subject to the “you must” of the superego. This technique also fills the poem with the feel of a scrambling continuity and the near mad-rush of a traveler looking for shelter in a storm that cannot be denied:

To the stone, to the mud
With hoofs busy clattering
In a fog-wrinkled spreading
Of waters? Halt not. Stay not.
Ride the storm with no ending
On a road unarriving. (54, 13-18)

Like the child in the first poem, the narrator has been turned out from human shelter in the mountains, but instead of leaving that which he knows his ghost would always haunt, he keeps going even though there is no promised end. The surging pace of “Horseback in the Rain” contrasts with the “solemn pace” of the closing poem “Heritage,” in whose quiet tone Holmes proposes that Still is “most like his mountain people.” Here is the second stanza of that naturalized Petrarchan sonnet, whose first stanza I discussed earlier:

Being of these hills, being one with the fox
Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal,
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending,
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.
Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond. (55, 10-15)
Holmes takes the space to quote this poem in order to demonstrate Still’s formal organic quality: “[Still’s rhythm] does not beat with any mechanical regularity, it approximates a form.” Still’s control of tone with syntax is clear when we compare the careful pace this final sextet, which contains only two end-stops, with the clatter of “Horseback in the Rain,” whose stops within the narrow lines paradoxically accelerate its pace. However, the last two lines of “Heritage,” which Still might have seen as allowing one to persevere death by “rising to bloom” within a larger natural cycle, are frowned on by Holmes: “[for] regional writers who insist that they are forever at home and happy in their chosen valley, there may already be some foreboding limitations.”

Just such a critique appears in the much briefer reviews from The New Republic, The Atlantic, and The New Yorker. And while Benét merely reiterates his own blurb in The Saturday Review of Literature, The Nation praises the “regional pastorals” as an “illative” manifestation of The Lyrical Ballads but complains that such description was confined to “a static society”: apparently Still did not speak his disapproval of industry loudly enough (S. Young). Defending the literary gate in The New Republic, John Gould Fletcher—one of the original Agrarians who also savaged Stuart in a review—railed against Still’s “monotony” of precise observation in which he became “too much the photographic realist, plodding along where a rustic furrow leads him.” Beyond representation of an agrarian life, Fletcher wanted Still to take a stand on modern culture: apparently, to gain one’s letter-jersey with the Agrarians, one needed a fervid stance on culture that “burns on, line after line.” Similarly, Theodore Morrison, the director of the Bread Loaf Writers Conference (discussed below), calls the poems “saturated with the love of nature.” Although noting that Still can sometimes be “miraculously wild,” Morrison condescends that his poems are merely those of “the keenness of a young man’s senses,” which become repetitive. Notably, all these reviews mention Still’s connection to the highlands and regionalism without recounting either his biography or popular associations with Appalachia. In short, for the more affluent or politicized reader, the reign of regionalism was already being to pass even as native Appalachians were entering the literary field.

On the level of literary quarterlies—those new, university-affiliated forces in the literary world—Holmes’s review in The Virginia Quarterly rehearsed his earlier praise and warnings. His words befitted the orientation of the quarterly, which had initiated and hosted the University

---

31 The issue of The Atlantic that held Morrison’s comments also contained a ten-page excerpt from Caldwell’s and Bourke-White’s You Have Seen Their Faces.
of Virginia Round-Table Conference on Regionalism in 1931, the first of a sequence of such national meetings (Dorman 276). Moreover, the quarterly’s second editor, Lambert Davis, had argued for Still’s poetry since February 1934, gaining acceptance of “Mountain Dulcimer” for publication that October. Upon hearing of Still’s book, Davis wrote that he was “delighted to hear that you will bring out a volume under the excellent imprint of Viking Press. Needless to say, I am proud of having offered you some little encouragement in your first work.”

However, The Virginia Quarterly was the only journal affiliated with regionalism (such as The Prairie Schooner or The Southwest Review) to publish a review, which was indicative of the changes in the American culture and the devaluation of regional authenticity.

Reviewers for the recently founded Southern Review and Poetry denigrated Hounds as outmoded and ill-crafted regionalism. Writing for Poetry, Sherman Conrad gave Still’s diction rigorous scrutiny and justified his focus based on Still poetry’s “freedom from any ‘doctrine’” and its self-classification as “‘regional,’” which thus places “unusual stakes” on its “distinguishing verbal characteristics” (347). He proceeds to critique Still’s “constant alteration of modifier-noun, modifier-noun,” which creates a “clumping monotonous rhythm,” and Still’s use of two adjectives per line, which “blur the nouns they should modify” (347-48). Moreover, he attacks Still’s use of idiomatic mountain vocabulary as being a rehearsal of bland diction from the English Lake Poets’ “vacuous pantheism” (348). And against the “quaint, picturesque” focus of poems such as “Mountain Dulcimer,” he praises—the only reviewer to do so—the three poems about mining-towns, which are “truly local experiences.” In short, although Poetry had published four of Still’s poems (three of which reappear in the book’s first section), Conrad discredits Still’s rhythm, diction, and subject material. This reaction reflects Conrad’s beginning quote, where he cites R. P. Blackmur’s essay on Emily Dickinson’s language, which had just appeared in Robert Penn Warren’s and Cleanth Brook’s The Southern Review, that shining new vehicle of New Criticism. Thus, F. O. Matthiessen’s review in The Southern Review is not surprising. Matthiessen skips all comparison with Still’s contemporaries and crows that Still’s “Kentucky regionalism” faces the same dilemma as “the local colorists of the eighteen-eighties”:

32 The relationship between editor and writer is a telling example of the relations in the literary field. After the publication of his book, Still asked Davis to write a recommendation for his Guggenheim application, and in 1938 from his new position as an editor with Bobbs Merrill, Davis would write to Still and implore him to publish there rather than with Viking (JS Morehead 10.11, 14.16).
He dwells lovingly on the details of his environment as ends in themselves. And, almost inevitably in such a method, the details chosen are quaint ones, those which set off his remote valleys from the harsher realities of the modern world: the ‘busy fiddles’ in the tallow light, the sound of the dulcimer, the horse-swapping on Troublesome Creek. And the defect is that these details, so handled, instead of summoning up a mode of life, become mere surface recording. (378)

In other words, the details provided by Still described without enacting a “mode of life.” Matthiessen ends by calling for Still to take the tact of Marxists who “link the problems of the region with the wider movements of industrialization” (379). Or, even better, to write more like “a man and only secondarily as a Southerner,” just as “Ransom and Warren [do], whose pungent local details can become symbols for broad human value” (379). Indeed, demonstrating that regionalism was already passé for learned writers, Robert Penn Warren had composed an anti-manifesto in 1936 called “Some Don’ts for Literary Regionalists,” which decried—amongst other equally valid points—the misuse of folklore to titillate readers and the pampering of “hicks” and “primitivism” (145, 148-49). What the Agrarians had helped to create, the New Critics would now defend and transcend.

Certainly, both Conrad and Matthiessen are on target. Still’s is guilty of overusing adjectives and of repetitive construction; however, to make this the focus of a three-page review is a decided act of dismissal, amplified by the fact that Still strove for skillful use of language, unlike Stuart who was praised for his vigorous disregard of such trappings. Similarly, Matthiessen is to some degree correct, as can be witnessed through the value that was placed on Still’s work by The Atlantic, which spawned mountain local color, and by Hindman. Yet to what degree was the cultural work that Still’s poetry performed for these institutions negative, to what degree positive? Was it merely propagating and sustaining fantasies that America held about the difference between a learned, exterior, benevolent culture and its mindful affirmation of America through aid rendered to an illiterate, interior, primal culture? Or was Still’s writing aiding in the contact, appreciation, and inevitable transformation of both cultures?

Arguments can be made on both sides, as we have seen through the discussion of the ambiguous relation of the dulcimer in Hindman’s history. Regardless, the book gained attention because it engaged those issues. Hounds was valued by Viking and by the Southern Author’s Award Committee, which gave it an honorable mention. Notably, in 1940, Still won the award on
for River of Earth, although technically the book was the second choice after You Can’t Go Home Again by Thomas Wolfe who died and was thus unable to receive the award. This event was the only occasion at which he ever read his poems to a public gathering (Cadle, “Pattern” 117). The reactions of Conrad and Matthiessen certainly forecast Still’s eventual exclusion from the more academic literary field then coming into ascendance. It was only because Appalachian writers and scholars canonized Still in the 1970s that aging New Critics Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks rendered appreciation for Still’s stalwart, full-hearted, and intimate rendering of mountain culture. Hints of why Still faded from national appreciation after World War II—as opposed to Jesse Stuart, who was continuously panned by the New Critics and the academic side of the literary field, whose value rose—are witnessed by his reticence to mobilize the cultural capital Hounds of Earth earned and participate in necessary self-promotion in the literary field. Part VII investigates how Still sought to capitalize (or not) upon his new contacts within the literary field that he gained by virtue of his book.

Part VII: Stumping the Literary Field

Still’s reaction to fostering relations in the literary field is forecast by his response to touching Hounds on the Mountain, which he shared with two young men that he brought into his confidences: Dean Cadle, mentioned in the footnote above, and Albert Stewart, who attended Hindman in the 1930s when Still was there and went on to found The Appalachian Journal. When Stewart asked Still what it felt like to be the author of Hounds, “the reply was strange, and

33 Tate wrote to Still in 1971 expressing his appreciation for Still’s “masterpiece of style” (qtd. in Stoneback 10), while Cleanth Brooks wrote the foreword to Still’s Run for the Elbertas in 1980. However, such appreciation was retarded due to Still’s split from the literary establishment. Indeed, critical documentation on how Still was appreciated in the 1930s and 1940s would have been difficult to access without the work of Dean Cadle in the early 1960s to compile a definitive critical anthology and bibliography on Still’s poetry and fiction. From a mining camp in south eastern Kentucky, Cadle had first learned of Still when interning as a student editor with Mountain Life and Work when he attended Berea in 1941 (Cadle, “Pattern” 112). Cadle went on to study creative writing as a fellow at Stanford and returned to Kentucky to write stories and work as a librarian in Pikeville Community College. A full manuscript of Man on Troublesome was rendered in the mid-1960s, but no University Press would publish it. The entire manuscript and the history of its assemblage and rejection exist with Dean Cadle’s papers in the University of Kentucky’s special collections.

34 Ted Olson’s study, “‘This Mighty River of Earth’: Reclaiming James Still’s Appalachian Masterpiece” (The Journal of Appalachian Studies 1.1 1995), explores the reasons that Still’s River of Earth has not been more widely valued by the national academic and literary establishment. He claims that although Rivers received greater original critical acclaim than Grapes of Wrath, Still’s book was categorized as regional fiction about Appalachia in a time of growing nationalistic fervor against international threats. Moreover, unlike Steinbeck and Faulkner—two other novelists who could have been considered regionalists—Still began publishing at the end of the regionalist era, and so his reputation could not transcend its demise, especially because he did not, as I discuss in detail below, promote his own reputation.
in words to the effect that ‘Maybe I should have felt elated but on that day I received the printed copies, I took a copy and walked out in the field and sat on a stump and felt like crying’” (38). Similarly, Cadle reports, “Being published is not total joy, he [Still] said, as I learned with Hounds on the Mountain came out. I got the package of ten free copies from the post office, and on my way home I sat down on a stump and opened them. I recall how naked I felt” (“Pattern” 118). Still’s feeling of being exposed (and perhaps betrayed) shows that his response to the world of literary publishing was somehow antithetical to the creative life he desired.

Still’s failure to continue to generate recognition in the literary field resulted largely from the dilemma that arose in his stance toward and relationship with the people and places that formed his subject material, his relationship with his own art, and his attitude about self-promotion. Simply put, he felt that respect and dignity demanded keeping the first two apart, and that his literary work would speak for itself. Still had experience to the contrary when Grover promoted his work, helping him gain publication and inviting Still to attend the Blowing Rock School of English where he met Herschel Brickell, the reviewer for The New York Post. As a result of that meeting, Brickell praised Still’s work and verbal story-telling ability, which he encouraged New Yorkers to experience when Still visited town (“A Poet to Remember”). As explained in 1926 by George Oppenheimer (who founded Viking with Guinzburg but left in 1933 to work in Hollywood), presses invest in authors, not books: “If the novel is a poor seller it does not mean for a moment that the next book will fail. A certain audience has been created, a certain prestige established, all of which can be entered on the credit side of the ledger when and if the next book comes” (219). Yet even before the next book, publishers sought to mobilize that “certain prestige.” As Still’s publisher, Marshall Best knew the critical importance for Still to meet the field’s editors, reviewers, authors, and publishers, so Best immediately suggested that Still attend Bread Loaf Writers Conference and won him a scholarship.

Bread Loaf had begun in 1925 at Middlebury College as an innovation of John Farrar, then editor of The Bookman (Morrison 5-7). There was little prestige in this undertaking and no pay for Farrar, but it provided the chance to meet other figures in the literary field. Farrar stopped directing Bread Loaf when he formed Farrar and Rinehart in 1929, the same year that Edward Weeks of The Atlantic was invited to participate as a lecturer. As his assistant at The Atlantic from 1927, Morrison soon began to teach at Bread Loaf and took over the conference in 1932 (10). Making interconnections between segments of the literary field was crucial for
authors. In 1932, few people knew of Bread Loaf, so Morrison undertook an advertising campaign in The Saturday Review of Literature, The Atlantic, the Herald Tribune, Christine Science Monitor, and The New York Times. Moreover, academics were displaced as lecturers. It is no coincidence that Marshall Best was Morrison’s college roommate and that the Best helped introduce many publishers to the conference (12). Teachers and visiting speakers such as Weeks, Farrar, Archibald MacLeish, Julia Peterkin, Robert Hillyer, and Paul Green proved a powerful draw. Soon editors, writers, literary agents, and publishers, rather than academics, were acting as instructors (44). With a position titled “Publication Advisor,” the Conference was as much about learning the realities of the market as producing a marketable piece of writing (45). While there, Still worked with the North Carolina playwright Paul Green, Herbert Agar of the Courier-Journal, and George Stevens of The Saturday Review of Literature. Still met Carson McCullers and Robert Francis as fellow students with whom he would stay in contact. Robert Frost and James T. Farrell were also guest speakers. Although Frost did not blurb Still’s book, Still reported having met him one afternoon “in Florida” after the summer of 1937, perhaps at Grover’s home where both Still and Frost had stayed (Cadle, “Pattern” 138). That evening when he went back to his own room, Still discovered Robert Frost “sitting there”: “Frost was the person who gave me the license to write. . . . Imagine the surprise of a beginning writer to walk into his room and find Robert Frost. It’s the kind of thing that happens in dreams. We talked for a long time—he did most of it. He talked about the difficulties and rewards of being a writer and about the need to remain free of pressure and promises and temptations” (138). Still would take the advice to heart.

The following year, Grover encouraged Still to give readings and to work at the Blowing Rock School of English as a visiting lecturer. “You’ve got to do it someday,” Grover instructed, “why not begin now?” (15 Feb. 1938). Yet, due to his shyness, Still had declined to read when he first attended in 1936, so the popular Southern novelist Majorie Kinnnan Rawlings read his poems aloud for him. In a letter that year Rawlings warned Still against further education and insisted that he ignore the outside world: “Your lessons, James, are in your Kentucky hills. They

---

35 The contradiction is that Still must have met Frost at Bread Loaf that summer in early July, just after his book came out. The meeting more likely occurred either at Bread Loaf or in Florida in December, when Frost wintered in Gainesville and Still spent time with the Grover family. Frost had spoken well of Still’s poetry on several occasions to Majorie Kinnnan Rawlins (another Floridian) and Knickerbocker. Indeed, Rawlins reported to Still that Frost had told her that he’d rather read Still than Wallace Stevens (JS Morehead 10.16). Although a close friendship was not developed, Frost did later kindly invite Still to many public events in which Frost was involved.
are in the waters of Troublesome Creek. They are in the strange minds and destinies of your
mountain people. They are most of all in your own innate good taste in writing—in your own
heart, sensitive and raw” (13 July 1936). Still went on, however, to meet other young authors at
artist colonies such as Yaddo, which he attended in 1939. There he met Katherine Anne Porter
and Delmore Schwartz, the three of whom promoted one another. During his correspondence
with editors and publishers who approached him about publishing, Still commonly commended
Schwartz’s poetry to them, levying influence with Simon & Schuster and Random House. They
asked Schwartz for manuscripts, but he declined due to already publishing with New Directions
(JS Morehead 10.15 and 11.11). Schwartz wrote Still, “How in Heaven’s name do you happen
to be corresponding with all these people when your own publisher is Viking and your live 2,000
miles away?” (27 Jan. 1940). In return, he promoted Still’s work at the MLA conference to
Ransom and Tate, both of whom promised they would read Still’s work, neither of whom, as we
have seen, did.

In 1938, Still also attended McDowell Colony, where he met John Gould Fletcher, who
would win the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for his Selected Poems. Given Fletcher’s deprecating review
of Hounds on the Mountain, clearly great reconciliation occurred. Fletcher wrote Still later that
year and provided admiration and guidance:

I enjoyed meeting you most of anyone that I saw this summer at the colony. Your
personality with its blend of complete integrity and love for your own local
background, is not a common kind of thing in America. I believe that you are
going to do fine things—perhaps in prose rather than in poetry for your
temperament seems to me deliberative, reflective, rather than emotional and
lyrical. But you will always find it hard to satisfy yourself, and you are by nature
so sensitive as to be almost unable to protect yourself from the world by means of
warding off things that upset you.

While Still would continue to write the occasional poem, Fletcher was correct that Still would
take to writing prose, a direction he undertook with great encouragement. What is more,
Fletcher’s observations about Still’s personality tell us about Still’s reticence in self-promotion.
At that conference, Still also met and impressed Boris Todrin, the editor of The Columbia
Review who wrote Still letters sharing how deeply impressed he was (JS Morehead 9.20). It’s
impossible to tell if Todrin was courting Still as a contributor, but the connection offered tremendous benefits, had Still decided to act upon them.

After Still’s novel River of Earth was published in February 1940, he was contacted by Irwin Edman, a philosophy professor at Columbia University, who asked him to be the Phi Beta Kappa poet at Columbia’s commencement exercises. Also an author published by Viking, Edman explained the esteem in which he and his colleagues held Still’s poetry. In this time of looming fascism one can feel the similarity of Still’s vision to Edman’s, who writes in Candle in the Dark (Viking, 1939), “Everyone recalls the preternatural lucidity of an autumn day, when every color, so soon to fade utterly, has for the moment the quality of timeless being . . . . To behold the recurrent types of energy and the spending of energy . . . raise us from the hurt and risk incident to existence in time to the peace of the eternal” (“Postscript” 34). Three days after Edman, Best wrote Still to express his “satisfaction” and “delight” (1 April 1940). Acting as Still’s coach, Best encouraged him: “This is a distinguished honor and I sincerely hope that you will find it possible to accept.” Knowing of Still’s meager income, Best also offered to help cover Still’s expenses. However, Still declined to go: “I didn’t have the bus fare and, as I thought, clothes suitable to wear at such function” (Interview with J. W. Williamson 51). Upon hearing of Still’s decision, Best admonished Still: “I am tremendously disappointed to know that you have turned town the Columbia invitation. As a human being, I can understand your feelings about it, but that doesn’t prevent me from being sorry to see you miss this honor” (18 April 1940). Best was beginning to feel frustrated with Still’s reticence to till the literary field.

This reluctance to public self-promotion is also seen through Still’s relationship with the more local University of Kentucky in Lexington, some 130 miles away from Hindman as the crow flies. L. L. Dantzler, Chair of the English Department, first asked Still to come be part of the Woman’s Club festival (7 April 1936). Upon Still’s apparently vehement and negative response, Dantzler asked him to meet with “English majors and staff members” (18 Dec. 1936). Still again said no. On February 26, 1937, Frances McVey (wife of the university’s president) implored him to “please” come down; when he declined, she wrote back again on March 11: “Whatever the day, please come. My husband joins me in assuring you of the warm welcome that awaits you.” Finally, after much begging, Still agreed.36

36 Dantzler invited him come in early May but preferably in late April, so Still might meet with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, who was expelled from his professorship at Columbia in 1917, leading to a reaction that fostered
In the 1960s, Still repeated his opposition to a writer undertaking self-publicizing: “I don’t think a writer should allow himself to be used to promote his writing. That sort of deceptivity is more appropriate for politicians and automobile dealers. My writing speaks for itself” (qtd. in Cadle, “Man on Troublesome” 254). Cadle reports in a later essay that Still saw “lecture tours and autograph parties” as the “enemies of writing. . . . The writer only has one duty: to write” (“Pattern” 116). However, as we have seen, reviewers’ sympathies and responses changed when they had an acquaintance with Still or supported his regionalist vision. Even then, the reviews only generated enough attention to get Still into the next series of encounters within the literary field, encounters from which he quailed, whether from his personality, his artistic philosophy, or a mixture of the two.

In March of 1959, Still discussed his thoughts with Dean Cadle about the difference between Katherine Anne Porter’s developing renown and his own literary abeyance. No doubt the situation was particularly biting to him, since Porter had written him in deep praise of his fiction. In the end, Still thought the difference in their success came down to her contacts within the literary field:

Although he [Still] feels that Katherine Anne Porter has written some of the best short stories in America, he is puzzled that she has remained well known, especially since she has published little during the past several years and since other good short story writers who have continued to publish have hardly made a dent. He said it is a comforting indication that a writer of serious short fiction does have a chance in the United States. However, we agreed that the indication is less comforting when we considered that for the past fifteen years or more Miss Porter has traveled throughout the country lecturing at writers’ conferences and serving as a writer-in-residence at numerous colleges. Furthermore, Mademoiselle magazine has published several articles on her, usually illustrating them with a photo of her. (Cadle, “Pattern” 121)

In an interview with the editor of Appalachian Journal in 1978—a year after the founding of the Hindman Settlement School’s Appalachian Writers Workshop which has become a central fixture in the Appalachian and Ohio Valley literary scene—Still’s position as the primogenitor of

the formation of the New School for Social Research which was critical in the formation of cultural pluralism, and hence, regionalism. See Chapter One, Part II, “Horace Kallen.”
Appalachian literature was well established, and he had revised his vision: “I wouldn’t blame an author for doing anything reasonable to bring his writing to the attention of the public. Agreed, I haven’t done much in this line myself. Frankly, I wouldn’t know what to do” (Interview with J. W. Williamson 51). Still’s attitude toward the literary field is the result of his attempts to resolve the paradox between his commitment to place and art and his opportunity to become a literary professional.

Still’s artistic persona was intensely introverted and committed to continuous, slow, private work. This position reinforced what he had been taught by the upcoming New Critics at Vanderbilt about the proper stance that one should take toward literature—it must speak for itself. But he also enacted Donald Davidson’s call from his essay, “A Mirror for Artists,” in I’ll Take My Stand:

The artist should not forget that in these times he is called on to play the part of both a person and of an artist. Of the two, that of the person is more immediately important. As an artist he will do best to feel the infection of our times, to stand for decentralization in the arts, to resist with every atom of his strength the false gospel of art as a luxury which can be sold in commercial quantities or which can be hallowed in discreet shrines. But he cannot wage this fight by remaining on his perch as artist. He must be a person first of all, even though for the time being he may become less of an artist. He must enter the common arena and become a citizen. (60)

When Still undertook a life of service to mountain literacy at Hindman, he was more than careful not to become lost in the seduction of the artistic field—he radically separated himself from it, even while writing poetry designed to function within it. In 1968, Cadle explained that few people in the region of Hindman had actually read anything by Still who had a policy of “flagrant disregard” for self-promotion and, instead, “worked diligently to protect his privacy and to insure separation between his personal life and any critical acclaim that might adhere to the name James Still as writer” (“Man on Troublesome” 236). Still felt he was entrusted to service and quiet observation of the people among whom he had come to live. When Cadle asked if there was a contradiction between his life as a writer (“whose duty is to preserve mountain people as they are, with their folk-customs and often primitive attitudes”) and his dedication as an educator and librarian at Hindman (who sought “to teach them to read, to
improve their living conditions, and to bring them closer to culture and so-called modern thinking and living”), Still replied: “No. None at all. I would still write about them as they would be under changed conditions. For it’s the people rather than the conditions I’m writing about” (“Pattern” 114). Yet the very terms of Cadle’s question and Still’s response belie underlying assumptions. Words such as “preserve,” “primitive,” and “about” demonstrate a contradiction at the heart of Still’s stance: instead of becoming directly involved in the artistic practices of the local population, Still wrote about a people whose habitus was valued by Hindman because of their removal from modernity, and he wrote for an exterior audience of highly literate readers. Still created extraordinary literary work that strived to capture the spirit of a passing moment, but with the imposing forces of labor exploitation and the raping of raw resources, his stance was questioned by those who assumed other tactics. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the response to his work by his fellow mountain poets Jesse Stuart and Don West. Between the three of them, they represent three distinct attitudes toward pluralism, regionalism, Appalachia, and poetry.

Before his first acceptance to Poetry, Stuart had been writing to Still since 1933. In January 1935, Stuart wrote how “fine” it was to see Still “climbing in poetry,” and in November 1935 wrote how “honestly glad” he was to see Still’s poetry appearing in The Atlantic, Household, and Esquire all within the same week. While both poets were writing about the same culture and geography, not a tinge of jealousy was registered. In June 1936 upon reading Still’s “All Their Ways Are Dark,” the first story he published in The Atlantic, Stuart wrote him about how he had seemingly “got over what Don [West] has been trying to put over all of his life” (18 June 1936). Stuart refers to how Still managed to, in just three pages, portray the crisis of a mountain family, who participated in the economy of a coal mine during the depression. This move brought the family in strife over the use of resources, forcing the narrator’s mother to solve the problem by burning down their home. Indeed, Don West did not appreciate Still’s description of internalized class conflict.

West had returned to Kentucky in 1934 with the Communist Party to help unionize coal miners, whose lives and struggles served as a central subject for his writing (I consider these in Chapter Four). Accordingly, in each letter that Stuart wrote Still, he ranted against West’s answer of political action, which Stuart saw as creating an “old sad-faced world” and denying the joy and “grand time” the world actually had to offer. Instead of frowning on moral decay, Stuart
chortled to Still, “Boy, life’s just a can of applesauce. Woodrow Wilson’s vice said the best thing that has ever come from the whitehouse. Said what this country needed was a good fivencent cigar. Say, if you come up here don’t fail to stick a San Felice in your pocket” (18 June 1936). Stuart’s take was that West, who was then the State Organizer for the Kentucky Workers’ Alliance (and Kentucky organizer for the Communist Party, although that was not public knowledge), was a charismatic but failed leader and poet. Stuart explained, “[Don] Wants his name before the public on the sweat and blood of other men’s labor and other’s writings” (Jan. 30, 1936), and he predicted that “Don will pass in a blowing wind unless he does a book of his own” and settles down (8 Sept. 1937). Yet Stuart continued, “There’s something in Don West that makes him go on. There is a thirst unbearable in him.” Against West’s political example and Still’s literary bearing, Stuart noted his own complicit use of images that he knew would sell: “I’m afraid about all my virginity is gone. I’ve been more or less a prostitute among the magazines” (18 June 1936). Like smoking, drinking, and other moral delinquencies, West also spurned such prostitution to the literary field.

That November (1936), West had written Still on precisely that point. He had been speaking at Sue Bennet College in London, Kentucky, about Kentucky writers and his hope for a new way. He dismissed the work of John Fox and Elizabeth Roberts as unable to speak about the present-day and spoke against Still and Stuart who claimed to be writing realistically about the mountains (6 Nov. 1936). West condemns Stuart for being “hungry for a career, exploiting the old romantic, sentimentalism which outsiders hook up to the mountains.” Then he launched into “Still,” who he describes in the third person within the letter: “As for Still, he is still a very confused young guy, honest in his work, sincere in his desire to picture the mountains—but tends to idolize and idealize. Fails as yet to get into the vital stream of present day life. Still holds on to the old romantic approach.” He then says that Still’s recent story in Mountain Life and Work had “nothing new, not even a new approach”; besides, he went on, “you still make the mistake of fumbling mountain language.” He continues, “This story [“One Leg Gone to Judgment”] is as trite as all the poems I’ve seen of yours in the same magazine and in the Sewanee Review.” West no longer confided the inner dilemmas of his heart to Still. By this time West had been blacklisted from Mountain Life and Work, which he called “that reactionary sheet” catering to “the old maids of Hindman,” so he was publishing stories of mining strife and conflict there.
under the pseudonym Mack Adams. And in the new furor of his political righteousness and perhaps his own anger at his lack of literary success, West was preaching to Still.

In May, 1937, West revealed, “I find myself constantly on a nervous edge with all kinds of commotion, fights [and] unpleasantness.” He shares his appreciation of Still’s ability to get him to listen quietly to stories and says he appreciates that Still is “pushing ahead” and sticking to his writing: “Of course, a man goes as far in any way as his vision allows. I do not expect you to go the same way I do socially in thought or action. We have two different outlooks, different set of values, as much as I love peace . . . .” But West’s calm was only momentary, and after reading Hounds on the Mountain, West realized their distance and voiced his anger at Still’s stance: “seemingly our interests are a million miles apart, [but] we once did have quite a close friendship which I have always appreciated in spite of the feeling that I have that you and your writing are barely scratching the surface of things” (9 Aug. 1937). West concludes by admitting that Still might find West’s contempt hard to bear but that “we can still get a hell of a kick out of talking together.” Such words were poignant since West had acted as a big brother to both Still and Stuart when they were at Vanderbilt and had inspired Still to come to Hindman when he sent him the dulcimer seven years earlier. 37 Although West would later send Still a copy of the flyer announcing the publication of his 1946 Clods of Southern Earth, this letter was essentially the last contact between them.

Conclusion

More than mere sibling rivalry, the work of James Still, Jesse Stuart, and Don West represents three distinct approaches to the mountains, America, poetry, and the literary world. Looking back from 1977, Still recounted,

Don was a gifted man, he writes well, and if the day ever comes that he writes his autobiography, we’ll have a volume to recon with. I last saw him in 1937. The three of us—Jesse Stuart, Don West, and myself—have been referred to as the

37 Still, Stuart, and West all graduated from Lincoln Memorial University in 1929, and West became close friends with both of them when all three attended Vanderbilt University—Still and Stuart working on Masters in English (Still 1929-1930, Stuart 1930-1931) and West completing his Bachelor’s of Divinity in the School of Religion (1929-1932). Stuart recounts how West would provide him food when he was delirious from hunger, and Still notes that the first moment he became aware of social conflict was when West brought him out to witness the effects of a strike at Wilder, Tennessee. Of Wilder, Still wrote, “It was my first inkling that folk could starve to death in the United States of America in plain view of a largely indifferent populace” (“A Man Singing” 14). No doubt this experience furthered his own appreciation of “the traditional kind of community” that existed around Hindman (20).
“barefoot boys.” We have different careers. We chose “the path less traveled by.” Don is the poet of the disinherited. And Jesse wrote the most books, some seventy-five of them, that came out of the class of 1929. (Interview with J. W. Williamson 64)

All three authors engaged the resources offered by the discourse of authenticity and regionalism, but to remarkably different ends based on their personal interests and participation in varied parts of the literary field. But the one regional writer who most exactly situates Still’s place in the literary landscape of the late 1930s is Elizabeth Maddox Roberts, whose literary prestige both came of age and faded with regionalism.

Marshall Best had passed Hounds on the Mountain along to Roberts, who wrote Still that she found the “verses beautiful, contemplative, a personal record that mirrors the hills themselves—the reflection being in the impression more than in the physical descriptive picture” (23 June 1937). Roberts felt strongly enough about Still’s work to offer to write a blurb for River of Earth, although she had never done so for any other writer. In appreciation of this offer, and of her 1940 novel Song in the Meadow, Still sent her a dulcimer, perhaps one made by Jethro Amburgey. Roberts gave her thanks but shared, “I do not know how to tune it” (6 May 1940). Still sent her directions, a copy of one of his stories in The Post, and praised reviews of her book. Roberts’s replied in sadness: “I am glad you have seen some reviews of my book. I have seen only three, and it almost seems as if it fell upon an indifferent world” (May 1940). She would die ten months later on March 13, 1941.

In the years leading up to Roberts’s death, the threat of fascism loomed ever closer with the ongoing Spanish Civil War and the Munich agreement that appeased German aggression. America was by no means indifferent to the plight of her own underclass or rural regions; however, the timber of America’s attention had changed. To understand the end of the 1930s and start of World War II, one needs to acknowledge the presence and influence of books such as You Can’t Go Home Again (1940) by Thomas Wolfe, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941) by James Agee (who hailed from Knoxville, Tennessee and had won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1934, beating out Muriel Rukeyser), and The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck, which was published by Viking as well and sold over 300,000 copies in 1939 alone (“The Best Sellers”). This attention to the plights and struggles of America’s exploited and disinherited eclipsed Still’s call to value an authentic mountain culture. Intellectuals and cultural workers in
Appalachia would again come to harvest and generate ethnic awareness with Still’s work in the 1960s during a similar rise of ethnic and racial awareness throughout the country, but in the late 1930s proletarian writers, such as Muriel Rukeyser, would rendered Appalachia as the heart of America that was pummeled by industrial exploitation and fascism. Rather than seeking to preserve the “authentic” values of an idealized Anglo-American past, they looked to contemporary scientific and social resources to overcome exploitation and to renovate the quality of people’s lives through the promise of industry harnessed to the democratic practice of social institutions. I turn now to the story of Muriel Rukeyser’s U. S. 1.
Chapter 3

Pluralism, Fascism, and the Ideal Pragmatic Poetics of Muriel Rukeyser’s *U. S. 1*

Introduction

Born in New York City in 1913, Muriel Rukeyser witnessed the city’s meteoric growth in the 1920s because her father owned and ran a construction company that poured concrete and set foundations (Rukeyser, “The Education” 219-20). Growing up protected in the middle class, Rukeyser was adroitly educated in the Ethical Culture Fieldstone School, a private academy, and attended Temple with her mother. Rukeyser relates, “I grew up among a group of Jews who wished, more than anything else I think to be invisible. They were playing possum” and “wanted a religion of reassurance” (“Under” 6). But in Temple, Rukeyser also discovered the conflicts she witnessed in New York: “[The Bible’s] clash and poetry and nakedness, its fiery vision of conflict resolved only in God were true to me” (7). She attended Vassar for two years until her father’s company went bankrupt in 1932, then joined a leftist student newspaper, *The Student Review*, and traveled to Alabama to write about the controversial trial of the Scottsboro Boys. Back in New York, Rukeyser sought out Horace Gregory, who served as her mentor, and in 1935 she suddenly found herself, at the age of 21, a nationally acclaimed poet when she won the Yale Younger Poets prize for her book *Theory of Flight*. Stephen Vincent Benét, the author of the best-selling epic *John Brown’s Body* who selected the book, explained, “Politically, [Miss Rukeyser] is a Left Winger and revolutionary” but “when [she] speaks her politics—and she speaks with sincerity and fire—she does so like a poet, not like a slightly worn phonograph record” (5). This “sincerity and fire” came from a committed balance in Rukeyser’s life. In a statement published in the *Contemporary Jewish Record* (1944), Rukeyser would stress, “My themes and the use I have made of them have depended on my life as a poet, as a woman, as an American, and as a Jew” (8).¹ From that position, Rukeyser fought to realize social responsibility for the injustices and poverty she witnessed during the Depression. Her second book *U. S. 1* (1938) illustrates the role that people from America’s urban centers could play to renew their country and to intervene internationally in a world threatened with fascism.

¹ For further analysis of the role of religion in Rukeyser’s work, which became more prominent later in her career, see Janet Kaufman’s “‘But Not the Study’: Writing as a Jew.” In Herzog. 45-61.
In 1936, Rukeyser traveled from New York to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, to document the deaths of almost 800 miners from silicosis, which they contracted when digging a tunnel through a mountainside to divert the New River for hydroelectric power. After her visit, Rukeyser wrote a twenty-poem sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” about the miners’ attempts to gain compensation. All the while relaying the dynamics of power and beauty with lyrical resilience, the sequence charts the miners’ negotiation through a maze of social, natural, and institutional interrelations. More than any poem in this dissertation, “The Book of the Dead,” the first section of U. S. 1, has been the focus of scholarly investigation. Ten essays have analyzed it from diverse, but overlapping, perspectives, each of which focuses on a particular discourse: formal structure (Rosenthal, 1953); reconciliation of power and annihilation (Kertesz, 1980); feminism in the popular front (Kalaijian, 1992); technology and race (Kadlec, 1998); objectivity (Wechsler, 1999); photography (Minot, 1999); relational modernist poetics (Hartman, 1999); dialogics and the popular front (Lowney, 1999); documentaries and politics (Thurston, 1999 and Shulman, 2000), and Marxist utopian hermeneutics (Daton, 2003).

Following their initiatives which all touch upon Rukeyser’s biography and her theories of relational poetics, this chapter offers a reading of U. S. 1 in terms set forth by Rukeyser’s own life. Part I begins by exploring the poet’s foundational connections within the literary field. Through analysis of documentary films, much contemporary scholarship has considered how Rukeyser sought to recognize and offset the power of appropriation and spectacle, but no scholar has considered her work in terms of her direct literary antecedents. In doing so, I explain crucial connections between Rukeyser’s formative self-understanding and her responsibilities as a writer in terms of the older, politically-radical modernists (such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and Waldo Frank) who published articles and books on “Bloody Harlan” from late 1931 through 1934. In their opposition to industrial exploitation, these writers held goals similar to those of the regionalists. Regionalists, however, sought to value and preserve local cultures while these national writers sought to oppose and expose class exploitation. While these approaches reinforced one another, they were also at odds. Contemporary scholars who write about Appalachia have read the writers’ to Harlan visits as opportunistic invasions, which stereotyped the local culture, debilitated labor resistance in the region, and drew attention to the rights of the writers rather than to the status of the miners. I use these critiques to formulate a
similar set of ethical inquires into Rukeyser’s relationship with her subject matter and regionalism.

In order to reveal that relationship, Part II examines the book, U. S. I, within which the sequence appeared.² In doing so, I show that Rukeyser’s particular version of pluralism—and her relationship to regionalism and race—was conducted as a mode of opposition to fascism, defined by her perspective as an urban New York member of the Popular Front which advanced a version of cultural pluralism. By the mid 1930s, Horace Kallen’s theory was being reiterated by educators, as can be seen from one collection of essays that was compiled to inform educators at all levels: “the nation will be richer and finer in its cultural make-up if it, the country, conserves the best that each group has brought” (Payne 762).³ But the growing threat of fascism and international violence brought a new urgency to cultural pluralism.

An issue of the Journal of Educational Sociology (April 1939) on “Culture Conflicts” featured articles that consistently maintained the benefits of diversity but did so by highlighting attention to international relations. Clara W. Mayer wrote about how the New School for Social Research had been taking in exiled German and Italian intellectuals since 1933. They were assaulted in their homeland by totalitarian governments that undertook “their own brand of universality, which is a new and comprehensive provincialism, embracing logic, ethics, and law” that silenced conversation and resistance (474-75). Mayer’s implication is clear: America was under the same danger of nationalized fascist provincialism. At the issue’s close, the domestic danger of fascism and the palliative of diverse culture are driven home: “cultural pluralism in our domestic politics is needed to insure adequate social and economic security,” because granting substantive recognition to the nation’s minorities would diffuse “the danger of any widespread popular support of fascism or communism” (P. Bradley 496). Moreover, an active governmental policy of cultural pluralism would acknowledge the diverse range of opinions and stances implicit in America’s diversity. In contrast, silencing that plurality of voice and vision through mandated standardization would be a sign of America’s walk toward fascism (497). The terms of the philosophers from Chapter One who resisted the homogenizing forces of modernity were still at play, but Rukeyser and the Popular Front had turned them toward a new cause.

² Of the eleven studies mentioned above, only one, by Kertesz, surveys the whole book and then briefly.
³ For an example of about how cultural pluralism was then popularly theorized, see Appendix F: Cultural Pluralism and American Education.”
At the center of Rukeyser’s pluralist project rests the ideal of America as self-revelation through social engagement. In “Migrations,” her introduction to a bicentennial anthology called An American Portrait (1975), Rukeyser wrote about her ancestors’ migrations until her father had become “walled-in” by his business in New York. For Ruksyer, migration was not about leaving (or joining) a culture but about using art and life itself to plunge “deeper, deeper under these dark voyages” (n.p.). Migration meant a continual quest for “our own deep wish” that was “forming our own lives, as the South burst open to my friends and to me in Alabama at Scottsboro [and in] . . . . the mines of West Virginia.” As morally and politically necessary as Rukeyser felt these interventions, her encounters with those lives were no less than a study of her own: “How did we search for the live men and the dead men, the women alive and dead, and not search for our own stories?” What defined people for Rukeyser was not their different cultures or identities but their evolving moral relationships. And in the 1930s, her discursive umbrella for those relationships was “the idea of America.”

As assessed by Michael Denning in The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (1996), the Popular Front’s ideological and aesthetic position is rendered in the slogan, “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism” (129). This “pan-ethnic” reclamation of American symbols and ideals drew upon “pride in ethnic heritage and identity combined with an assertive Americanism and a popular internationalism” (130). The result was a working-class mythology in the late 1930s that “significantly reshaped the contours of official US nationalism” towards inclusion and equality. If members of ethnicities were seeking to gain authority via the garb of American symbols, a key Popular Front figure for native whites was John Brown (131), reference to whom drew upon his popularization in Stephen Vincent Benét’s best-selling and acclaimed John Brown’s Body (1928). Benét, who chose Rukeyser for the 1935 Yale Younger Poetry prize, was a potent influence on Rukeyser’s vision of the relationship between the poet and the public, and the figure of John Brown is a central moral icon for Rukeyser. Rather than emphasizing the value of particular regional cultures to resist the subjugation of oppressive capitalism, Rukeyser would valorize the role of the outside moral crusader to aid those isolated populations victimized by an exploitative national culture. Rukeyser’s vision of the relationship between American regionalism and international fascism is demonstrated in the structure of U.S. 1, the full analysis of which is conducted in Part II.
In the book’s first section, “The Book of the Dead,” the narrator is an urban outsider who proceeds into rural West Virginia to grant witness to the near futile search for reparations by workers who died or were dying from silicosis. The sequence is structured so that readers, who are scripted as American middle-class urbanites, are complicit in the deaths. “Night-Music,” the second section, is a lyrical Bildungsroman that demonstrates how middle-class urban dwellers might rise into historical consciousness and become actors capable of recognizing and changing the structuring forces of history. Rukeyser undertakes representing the difficulties of resisting “corruption of consciousness” within her own precincts of urban New York (Rukeyser, The Life 48). The third section, “Two Voyages,” provides a course of unhesitating action. Therein, the narrator breaks free of nationality and relates her experience of the fight against fascism in Spain. The book’s narrative demonstrates a decisive evolution of involvement: the narrator moves from retrospective witness (in “The Book of the Dead”) to ideological awakening (in “Night-Music”) to projective participation (in “Two Voyages”). Thus, to either side of the urban reader lies the need for action, whether against the deadly, stultifying force of capitalism and law in the American interior or against the acts of war being committed by fascists in the international arena. The structure of the book is laid out in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of U. S. 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Book of the Dead”</td>
<td>7-73</td>
<td>Neo-Epic (dramatic monologue, narrative, lyric, and documentary)</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>You/They</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Night-Music”</td>
<td>74-114</td>
<td>Lyric</td>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Two Voyages”</td>
<td>115-47</td>
<td>Allegory/ Panegyric</td>
<td>Europe/Spain</td>
<td>Projective</td>
<td>We</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U. S. 1 links together the concerns of regional America, urban New York City, and Spanish Europe. America’s Anglo-Saxon heritage in Appalachia becomes linked to Europe (and the Soviet Union) through the mutual threat of fascism. As laid out in U. S. 1, the world is constructed from interpenetrating and mutually influential sections, at the center of which rest New York City and Rukeyser’s identity.
While not a displaying a complex development—from witness to awakening to participation—U. S. 1 sold fewer than 544 copies in its first year (“Agreement”). This low number of sales is surprising given Rukeyser’s prestige and the twelve high-profile reviews the book received. Reviewers’ evaluations reflected their relationship to Rukeyser’s alignment within the literary and political fields during a time of great crisis: the far left was being torn apart by internal conflict, New Criticism’s influence was on the rise, and mainstream “liberals” were defending accessible poetry. Thus, as I detail in Part III, most reviewers described “The Book of the Dead” as laboriously journalistic, called “Night-Music” obscure (if interesting), and generally failed to comment on “Two Voyages.” Part III concludes with an examination of the critiques brought against Rukeyser’s accessibility. Unlike the other poetry books studied in this dissertation, U. S. 1 does not lend itself to a study of its palpable influence of upon a specific audience; paradoxically, the status of Rukeyser’s poetry’s accessibility to readers was the key issue upon which her work was evaluated. Indeed, although Rukeyser sought to instigate social awareness and change, most readers found her poetry nearly impenetrable. To understand the paradox of Rukeyser’s identity as a proletarian poet and the complexity of her poetry, Part IV investigates her alignment within the literary field in which she was assigned significant—and controversial—status. Rukeyser was a Yale Younger Poet, and U. S. 1 was published by one of the nation’s leading literary and leftist presses, Covici·Friede. She was also widely published, and her readers can be understood as belonging to the same public who read the journals her poems regularly appeared in: Poetry, The New Republic, New Masses, and The Nation, all of which carried great influence in the literary field. As a high-profile author who cultivated the literary field, Rukeyser’s relationship to the cultural circuit illuminates how national prestige was generated, maintained, and utilized. Furthermore, U. S. 1 received high-profile reviews by influential figures such as William Carlos Williams. Rukeyser was also intimately connected with important literary elders, such as Benét, Horace Gregory, Marya Zaturenska, and Louis Untermeyer—all of whom defended and promoted her seemingly contradictory relations to poetry and audience.

In Part V, I focus on the claims made in The Saturday Review of Literature by Louis Untermeyer, who defended Rukeyser’s complexity, but in the same issue William Rose Benét

---

4 Of the 544 copies of U. S. 1 distributed in the first year, almost 200 were bought by libraries, and copies were also sent to reviewers and Rukeyser’s friends.
5 See “Appendix G: Literary Prestige and Weekly Political Magazines.”
and Selden Rodman defended poetry’s need for accessibility. This debate leads into consideration of Rukeyser’s pragmatist poetics, which she called a “usable truth” that promoted interpretation based on relationship between poet, poem, and any reader. Paradoxically, Rukeyser’s art restricted access to readers of highly-educated literacies.

Rukeyser’s goal for her writing was to achieve pertinence and applicability that would catalyze change, and her attentions shifted when the social ground shifted. The chapter concludes in Part VI with Rukeyser’s anticipation of pluralism’s evolution in her essay, “The ‘Amistad’ Mutiny,” which appeared in A Primer for White Folks (1945). At that stage of her career, she had begun her move away from being seen in terms of proletarian poetry and into recognition as a truly national intellectual. But in 1934 she found her place in The New Republic, The Saturday Review of Literature, New Masses, Dynamo, and The Partisan Review as a poet who was closely identified with New York City, science, and proletarian affiliation. Like the examples of the older writers who served as her models, her relationship to regional America focused on the racial prejudice in the South and the exploitation of miners in Appalachia. And it is to her encounter with those models that I now turn.

Part I: Radical Outsiders

In November 1931, Theodore Dreiser and members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners ventured into eastern Kentucky where miners were conducting strikes. Soon thereafter, articles on the mining conflict in Harlan Kentucky flooded national papers and magazines. Throughout the 1930s, “Bloody Harlan” was a national symbol for the capitalist repression of civil liberties and exploitation of workers. But Rukeyser’s experience of Appalachia and labor went far beyond reading leftist representations in The Nation, The New Republic, and New Masses—she participated in the networks through which those writers and editors who went to Harlan circulated.

After dropping out of Vassar College when her father’s building company became bankrupt, Muriel Rukeyser kept herself engaged in literature by becoming literary editor of the Student Review in December 1932. Rukeyser’s interconnection with the Student Review—the organ of the National Student Union, a Communist-affiliated national student organization—provided her introduction to Appalachia. The review’s contributing editors included Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, and Joseph Freeman. Anderson and Dos Passos were
in close alliance with the Communists, while Frank and Freeman were important members. Indeed, the Communists had just asked Freeman to join the editorial board of the *New Masses* to help bridge the gap between older writers and the younger members of the recently formed John Reed Clubs who felt excluded from the literary establishment (Wald 109, 105).

In the second issue of the *Student Review*, Dos Passos published an essay about what he had witnessed when he visited eastern Kentucky as a member of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (NCDPP). While blocked from entering Harlan County, for three days in November 1931, Dreiser and the NCDPP hurriedly toured the camps of fired union members, conducted public interviews, and attended a union rally. Dos Passos narrates visiting a section of Bell County organized by the National Miners Union (a Communist union), and he writes about the “disorderly rows” of bedraggled “shacks” with “rotten boards,” amongst which wandered, and defecated, cows and pigs (5). Against that background of forced poverty, he goes on to describe a secret union meeting at a local church. Out of the modernized poverty of the shacks rises the image of Anglo-Saxon Appalachia:

> The low frame hall was packed with miners and their wives; all faces were out of early American history. Stepping into the hall was like going back a hundred years (or perhaps a few hundred years). These were gaunt faces, the slow elaborations of talk and courtesy, of frontiersman who had voted for Jefferson and Jackson, whose turns of speech were formed on the oratory of Patrick Henry. I never felt the actuality of the American revolution so intensely as sitting in that church, listening to these mountaineers with old time phrases, getting up to their feet and explaining why the time for revolution had come again. (5)

The same piece appears in *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields* (1932), a compendium of essays and testimony that Dos Passos edited about the

---

6 Local sheriffs used the Kentucky statute of criminal syndicalism to expel or jail the leaders of the National Miners Union (NMU), which had come into the counties after a failed United Mine Workers strike that May and June (Hevener 55-59). From 1929 to 1932, the depression had cut the value of the high-quality Kentucky coal by two-thirds, leading to less work time, reduction in pay, and layoffs of 4,000 workers in Harlan County alone (55). Miners took what jobs they could, few of which were unionized due to the isolation of the area. The United Mine Workers had reluctantly undertaken the strike after miners rallied to the defense of the 43 unions members who were indicted and jailed for the killing of three deputies at the Battle of Evarts, an incident that would win the name of “Bloody Harlan” (43). With the lockout of unionized miners, who were evicted from the company homes, the tiny town of Evarts—the only locality in Harlan not under direct control of the Mine operators—swelled from a population of 1,500 to over 5,000 (35-36). To control disgruntled miners, Harlan’s Sheriff, J. H. Blair, had 170 deputies, all but eight of whom were paid by the mining operators (39).
committee’s visit. The first third of the book lays out the background of the conflict in ten short essays, each by a different member of the committee. Several authors portrayed the miners’ situation as a result of “primitivism,” an “inherent” tendency for violence and “feuding,” or moonshining and illiteracy (National Committee 17-22). But a transcript of testimony from the miners and their wives, mining authorities, and hearings in Washington make up the majority of the book. Reviewers felt the miners’ voices to be a “strikingly direct and simple” affirmation of “our native pioneers” (Adamic; Dahlberg 630).

The interviews in Harlan Miners Speak bore witness to the particular vision of Dos Passos and the visiting writers. On the one hand, the sociologist Allen W. Batteau found that the voices of the miners “ring with authenticity, local accents untouched by radical cant. Their stories tell of beatings and evictions for such offenses as possessing copies of the Daily Worker or trying to organize a union” (120). On the other hand, the literary scholar David Duke contends that the situation was “othering”: after negotiating a gauntlet of armed townspeople to the NCDPP’s hotel room, the miners and their families were forced to testify through “intimidating” and “leading” questions (33). The representations in Harlan Miners Speak have provoked scholars and writers across the disciplines, but at the time the book was hailed as a model by the leftist literary community.7

While Rukeyser never gave essentializing portraits of miners in terms of mountain culture, she was deeply influenced by the example that Harlan Miners Speak set for how writers might participate in class struggle. Although he did not accompany the expedition, Sherwood Anderson had added a passionate conclusion, titled “I Want to Be Counted,” which praised the “nerve and manhood [of the Committee] to go down there to into Kentucky” because they wanted to speak the truth “in a speak-easy country” (311). In a New Masses article, “American

Writers and Kentucky,” Edwin Seaver explained the significance of this active writerly witness: “Our writers have begun to abandon heir role of aloofness and disillusion, of cynicism and distain—their historic role of the twenties—and to become active participants instead of amused or bored observers” (9). Other writers soon followed Dreiser into Kentucky because of the publicity that his inspection generated.

A week after the Committee left, a Bell County grand jury charged each member with criminal syndicalism. Thus Dreiser and the Committee’s visit, which had had been initiated by the Communists, drew the nation’s attention to Harlan County: that November, eleven stories were published in The New York Times with 62 more to follow in 1932 (Draper 389). Working closely with the Communists, Dreiser had been organizing national writers since April to help bring attention to the plight of unions. The young “lost generation” writers that he called upon, such as Malcolm Cowley and Louis Adamic, were catalyzed to join the left by Dreiser’s personal, impassioned testimony (Cowley, The Dream 51-62). In early 1932, Waldo Frank, Edmond Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and nine others working with the Independent Miners Relief Committee, which was also closely aligned with the Communists, took food and relief to the miners in Bell County. After confrontations with the authorities, the writers were chased out, but Frank and a Communist lawyer with International Labor Defense were taken aside and severely beaten (Hevener 81-85; Cowley, The Dream 63-76). Photos of Frank’s blood-torn face appeared around the nation. The experience not only radicalized all those involved, but even though the NMU’s strike had entirely failed by midsummer 1932, the onslaught of media attention helped to bring about protection of civil liberties and the right to unionize in 1937 (Batteau 123-127; Hevener 85). Articles about Harlan County and eastern Kentucky poured forth in national magazines, many of which blamed the character of the mountain people, but industrial exploitation was the primary focus in The Nation, The New Republic (for which Cowley and Wilson were editors), and New Masses. The striking miners, however, were not directly aided by the writers, whose influence was realized among the students around the country and young writers in New York, such as Rukeyser and her peers, who were searching for models.8

8 In Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley (1980), John Gaventa evaluated the negative effects of the national attention upon the miner’s struggle: “The liberal northerners sought in good faith to help the miners. But, through their efforts, the emphasis of the conflict shifted from the miners’ conditions to the outsiders’ civil rights. A careful study of the chronology of conflict shows that the miners’ own internal organization and level of challenge diminished as groups of investigators came in. With the ‘invasions,’ the local...
In March, the National Student League—representing Communist student groups from around the nation and which Rukeyser would soon join—organized a delegation to investigate the Kentucky “horror-tales” of “feudal subjugation imposed upon 15,000 miners and their families in the land of King Coal” (J. Wechsler 99). That April two busloads of students from five eastern colleges went to investigate the conditions (Hevener 85; J. Welshner 95-108). They were met at the state border by a crowd of 200 armed men, and deputies boarded the busses, jailing those who would not leave. This repulsion, which was widely documented by accompanying reporters, proved the students’ fears about repression and lack of civil liberties, even if they had not actually seen the conditions.

Rob F. Hall wrote of his experience on that trip in the Student Review (May 1932), whose cover held advertisements for Harlan Miners Speak and aid for the strikers. Hall narrates the students’ difficulties in accessing the area and their failed attempts to appeal to state governors and national representatives. For Hall, the isolation of the miners, which was enforced with armed deputies and “legal machinery,” demonstrated the realities of the Communist assertion about the solidarity of the ruling class, government, and capital: “Constitutional rights are a fiction. Democracy is a myth” (9). Thus, even though the only means of resistance to “such a blood-and-iron rule is the organized working class,” middle-class students could append themselves to the workers through such action as the students had undertaken: “The bonds which bound us to [the workers] were the human bonds of common interest and a common objective.” The “common interest and common object” appear to be the fight for democracy and constitutional rights, which the students realized were not fully at their own disposal only when they attempted a high-profile trip to document the miners’ circumstances.

As a counter-posture to such a role, the death of a young New York labor organizer in Harlan showed the danger of more direct involvement. The same day that Frank’s group came to Kentucky, Harry Simm—a young, Jewish NMU organizer—was killed in Harlan Kentucky. After being held by authorities to defuse reactions, his body was returned to New York. Simm’s mute funeral procession wound through the rain-drenched streets, and an estimated 10,000 people gathered at the Bronx Coliseum where his body was set forth in the boxing ring. Above, “a gigantic picture of Comrade Simms surveyed his mortal effigy” (Ross 181). With seven elites were able, apparently with some success, to shift the perceptions of the conflict from that of an emerging class struggle to a more ‘nationalistic’ cleavage of ‘mountaineers v. outsiders.” (114)
Kentucky coal miners behind him, Simm’s father declared to gathering, “He died on the battle field of class struggle” (qtd. in Bubka 55). Amongst the leftist youth in New York City, this scene—and the fate of Simm—formed both an inspiration and a deterrent.

The NMU dwindled to some 500 members throughout eastern Kentucky by the summer of 1932, so Communists turned to more accessible examples of exploitation. International Labor Defense won the right to represent the Scottsboro Nine in April 1931 (Carter 56), and Rukeyser and another staff member of the Student Review undertook a visit to Scottsboro and Decatur, Alabama, in March 1933. As if in preparation, Rukeyser had reviewed books about the South, including Sherwood Anderson’s Beyond Desire and John L. Spivak’s Georgia Nigger. She appreciated Anderson’s glimpse into the “restless and unorganized” lives of Georgia mill workers “who are not rich in self contemplation, who are driven desperately to revolt; who are devotees to disaster.” In her review, Rukeyser reads these figures as the uneducated proletariat who “grop[e] with no conscious propulsion towards some sort of protest.” Inversely, the role of the educated outsiders is to explain “the grand scale” and “larger view.” Similarly, she admires Spivak’s account of Georgia blacks who are freed from chain gangs only to be placed in “peonage and enforced labor.” Anticipating the construction of her “Book of the Dead,” what she most appreciates is Spivak’s integration of facts and “copies of convicts’ letters and death certificates and . . . pictures of brutalities” to more aptly represent in his fiction the conditions of chain gangs for which there were no adequate “penological” studies.

When Rukeyser went to Scottsboro, she depended on the models of her activist writer forbearers. Rukeyser’s essay, “From Scottsboro to Decatur,” describes her venture: “we wanted to see that trail. It was not to be read in the newspapers, we thought, but something to be seen” (12). Rukeyser’s essay recounts her discovery of the South—the quiet roads and the unresponsive “Negroes” who had been “taught better.” After describing the crowds of journalist around the courthouse and guards with bayonets, Rukeyser explains, “Here the history of the American Negroes was being made,” but she then writes, “I shall not report it here. You have known about it already from news accounts” (13). The story, instead, becomes a tale about her encounter with the Decatur police who discovered that Rukeyser and her peer were carrying announcements for an interracial student conference about the status of African-American students. She recounts their brief incarceration, the charges that were brought against them, and the threatened consequences if they were ever to return. “From Scottsboro to Decatur” became a
tale about the stripping of her rights by southern whites rather than narrating the plight faced by blacks.

Rukeyser transfigured those experiences in her poem “The Trail” (The Theory, 49-50), which was her last appearance in The Student Review (January 1934). The poem was soon thereafter republished in the New Masses, which marked Rukeyser’s coming of age in the leftist literary community.9 The poem begins by focusing on a young “black boy” who quietly “teeters no-handed on a bicycle, whistling the St. Louis Blues” (5, 6) down a muddy southern back road in April. The poem then leaps to images of courts and migrant labor. Listing the names of Nat Turner and Dred Scott, Rukeyser continues, “all our celebrated shambles are repeated here: now again/ Sacco and Vanzetti walk to a chair” (36-37). Rukeyser’s portrayal of Scottsboro as one of the “wreaths [that] are brought of history” would win the admiration of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps who anthologized her poem in The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949 (1949).

In her first collection, Theory of Flight, “The Trial” appears as the third (and final) part of the sequence “The Lynchings of Jesus.” The section’s first poem, “The Committee-Room” questions the right of writers to undertake such recounting. These lines portray the accusations that were often brought against writers such as Dreiser who became too involved:

   Our little writers go about, hurrying the towns along,
   running from mine to luncheon, they can't afford
   to let one note escape their holy jottings :
   today the mother died, festering :
   he shot himself :
   the bullet entered
   the roof of the mouth, piercing the brain-pan
   How the spears went down in a flurry of blood . . . (50-56)

Rukeyser escalates this catalogue of easy outrage by condemning the educational system that limits students merely to analyzing the morality of literature which was abstracted from experience. They are reduced to voting on what poverty means to the Piers Plowman or on what

---

9 Demonstrating the different directions that they took from the same set of influences, in December 1934, Don West, who had recently joined the Communist Party, would publish an article in the Student Review about the Berry Schools, “A Southern Utopia” (10, 19-20). In this article, West condemns the Berry schools, where he had gone to high school. The Berry schools offered an inexpensive education for students, which they paid for by working. West accused the schools of exploiting mountain students who had attempted to strike for higher wages; West also charged the schools of stripping the students of their native culture. No proof was found of such strikes having occurred or of financial exploitation.
anger to did for Shelly. Her reply is the impassioned historical analysis of Scottsboro in “The Trial.”

The first part of the next sequence, “The Tunnel” (51-52), represents the plight of coal miners, which Rukeyser knew from visiting coalfields in Pennsylvania and from their representation in the press:

The father’s hand is rubbed with dust, his body is witness to coal, black glosses his skin.

Around the pithead they stand and do not talk looking at the obvious sign.

Behind his shoulder stands the black mountain of unbought coal, green-topped with grass growing rank in the shag, as if the coal were native earth and the top a green snowing
down on the countryside. In the whole valley eleven mines, and five of them are closed, two are on strike, but the other workers scramble down the shafts disposed to grub it all day and all night. . . . (5-17)
The mine has changed the very structure of culture and nature: a white man becomes black, and grass grows from sedimentary rock. The poem proceeds to describe out of work miners and a pregnant women who eats “roasted puppy” (25). At the end, Rukeyser returns to the employed father who wishes he had found someway out but now feels caught in a loop of seeking to feed his own family even though he is separated from them: “we got infants, and never knew our wives,/ year in and out, seeing no color but coal,/ we were the living who could not have their lives” (46-48). While Rukeyser avoids stereotyping the culture of mountaineers, her portrayal of the miner also minimizes their culture, reducing their lives to a desperate search for work.
At issue is the relationship between the writer and those whom she represents. Caught in the sweep of Communist ideological explanation, to what degree would Rukeyser value culture—the focus of regionalist writing—in terms beyond class conflict? And an outside intellectual and poet, how did Rukeyser negotiate her relationship with those about whom she wrote? To what degree does Rukeyser deploy character types, and to what degree does she honor her subject’s experience by representing full and complex individuals? Such successful renderings were rare given the gaps between the writers and the subject matter—gaps of class, gaps of locality, gaps of culture, gaps of religion, gaps of politics. Rukeyser would strive to turn those apparent chasms into a web of interconnections. And Rukeyser was also aware of gaps between herself and her readers.10

Part II: Readers, Region, and Rukeyser’s U. S. 1

Rather than being a dyadic act of assertion by an author and poem upon an audience, Rukeyser understood poems to be the product of complex, changing relationships. In The Life of Poetry (1949), Rukeyser quotes the pragmatist Charles Peirce who grounded the construction of meaning within contingent relationships: “[Semiosis] is a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant; this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs” (qtd. 174). Thus, Rukeyser explains, “The giving and taking of a poem is, then a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem, and the audience.” Once they are drawn into a relationship, Rukeyser finds the terms “audience,” “reader,” and “listener” insufficient to describe the dynamic exchange involved in the “triadic relation.” Instead she chooses the word “witness”:

I suggest the old word “witness,” which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal evidence, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtones of

---

10 In Writers and Miners (2002), David Duke reviews the involvement of national literary authors who wrote journalism and fiction about coal mining. Duke inquires about the writers’ motivations and their relationship to the miners about whom they write. Unlike the earlier coal strikes in Illinois, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, Duke explains that Harlan County became “an important symbol of the decade” because of the involvement of the two writers’ committees (28). But Duke ultimately judges that the writers garnered more attention for themselves than for the miners. The miners became people to be written about in order to promote writers’ careers rather than to be written for in capacities that did not gather prestige for authors (35, 45):

Thus, driven by the universality of their ideologies and the particularity of their creativity, these well-intentioned writers or groups of writers defined what needed to be done for the striking miners instead of asking: “What can we do to help?” “Are there ways our talents can serve your cause?” “What do you need?” “Does our presence help or hurt your efforts?” Instead, they appeared, did what they thought best, and departed. (45)
responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change . . . . These three terms of relationship—the poet, the poem, and witness—are none of them static. We are changing, living beings, experiencing the inner change of poetry. The relationships are the meanings and we have very few words for them. (175)

Through grounding interpretation in relationship, Rukeyser called for the construction of a dynamic, evolving community. She found that this formulation frustrated her critics who wished, Rukeyser claimed, that word would lie statically on the page even as it subjugated the reader to its conventions.

The power of Rukeyser’s poetics has led critics to analyze the audience of “The Book of the Dead” in terms of the empowered “multiplicities” (such as working-class blacks and women) that were forecasted by those poetics (211). However, my reading U. S. 1 is attuned to how Rukeyser scripted it for interaction with a specific type of reader. This reader first emerges in “The Book of the Dead,” which I then consider in terms of its role in U. S. 1 and its revision of motifs associated with Appalachia, coal, and labor—both those of regionalist writers and those of proletarian writers. Specifically, I read the authorial relation to the subject material and reader within the framework of both Rukeyer’s poetics and the problematic tradition of writerly involvement initiated by Dreiser’s Harlan Miner’s Speak. While the results demonstrate a much more constricted audience than predicted by other critics, Rukeyser’s skill in situating the reader as a participant and “witness” leads to an encounter with fluid moral possibilities.

U. S. 1: “The Book of the Dead”

“The Book of the Dead” is a twenty-poem sequence that relates the aftermath of the Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, industrial disaster, in which silicosis had killed hundreds of miners between 1930 and 1936. The tragedy in the central mountains of West Virginia occurred when Union Carbide & Carbon, Co. had contracted to have a tunnel built through 3.75 miles of a mountain in order to divert the New River—a large, fast-flowing river—and produce hydroelectric power. In the process, they discovered that they were tunneling through silica, a

11 Because they have depended too strongly on her poetics, scholars have often had difficulty accurately approximating Rukeyser’s audience. See “Appendix H: Contemporary Scholars Appraisals of Rukeyser’s Audience.”
key component for the electro-processing of steel, which was conducted at a near by town. To speed the tunnel (and the mining of the silica), basic safety precautions in wet-drill mining and breathing masks were ignored, leading to the deaths of—in one conservative estimate—764 victims (Cherniack 104). News of the tragedy and of the difficulty in securing restitution was first published in New Masses (January 1935). Word quickly spread through the left press, whose publicity led to Senate investigations in 1936, which were covered by the mainstream press that dismissed the scope of the tragedy.

Just she had visited Scottsboro in 1933, in 1936, Rukeyser traveled from New York to West Virginia with a photographer friend. Rukeyser set about uncovering what had happened through observation, interview, and reading the Senate hearings. In many ways, the resulting sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” brings the reader through the same series of uncoverings, witnessings, and revelations. The sequence begins from the point of view of a tourist who leaves her or his metropolis and is presented with a landscaped terrain of the mountain valley, its small town, and its quiet industrial works. As the sequence proceeds, the story of the struggle to gain restitution unfolds through a series of poems, each of which focuses on some member of a committee of miners and surviving relatives. Appropriately enough, this section is initiated by “Philippa Allen,” a New York social worker—an outsider—who is giving testimony of the tragedy before a senate committee. As the sequence progresses, the reader also hears from those who designed the tunnel, doctors’ testimony, congressional hearings, scientific data, medical evaluations, and legal documents. Mixing with the voice of a woman who lost sons and her husband, a black worker, along with the voices of other victims, “The Book of the Dead” represents a critical articulation of the relations between distinct and seemingly disjunctive social spheres. Near the end of the poem, the hydroelectric plant’s designer enters the dam and tunnel, admiring its genuine architectural genius. Rukeyser’s own documentary testimony punctuates the poem and, in its description, comments upon the nature of power relations and representation through attention to silica which formed both the lens of cameras and the focus of the deaths. Just as the sequence begins, at its end, Rukeyser invokes American history and travel, and she (and the reader-witness) reemerges from the mountains. Although documenting the quiet struggle of survivors to gain minimal compensation, the poem is ultimately about the continuity of life and rebirth through involved action, and an underlying structure of religious mythology binds the poem, based on the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Rukeyser’s is not the story of Eliot’s
Fisher King but of re-memebering Osiris. This neo-epic charts the maze of social, natural, and institutional interrelations in relation to human hope and suffering, all the while relaying the dynamics of natural and scientific power and beauty with resilience. Ultimately, it appeals to the reader-witness to arise, uncover, and aid such situations in regional America.

The introductory poem, “The Road” (9-11), firmly addresses (and hence situates) a reader who holds a cosmopolitan perspective. The first line lays out exactly to whom Rukeyser pictures this sequence as speaking—an urban “you” who is searching for America: “These are roads to take when you think of your country.” The “you” is tracking down an America she or he has heard about from friends and read about in statistics and newspaper stories (3-4). Written in languorous lines (roughly 12 syllables per line) this “you”—the reader-witness—leaves the “tall central city’s influence” on six-lane highways to drive into the Appalachian mountains, where he or she find him or herself on slim roads that follow rivers up passes that take him or her into the heart of America, West Virginia. She or he sees what any vacationer would desire: “Pillars and fairway; spa; White Sulphur Springs” (19)—the golf courses and luxuries of the best vacations to which “Gay blank rich faces [wish] to add/ history to ballrooms, tradition to the first tee” (20-21). Yet the narrator looks beyond the attractions:

The simple mountains, sheer, dark-graded with pine
in the sudden weather, wet outbreak of spring,
crosscut by snow, wind at the hill's shoulder.

The land is fierce here, steep, braced against snow,
rivers and spring. KING COAL HOTEL, Lookout,
and swinging the vicious bend, New River Gorge. (22-27)

Towering over the New River Gorge was a cliff formation called Hawks Nest, which the state of West Virginia had acquired in 1935 and developed into the first state park (Eller 159-60). From the perspective of the Overlook (and the state printed tourist material), one might believe that these are the mountains that somehow seemed to remain pure, that held the vestiges of America’s original Anglo-Saxon pioneer culture. Indeed, the second poem of the sequence, “West Virginia” (11-12), rehearses the first colonial explorers’ words about the area:
They left a record to our heritage,
breaking of records. Hoped now for the sea,
FOR ALL MOUNTAINS HAVE THEIR DESCENTS ABOUT THEM,
WATERS, DESCENDING NATURALLY, DOE ALWAIES RESORT
UNTO THE SEAS INVIRONING THOSE LANDS . . .
YEA, AT HOME AMONGST THE MOUNTAINES IN ENGLAND.  (8-13)
The diction of this passage—“descents,” “mountains,” “naturally,” “England”—refers to geography, but it is easily transposed onto beliefs that Americans held about how descendants of English ancestors still lived in the mountains of West Virginia. Not only do the rivers “descend,” but the first two poems an ascent into the heart of American industrial strife. In “The Road,” “The King Coal Hotel” perches on the overlook above the New River Gorge. All seems quiet—but Rukeyser has already planted the seeds of the story, for King Coal (1918) was also a well-known book by Upton Sinclair narrating a 1914 mining unionization conflict in Colorado, which was also reported upon by Max Eastman (the editor of The Masses) and John Reed (Duke 19-25). All these authors were models for the proletarian writers of the 1930s. Moreover, West Virginia in the 1930s was widely known for the unionization conflicts that had happened in the coalmines in the 1920s.

But Rukeyser goes even further into American history in “West Virginia” when she relates how “the military telegraph” of the Union’s headquarters was strung over the “gash of the gorge and height of pine” (31, 33). The “two hundred battles fought during four years” in West Virginia during the Civil War are framed by Rukeyser as a response to John Brown, whose “RAID AT HARPERS FERRY” in the West Virginia lowlands to the north east was announced with a historical marker (30, 26). Rukeyser begins to move beyond the well-established labor conflict with coal to hint at the interlocking depths of oppression, wealth, and the struggle for freedom. But even as the mountains and their valleys were further being torn by “opening mines,” the rivers nevertheless flowed freely. Rather than the momentary power of “military telegraph” wires suspended over the “gash of the gorge,” Rukeyser focuses on
. . . always the water
the power flying deep
green rivers cut the rock
rapids boiled down,
a scene of power. (32, 33, 34-38)

This “scene of power” introduces the next poem, “Statement: Phillipa Allen” (13-15), which outlines the tragedy at Gauley Bridge. As the first speaker in the sequence, Allen’s statement is taken before an official body (although just who is asking the questions is not clear at this point). This mode of question and response recalls the model of recorded testimony in *Harlan Miners Speak*. The great difference is that Allen is an outsider who first discovered the silicosis “During the summer of 1934, when I was doing social work/ down there” (4-5). With a voice of authority, Allen presents the facts of the case: 97-99% “pure silica” was discovered in the 3.75 mile tunnel that was bored to divert the New River in order to power a hydroelectric plant (21). Allen outlines the danger involved and the lack of safety precautions, exposing over 2,000 laborers to silicon dust (26, 13), and she relates how the silica was in nearby Alloy for “the electro-processing of steel” (50). Like *Harlan Miners Speak*, which begins with 90 pages of essays about the region by outside authors before the miners are allowed “testimony,” Rukeyser uses the voice of an outsider to provide an overview of the situation. Asked about the “people of West Virginia” who picked her up while she was hitchhiking in from her home, Allen relates, “they are delightfully obliging” (60, 62).

In this poem Rukeyser would carefully invert all the reader’s associations with Appalachia, for now, rather than the weight of ink-black coal, the white dust of silicon kills the miner. Furthermore, rather than the gun battles and ambushes that had become famous in “Bloody Harlan,” the people in West Virginia are “delightfully obliging.” Moreover, unlike the determined miners of earlier union battles, Allen speaks parenthetically about the tunnel workers who picked her up:

(All were bewildered. Again at Vanetta they are asking,

"What can be done about this?") (63-4)

These are people who need to be shown the way, and Allen has come to help. The urban readers are eased into the facts of the situation by someone whose voice they can trust in a situation they can recognize. Moreover, the situation is also presented calmly so that it might rest in the

---

12 Under the pseudonym Bernard Allen, Phillipa Allen had published the first articles about the Gauley Bridge disaster in the *New Masses*: “Two Thousand Dying on a Job” (15 Jan. 1935: 18-19) and “How the Tunnel Workers Lived” (22 Jan. 1935: 13-14). Rukeyser’s endnotes cite that testimony was taken from “Hearings before a Subcommittee of the House of Labor” (146), and she thanks Allen for making the poem possible (147).
background during the sequence’s rising action. But Rukeyser’s placing of Allen first and Allen’s characterization of the people as “delightful” and “bewildered” creates a problematic relationship to those figures, who are clearly not conceived of as readers. The appeal to the reader is to defend the defenseless—a powerful technique but one contingent upon tunnel workers who are victims rather than actors.

The reader’s expectations of a more squalid coal camp (such as were portrayed in Harlan Miners Speak) are countered in the next poem, “Gauley Bridge” (16-17), which shows the town as a quiet one. Keenly aware of the reader’s desire for spectacle, Rukeyser slowly renders the picture of a peaceful main street and concludes,

What do you want—a cliff over a city?
A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?
These people live here. (38-40)

Commentators have noted how Rukeyser musters attention to the mechanics of representation through calm references to glass, windows, and eyes. The most likely aspect to perk a reader’s attention is the mention in three lines of “the Negro” who stands on a corner “looking” at the town (4, 27, 30). The next poem takes the reader into the memories of an ex-tunnel worker who walks through town.

Written from a limited omniscient third-person point of view, “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” (18-19) slowly narrates the story from the perspective of a man who drove the “locomotive” in the tunnel to extract the silica. As he shuffles through the valley town on an hour walk along the river, he sees a history that is now covered:

There, where the men crawl, landscaping the grounds
at the power-plant, he saw the blasts explode
the mouth of the tunnel that opened wider
when precious in the rock the white glass showed. (5-8)

The narrator’s perspective allows her to render the interior thoughts of Jones as lyric description, combining memory and exterior phenomena. The reader-witness is inducted into the workers’ perspective through Rukeyser’s decision to trace Jones’s reminisces in the form of descriptive ballads (the stanzas rhyme ABCB) rather than allowing Jones to speak, because his voice could not sustain the reader’s expectations about lyric poetry.
The old plantation-house (burned to the mud)
is a hill-acre of ground. The Negro woman throws
gay arches of water out from the front door.
It runs down, wild as grass, falls and flows. (9-12)

It is unclear if the “Negro woman” is being observed or if her image is being superimposed on
the mud on the hill where once she worked. But against the burned plantation-house, Jones
recalls the coming of migrant workers “riding freights,” most of whom are gone now that “the
snow clears and the dam stands in the gay weather,/ O proud, O white, O water rolling down”
(33-34). Images of the once unquestioned white power of the “plantation-house” over the
“Negro woman” are now transferred to the dam, which diverts the river (and the workers) into
the tunnel.

Rukeyser’s clearest statement of cross-regional, cross-racial, cross-class community
comes in the sequence’s sixth poem, “Praise of the Committee” (20-22). George Robinson is the
“leader and voice” of the Committee that has formed “To fight the companies to make
somehow a future” [sic, space is included in Rukeyser’s poem] (30, 66). Under his guidance are
“four other Negroes” (“three drills and one camp-boy” who are migrant miners), Mrs. Jones (a
native mountaineer, mother of three dead miners, and wife of Mr. Jones), Mrs. Leek (cook for
the bus cafeteria), Blankenship (a white married man), Peyton (an engineer), and Juanita (a
waitress). A line in italics announces: “The Committee is a true reflection of the will of the
people” (20). The poem narrates their work in seeking support for compensation and the
likelihood they will be “cut off from” “relief” for being active members (49). Indeed, the
poem’s antagonists are not people so much as the very procedure of seeking restitution: the only
appearance that the local sheriff and company “Spies” make comes briefly three pages into the
poem (58-63). The fight is not about overcoming local oppression but of gaining public support
through the media and senate hearings. The poem ends by confronting the reader with the stare
of a victim of silicosis:

In this man's face
family leans out from two worlds of graves---
here is a room of eyes,
a single force looks out, reading our life. (85-88)
The interrogative force of the dying questions the readers’ hermeneutical authority by “reading” (hence interpreting) “our life,” which cannot apprehend its own mechanisms of meaning.

Who stands over the river?
Whose feet go running in these rigid hills?
Who comes, warning the night,
shouting and young to waken our eyes?

Who runs through electric wires?
Who speaks down every road?
Their hands touched mastery; now they
demand an answer. (89-96)

The questions ask the reader-witness to plumb her or his imagination and see into the lives of those on the committee. Here, Rukeyser’s narrator speaks for the interconnection of broad struggle. And four of the next five poems are dramatic monologues by committee members.

In “Mearle Blankenship” (24-26) three narrative voices mix, and his are the first halting words spoke by a victim of silicosis. The authorial narrator begins with a description that later casts Blankenship as consummate with the earth:

He stood against the rock
facing the river
grey river grey face
the rock mottled behind him
like X-ray plate enlarged
diffuse and stony
his face against the stone. (30-36)

Next Blankenship gives halting verbal testimony to his “choking” in the night (8), and he explains that he is writing a letter for a newspaper. The difference between spoken and written voice is an important distinction: one is “choking” and is heard only in the night by his wife, while the other hopes to reach out to readers around the nation. The letter explains—in simple language and anaphoric repetition—Blankenship’s history with the tunnel and how the lawyers cheated him. The letter (and the poem) end:
I am a Married Man and have a family. God knows if they can do anything for me
it will be appreciated
if you can do anything for me
let me know soon. (45-49)

This letter is a humble appeal to the outside world for aid by a thwarted but kindly individual, who—although he has outlived others and is “expecting to lose my life”—calmly reports the calamity (40). Rukeyser’s presentation of Blankenship reinforces Allen’s earlier description of the natives of West Virginia as “bewildered.” This impression is countered in the next poem, which is narrated by Mrs. Jones who has undertaken action on her own terms.

“Absalom” (27-30) begins with Mrs. Jones recalling her involvement: “I first discovered what was killing these men” (1). The poem grounds her family as natives to the region when she recounts that her husband and three sons “used to work in a coal mine, not steady work/ for the mines were not going much of the time” (4-5). When drinking mountain “home brew” with the “Co. foreman,” they were persuaded to work for higher pay in “the tunnel,” which caused her three sons to contract silicosis and die (6, 12). Mrs. Jones tells about her search to verify that her sons’ sickness resulted from silicosis and how she initiated the series of suits against Union Carbide. But more important for her was her motherly quest to replace the lost voice of her sons. Speaking of her youngest, Jones concludes, “I shall give a mouth to my son” (80). Indeed, only through Mrs. Jones does her son speak his dying wish, and the poem breaks into a lyrical over-voice that manifests the spirit of their transaction in terms of the Egyptian Book of the Dead:

The youngest boy did not get to go down [to the hospital to be x-rayed] with me,
he lay and said, "Mother, when I die,
"I want you to have them open me up and
“see if that dust killed me.
"Try to get compensation,
"you will not have any way of making your living
"when we are gone,
"and the rest are going too."
I have gained mastery over my heart
I have gained mastery over my two hands
I have gained mastery over the waters
I have gained mastery over the river. (40-51)

The “I” in the italicized rendition of the Book of the Dead joins together both the mother and the son within a metaphor that resonates with the cause of death. Mrs. Jones continues after this mystical interlude to recount the difficulties of the company’s response to the lawsuit, of hiking 18 miles to get relief, and of the eventual death of her sons.

Such recourse to working in the tunnels by the area’s natives was called for because coal production in West Virginia fell by 40% from 1929 to 1933, and unionization was at its lowest membership in 1931 (Eller 164, 167). However, of 4,887 workers who Union Carbide identified as having worked in the tunnel, 65% (3,197) were black migrant workers, and of the whites who worked the tunnel, only half—or 17% (845)—were not migrants (Cherniack 119). Why then did Rukeyser settle upon Mrs. Jones rather than a black worker to enact the story? By relating the experience of local whites, Rukeyser summoned the reader’s associations with coal and the mountains. To draw the reader-witness into the story, Rukeyser presented what he or she assumed about the mountains. Moreover, the mountain woman was seen as a figure who was in touch with the spiritual world. Although Christian, mountain spirituality was thought to be deeply connected to the locality, which made Rukeyser’s use of The Book of the Dead a powerful stand-in for Mrs. Jones’s self-understanding. But Mrs. Jones’s struggle to give voice to her son also represents Rukeyser’s struggle to give voice to the situation, and of all the speakers in the sequence, Mrs. Jones’s perspective is closest to Rukeyser’s own. The permeability between voices is key to the poem: the son’s voice is only spoken via the mother. The mother’s narration in the monologue, however, is broken by an associated spirit-narrator who speaks in italics from The Book of the Dead. Moreover, in writing about a mother named Jones who was fighting for miners, Rukeyser raises the ghost of Mother Jones, who had just died in 1930 and who had long campaigned for miners. Those four levels of intimate and struggling voices—a mother, a son, spirits, and history—form the lattice through which the poet gains authentication to also stand in line to “give a mouth” to the losses at Gauley Bridge.

The mother’s work to document the disease is taken over by a doctor in the next poem, “The Disease” (31-32), in which Rukeyser reports his exact, medical testimony before the
senatorial subcommittee. Given the switch from the mother-son-spirit, Rukeyser gains credence from her reader-witnesses who granted authority to physicians. Holding up an X-ray, the unnamed speaker explains the image: “Between the ribs. These are the collar bones./ Now, this lung’s mottled, beginning, in these areas./ You’d say a snowstorm had struck the fellow’s lungs” (10-12). The poem conducts a careful review of the disease, and the voice of a white, establishment professional makes for a powerful transition to the next poem, which is spoken by a black migrant tunnel worker.

As the sequence progresses, the poems illustrate how social systems in the 1930s structured social relations, i.e., Rukeyser discusses who held authority, how, and what they did with it. She does what the social order’s structure works to avoid: she reveals the connection of seemingly isolated actors. Thus the normally authoritative image of the white doctor amplifies the next dramatic monologue called “George Robinson: Blues” (33-34). Written in an approximation of the blues, the poem starts slow, rises in anger, and ends in understatement. The first stanza recounts the image from the fourth poem of the sequence (“Gauley Bridge”) of a “Negro” standing quietly on the street corner, but Robinson immediately draws the reader behind the scenes:

Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand around, they let us stand around on the sidewalks if we're black or brown.
Vanetta's over the trestle, and that's our town.

The hill makes breathing slow, slow breathing after you row the river,
and the graveyard's on the hill, cold in the springtime blow,
the graveyard's up on high, and the town is down below.

Did you ever bury thirty-five men in a place in back of your house,
thirty-five tunnel workers the doctors didn't attend,
died in the tunnel camps, under rocks, everywhere, world without end. (1-13)
As Rukeyser’s approximation of the blues is being enacted, one can hear the heaving of the miner’s lungs in these elongated lines and the airy rhymes in the second stanza: “slow, slow, blow, below.” But the voice associated with black orators erupts on the page two stanzas later, and one can hear the punctuated rise and drop of voice:

I've put them
DOWN from the tunnel camps
to the graveyard on the hill,
tin-cans all about---it fixed them!--- (18-21)

Robinson then drops into a melancholic consideration of the seemingly irresistible circumstance when the miners hurry to follow the boss through the white cloud back into the “falling rocks and muck” (30). He relates how the drinking water brought to them “had dust in it” (31) since the dust covered the entire “camps and their groves” (32):

Looked like somebody sprinkled flour all over the parks and groves,
it stayed and the rain couldn't wash it away and it twinkled that white dust really looked pretty down around our ankles.

As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the tunnel at night,
with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white.
The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white. (34-42)

The popular image most readers held of mines was of a man rolling out of the mineshaft with his (white) face covered in (black) coal dust. But in the last stanza, Robinson, a black man, now covered with silica, is forced to wear a deadly whiteness in the Appalachian mountains, that region which the era thought exemplified Anglo-Saxon culture.14 Through a modulation of speakers—the outsider Allen, the choking Blankenship, the mother Mrs. Jones, the dryly exact

---

13 Even though the blues structure works in three line units, when later editions were done in smaller font that allowed the line breaks to shift, Rukeyser continued to break the lines as above.
14 In 1931, 61.1% of miners in West Virginia were “native whites,” 21.9% “Negroes,” and 17% “foreigners” (Laing 417). Of the African-American miners, 85% were from out of state, with half of those coming from Virginia (418). For further information on the status of black workers at Gauley Bridge see Irwin M. Marus’s “The Tragedy at Gauley Bridge.” Negro History Bulletin 34.4 (1976): 527-8; and Cherniack.
doctor, the unexpected Robinson—Rukeyser has activated her readers’ associations with authority and Appalachia to bring them inside the story.

The relationship between poet and the speakers is critical. The poet is a young, middle-class, white Jewish woman from New York in 1938 writing blues in the voice of an African-American miner. Do we call this act an appropriation? Or is it a witnessing? Most of those who died in the mines were migrant African-American workers from the South who had been imported to do the work that few of the whites (or blacks) in the mountains would do. In the end, I think Rukeyser honors the circumstances of the black miners, if not an individual’s voice as some critics believe (see Lowney 199). Robinson’s voice is one of a dozen in the poem and his has a central power. Rukeyser’s induction of the reader-witness through the sequence of speakers in the proceeding poems allows Robinson to be heard. If Robinson functions as a “type” (a black man reciting the blues), he serves a similar role to Mrs. Jones and other speakers who each reflect upon a differing aspect of the story.

The next two dramatic pieces (the monologue “Juanita Tinsley,” the waitress, and an ensemble of voices in “The Doctors”) reinforce the circumstances. A critical switch, however, occurs in “The Cornfield” (42-4). The authorial narrator relates how H. C. White—who runs the town’s Funeral Services—buries “Negroes” in his family’s cornfield “five at a time,/ pine boxes” for “$55/ a head” (30-32). The poem describes farms with “cornfield, white and wired by thorns,/ old cornstalks, now, the planted home” (49-50), but in a farther field “mounds” rise with “wooden takes, charred at the tip” (54, 52). Rukeyser then widens the scene with a biblical metaphor: “Abel America, calling from under the corn,/ Earth, uncover my blood!” (56-57). If the black miners are Able, the narrator asks if Cain is Andrew “Mellon’s ghost” who prowls the “furrows of corn, still sowing”(62, 63). While the reader might be angry at the situation, angry at White for burying blacks, angry at American industrial capitalists, Rukeyser suddenly turns the tables:

Voyage.

Think of your gardens. But here is corn to keep.
Marked pointed sticks to name the crop beneath.
Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe. (65-68)

The narrator uses a single word (“Voyage”) to command reader-witnesses to imagine their involvement: “Think of your gardens.” In demanding this introspection, Rukeyser makes the
“harvest” one intimately connected with the reader. Perhaps the harvest is not just that of the capitalists but of everyone who partakes of the “crop.” Rukeyser makes a gesture towards America’s long plunder of the mountains—that garden of America’s raw resources whose fields have been richly fertilized with the “blood” of America’s Abels.

The next poem, “Authur Peyton” (45-46), follows Peyton’s interior apostrophe to an absent “you”—the waitress “across the street” whom he loves and will not marry. In his address, he recounts how he has received a $21.59 check for his part in the settlement, one half of which has already been claimed by his lawyers for their payment. He sees his hopeless love as

. . . . a mirror for our valley
our street our river a deadly glass to hold.
Now they are feeding me into a steel mill furnace
O love the stream of glass a stream of living fire. (40-43)

Peyton’s thwarted love follows the “stream of glass” to become embodied in “Alloy” (the next poem, 47-48), the name of the town where a “hill of glass” is “[s]loping as gracefully as thighs” (3-4). Drawing on the reader’s association with the sequence’s dramatic monologues, the smelters are personified when “severe flame speaks from the brick throat” of the “electric furnaces” that “produce this precious, this clean/ annealing the crystal, fusing at last alloys” (13-15). In this vision, the organic world, which is so highly associated with the mountains, melds with silica mounds that “blow” like a “disintegrated angel” from the “the field of glass” (25, 27, 24). Unlike the regionalists, Rukeyser was not against technology and appreciated the need, physics, and sophistication of power generation.

The full energy of Rukeyser’s voice erupts in the next poem, “Power,” which describes the dynamics of nature’s close link to hydroelectrics. The first stanza embraces the rush of the New River in sensual terms, continuing the personification in “Alloy” (49-53):

. . . the entire body watches the scene with love,
sees perfect cliffs ranging until the river
cuts sheer, mapped far below in delicate track,
surprise of grace, the water running in the sun,
magnificent flower on the mouth, surprise . . . (4-8)

Rukeyser transfers her sensual appreciation to the hydroelectric machinery. But this praise ends when she examines her relationship to power and to those who died to make that power possible:
The power-house stands skin-white at the transmitters' side
over the rapids  the brilliance  the blind foam.

This is the midway between water and flame,
this is the road to take when you think of your country,
between the dam and the furnace, terminal. (19-23)
The “you” again invokes the reader-witness’s role, this time as a consumer. The rest of the poem follows the man who designed the dam and tunnel into the bowels of the operation, evoking Dante’s *Inferno* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Having descended “uncertain rungs down into afternight” the designer speaks:

"This is the place. Away from this my life
I am indeed Adam unparadiz'd.
Some fools call this the Black Hole of Calcutta,
I don't know how they ever get to Congress." (65-68)

If he deems himself Adam, he has fallen from God’s graces, and brought the reader with him into the dark inner-silence of power production:

Down the reverberate channels of the hills
the suns declare midnight, go down, cannot ascend,
no ladder back; see this, your eyes can ride through steel,
this is the river Death, diversion of power,
the root of tower and the tunnel's core,
this is the end. (93-98)

“Your eyes” refer to the designer but also to the reader and other consumers who partake of “the river Death.” But Rukeyser does not ask her readers to turn off their electricity. Indeed, in the next poem “The Dam” (54-58), Rukeyser appreciates hydroelectrics because “All power is saved, having no end” (see lines 1-63). In such sophisticated, scientifically-informed poetry (including equations), Rukeyser condemns only those whose “stocks went up” when they blasted the tunnel and “wrote their own graphs upon/ roadbed and lifeline” (67, 70-71). For testimony, she offers the condemning voices from the Senate’s hearings and emphasizes their points by providing a table of one day’s stock increases, which is conveyed in Fig. 2.
Implicit in her image is that the capitalists created power through damming the workers. But the poem concludes with a hopeful meditation upon the nature of power:

Nothing is lost, even among the wars,
imperfect flow, confusion of force.
It [power] will rise. These are the phases of its face.
It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.
It changes. It does not die. (105-09)

“The Dam” even begins by equating power to the birth of the resurrection of the phoenix (lines 25-29).15

Rukeyser then begins to range far from the consideration of the workers in the sequence in order to address broader issues of social transformation. For instance, the next poem, “The Disease: After-Effects” (59-61), shows Gauley Bridge from the perspective of a “a Congressman” who sees it as one in a catalogue of abuses and bills:

embargo on munitions
to Germany and Italy
as states at war with Spain.

He proposes

Congress memorialize
the governor of California : free Tom Mooney.

A bill for a TVA at Fort Peck Dam.

A bill to prevent industrial silicosis. (8-15)

Here, the reader is removed from the fate of the workers at Gauley Bridge, is given a national (and international perspective), and learns that “500,000 Americans have silicosis now./ These are the proportions of a war” (37-38). However, just as the American government refused to

---

15 As explained by Stephanie Hartman, “Rukeyser’s images of continuity—of endless flow, inexhaustible power, rebirth—are made to celebrate the durability and strength of the workers” (220).
become directly involved with Spain, so—regardless of the effect of the disease—the bill against silicosis is “blocked; investigation blocked” (60). Beyond the empty tiers above the legislative gallery, the poem ends with “a million [who] look from work,/ five hundred thousand stand” (65-66). But the weight of 1.5 million absent workers is hardly enough to sway the legislative process.

The process of gaining reparations is shown to be hollow in the sequence’s penultimate poem, “The Bill” (62-65). The poem relays the subcommittee’s grim findings but ends by admitting that nothing can be done by the subcommittee except to call for more investigation. In an empty offering of hope, the Senators recognize that the deaths of workers at Gauley Bridge may not have been “in vain” if new legislation is passed. Against such empty gestures, the poem ends by forecasting violence:

The subcommittee subcommits.

Words on a monument.
Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.
The origin of storms is not in clouds,
our lightning strikes when the earth rises,
spillways free authentic power:
dead John Brown’s body walking from a tunnel
to break the armored and concluded mind. (72-79)

If justice cannot be claimed for the dying miners by their appeal to the American system, Rukeyser implies that it is time for those who feel moral outrage to act. In Rukeyser’s analogy, just as the nation was in denial about the dehumanizing violence of slavery upon which the economy depended, so America in the 1930s was standing in denial of the consequences of industrial exploitation. Just as John Brown acted, so too Rukeyser hopes her poem will “break the armored and concluded mind” of her reader-witnesses and help them see what was going on, if only they dare to follow the roads that take them into their “own country.”

“These roads will take you into your own country,” begins the first line of the final poem called “The Book of the Dead” (66-72). The poem addresses a “you” (middle-class intellectuals) about a “they” (the working class). Rukeyser is careful not to use any class terminology, but the constituency of the “you” is named at the start of the fifth page: “surveyors and planners,” poets,
and “men of fact” (82-90). The address “you” is used six times in eight lines, and Rukeyser recognizes them as literal social workers, or better, engineers—“you workers and hope of countries, first among powers” (83). The difference between the “you” and the “they” is initiated in the poem’s third stanza, where the narrator asks the reader three riddles and provides the answers:

What one word must never be said?
Dead, and these men fight off our dying,
cough in the theatres of the war.

What two things shall never be seen?
They : what we did. Enemy : what we mean.
This is a nation's scene and halfway house.

What three things can never be done?
The hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain. (7-15)

“These men” are the workers whose labor provides a high standard of living to the “you” in the culture. When the answer to the first question, “What one word must never be said?”, is “Dead,” Rukeyser asks the reader to admit the consequences of their way of life upon millions of the working class. She confronts the repressed conflicts of the social order in the next stanza by claiming that “we” are the “Enemy” who has wrought a quiet havoc upon the “They” who “cough in the theatres of war”—or in the theatres of industrial production. The next fourteen stanzas (l. 16-57) admire how “they took the land” during the settling of America and “planted home-land that we know” (25, 35). The review of America’s settling then shoots through 400 years of history, and within that “sum of frontiers” are the “unmade boundaries of acts and poems” that are confronted with the “fact” of the “disease” of industrial exploitation which stands “between the seas” (58-60). The poem then addresses how the “Half-memories absorb us, and our ritual world/ carries its history in familiar eyes,/ planted in flesh” (61-64). In other words, against the “museum life,” how is this “us” supposed to awaken to the reality of “our times” (70, 69)?
Rukeyser hopes that “we” will be awakened by “friends in the old world [Spain]” whose signal for “intercession” falls like a “Blow . . . full in the face” (77-78). Or, if that jolt does not induce action, America’s intellectuals—poets and “men of fact”—might “measure our times again” and thus witness the potential of the working class: “These are our strength, who strike against history” (91). “These” people are the miners “carrying light . . . on their foreheads / . . . drilling their death” (94, 96); they are chemical workers who, “touching radium,” “glow in their graves” (97, 99); they are weavers and steelworkers who “stand at wheels until their brains corrode” (101); they are farm workers who “starve” (102); they are “known as strikers, soldiers, pioneers” (106).

With the valued Other (the working class) identified, Rukeyser renews her call for reader-witnesses to “widen the lens” and see beyond their “myths of identity” (109, 110). Leaving behind location in a particular place, she calls for “new processes” that would allow readers to transcend the “fanatic cruel legend at our back” (118, 130). In a metaphor of continued expansion, she calls for growth beyond class and geographical identity:

speeding ahead the red and open west,
and this our region,

desire, field, beginning. Name and road,
communication to these many men,
as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (131-135)

In this transcendence of region, inspired by the moral daemon of John Brown, these intellectual angels of “desire” would recognize the common humanity of people from every region and struggle to communicate and nurture everyone’s “beginning.”

Yet even though Rukeyser hoped her poem might offer a mechanism to transcend the boundaries of class, region, and race, those distinctions held firm. In many ways, Rukeyser seems to have removed herself from the critiques of interference and self-aggrandizement which later scholars of Appalachia—Richard Hevener, David Duke, John Gaventa, and Shauna Scott—claim against Dreiser. But they also point out that such national attention was part of the process through which the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee (a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Labor and Education) coordinated its efforts with the CIO and the Department of Justice to prosecute 68 coal operators in Harlan in 1937 (Hevener 128-29). This federal attention
led to the State of Kentucky to dispatch state troopers to protect UMW organizers in April 1937, and outlaw private deputies in 1938 (141,142). Kentucky was the last state to do so.

With belated concerns for the mostly migrant black workers, national attention to Gauley Bridge had little effect (Cherniack 87-90). And Rukeyser’s functioned as a low-profile, almost retrospective participant (U. S. 1 was published years after the final decisions about the Gauley Bridge workers had been made and two years after the subcommittee had been disbanded). Is Rukeyser to be critiqued or praised for this removal? Rukeyser presents all her actors with calm compassion, generally avoids Appalachian stereotypes, and only writes negatively of the funeral director, the tunnel’s designer, and of capitalists (in the abstract). More to the point, the cosmopolitan reader is carefully inducted, given empathetic connection to those seeking restitution, and then has their own values and implicit involvement confronted. In doing so, Rukeyser makes the “Book of the Dead” be much more about herself and her reader (who shares her identity as a highly literate, urban outsider). Indeed, Rukeyser emphasizes the victims’ need of help from outsiders, and while poem generally featured a single character, personal focus is minimized to demonstrate the national politics at play. As with the case of Dreiser, Waldo Frank, and the students who visited, the case becomes about the failure of the federal system to account for basic rights. To the extent that Rukeyser focuses on the victims rather than her own loss of rights, she has learned a valuable lesson from those earlier Harlan County adventurers. But the sequence is framed and addressed to a “you,” which includes Rukeyser and her reader-witnesses. In this sense, the poem is honest about its audience and its purposes. It was not written for the working class but for leftist intellectuals to consider their role in their world. To say so recognizes the poem’s construction and forecasts its social life. “The Book of the Dead,” which focuses so sharply on relations between region and class, has become the most well known part of U. S. 1, even to the exclusion of the other sections. However, Rukeyser moved closer to her contemporary readers’ own region and class issues in the book’s next section, “Night-Music.”

16 That “The Book of the Dead” has recently become so valued by 20th-century American poetry scholars serves as an important mirror to our own crisis of relations to class, region, and labor. Rukeyser’s skill in addressing a cosmopolitan audience is also shown by examining those who have found her poem to be pertinent. To date, no Appalachian scholars have written about her poem but many profess knowledge of its existence. Meanwhile, modernist literary scholars have found the poem has become an important site for considering the intricate, multi-tiered workings of the American labor, legal, and literary system in the 1930s. However, because Appalachia is still considered to be the focus of regional scholars rather than an example of white America’s encounter with pluralism.
U. S. 1: Night-Music

“Night-Music,” the second section of U. S. 1, consists of 21 poems (including two short sequences) and acts almost as a book unto itself. The poems can be generally characterized as intimate lyrics, and the narrator is closely associated with Rukeyser—a young person, coming to political awareness within the boundaries of an urban center and the strictures of the middle class. These poems are about Rukeyser’s struggle with her habitus, and each poem acts as a piece of Marxist Bildungsroman: a cycle of becoming consciousness of history and diagnosis of those social forces which suppress such difficult awakening. Much more classically poetic than the sequence before, these poems use highly compact language in tense, at times disjunctive, arrangement to illuminate, in striking fashion, how personal struggles interface with the social world. Within the lair of the poems, the poet shares her own struggles and dilemmas about maintaining moral clarity in relation to the power of American culture.

I will focus on the four-poem sequence “Night-Music” (96-104), which is dedicated to Mayra Zaturenska and was first published by Horace Gregory as the final poems in his “Social Poetry Number” in Poetry (1936), the publication of which I will discuss in Part IV. Each poem in the sequence narrates an encounter with a different set of temptations to mollify the awareness of the narrator. The first part, “Time Exposures,” sets the time for the sequence: these poems occur at night, “the only renewer,” wherein “Cities lose size” as the “raw electric green” streetlight “invents” the dark streets, the “black tree,” and a lonely wanderer (2, 9-12). The poem’s narrator is driving home from work through the suburbs, but even as she speeds toward escape in the countryside’s “black basin always spilling stars,” she is haunted by the day’s work:

But in our ears brute knocking at all doors,
factories bellow mutilation, and we live needy still
while strength and hours run
checkless downhill.

Flattered by grief, the changeable spirit
puts on importance. Goes into the street,
adventures everywhere . . . (38-44)

via regionalism, literary scholars have not considered “The Book of the Dead” in terms of central discourses—Appalachia, regionalism, mining, etc.—upon which Rukeyser’s drew.
But the world’s suffering cannot be lost through the lipstick that the narrator is “jotting” on in order to “sexualize her thistle thought” (55-56). Yet only through “fornicating” does the narrator manage to find sleep like “children sleep” (58, 59). The second part, “The Child Asleep,” moves back and forth between a child who imagines a nameless night and a parent who disciplines that imagination. As the poem progresses, the child learns to ignore “Immortal” [sic—the adjective is used as a noun], the sea, and “dirty children” (72, 76). The parents scold her:

Quiet, music is playing! Never move your face.
Wear a mask if your face moves with your
love or anger moving. God first, then us.
Friday candles. Never discuss. (77-80)

In staccato half-lines, Parental and religious training muffle emotion. The next stanza relates the narrator’s first realization of her father’s wealth: “The sand-pit high with money. The limousine” (86). This awareness is juxtaposed against the “First strikers seen” (88). At the section’s end, the narrator jettisons out a series of questions that seek an adequate response to the world she witnesses—even quietly reading, lying still in a bath, weeping alone at night, or “at last sleeping” all seem forbidden. If renewal through sleep is not allowed, other solutions also prove unsatisfying. The next part, “Adventures, Midnight,” recounts three such encounters.

In the first, the narrator encounters a beggar for whom minor financial aid is not enough: “The wasted pity. Thieving charity” (116). The section catches the narrator in an act of useless empathy for the suffering, which turns her bitter. The second encounter tells the story of the narrator’s travel to a park in the middle of the night with two friends. Their “comfortless” attempts to find sexual fulfillment in each other excludes the narrator, who feels grief and anger at “this crying, frantic at removal, the dark, the sor-/rowful danger” (127, 135-36). The third escapade, which describes watching boaters enjoying the waterfront, proves just as empty. The narrator’s heart is “smothering” when she observes the cruise passengers’ fear at getting their “feet wet in a drowning world” (155, 151).

In response to first three parts of “Night-Music,” each of which leaves the narrator more dyspeptic than the last, comes in the final section titled “Night-Music.” Therein, after a dinner and a movie, the narrator finds herself caught in “demonstrations/ sweeping the avenues” (158-59). After the demonstrators confront police and the march is broken up, the demonstrators retreat “down/ night-streets to unique rooms” where “strike-song are sung and old songs
remain” (169-70, 171). This unity with those who confront the circumstance faced by laborers during the day causes the narrator to embrace a “Changeable spirit” that can “build a newer music” by recognizing the “scenes of horror, among children awake, lands ruined, begging men” (178-79). Anger at the “torment,” “fear,” and “cruelty” allows the narrator to seek redress and sleep only after articulating a creative dictum: “Make music out of night will change the night” (180-84). Such a finale is a hard-earned respite for the reader.

In these poems, Rukeyser repeatedly returns the reader to the plight of denial, whose only solution is admission of the struggle. The poems after “Night-Music”—“Drive Way,” “Lover as Fox,” “Gift Poem,” and “Women and Emblems”—gently restore the torn spirit. “Outpost” (113-14), the final poem of the second section of U.S. I, delivers the reader from the mainland of America

into the sea whose foreign colors waver,
hold to the end the images of violence
on rising overwave and underwave,
slave and slavedriver. (32-35)

The reference to slaves reunites Rukeyser’s correlation between fascism, capitalism, and slavery. The poems in the second section act as a homeport from which the reader-witnesses leave the United States whose inner reaches they had so deeply plumbed in “The Book of the Dead.”

U.S. I: “Two Voyages”

U.S. I’s third section, “Two Voyages,” consists of two long poems, each of which address issues of America’s interconnection with European nationals, who are faced with fascism in Italy, Germany, and Spain. The first poem, “The Cruise” (117-134), serves as a sociological allegory for America’s international relations. Crew members and passengers represent segments of the American social order, much as figures in English Morality Plays represented aspects of religious travail and hope. The ship is a leisure ocean liner with

17 “The Cruise” was first published in Horace Gregory’s annual New Letters in America (1937): 87-97.
18 The metaphor for this poem was taken from two moments in Rukeyser’s own life. When visiting England in 1936, she had been asked by the editor of Life and Letters to take his place in going to Spain to cover the first People’s Olympiad, which had been organized to oppose the Berlin Olympics. When Rukeyser’s train first crossed into Spain, it was stopped by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and she and other passengers were halted for two days and given shelter in a local town when Loyalists (Franco’s fascists) were retreating from Barcelona. Rukeyser then went with two of the Olympic teams in trucks to Barcelona, where they heard nightly shelling and were sheltered with 2,000 other participants (“Barcelona” 10). Non-fighting foreign nationals were asked to leave,
“dancing and games” and “polo ponies in the hold” (15, 16). Around these passengers are arrayed the resources—human and mechanical—of the ship: the corresponding allegory is that the nation’s resources are arrayed around the play and comfort of the wealthy. The poem’s narrative demonstrates the key role the poet plays in reconciling the ship (the state) to reality.

By line 50, the ship finds that it cannot land at its destination due to a mysterious war that has erupted, and there are rumors of disturbances back home as well. While all ships are ordered to “make for port” (p. 120, l. 76), the captain finds the port under attack and decides to keep the passengers amused, and he heads to the south for “languid warless lands” (p. 121, l. 111). However, no safe harbor is found—battles are raging or towns are quarantined due to plagues. Slowly, both the ship’s passengers and her crew grow uneasy as the ship’s stores are being consumed. The metaphors in this contemporary social-morality play are obvious and reinforce the poem’s argument:

“Where is the cruise the travel posters promised? The dancing partners, quick landing?”
the blonde demanded. "The epidemic harbor's faded, is the radio dead?"
"It answers only War." "Put in to port, if war is everywhere,"
the union man, "accept obtainable things." "I have my orders," answered the captain.
"Arbitrary commands!" "Do not be cynic at the captain's religion,"
the financier. "Commands are dead, he's a dead priest, the other's living,
this is a new voyage that you have not known."
"I've thought it out through orders," said the captain. The sailor cried,

and Rukeyser caught passage with a Belgian ship with twice the number of passengers it was supposed to carry. Before Rukeyser had left Barcelona, the organizer of the games designated all those leaving as witnesses: “You came to see games, and have remained witness to the triumph of the People’s Front. Now your task is clear; you will go back to your countries and spread through the world the news of what you have seen in Spain” (11). Thus, moving from the poet of despair in “The Cruise,” the second long poem, “Mediterranean,” recounts the beginning of the Spanish Civil War from the perspective of an inspired poetic witness, whose mission is to stir her readers to action through her rendition of the war’s start.

198
"We have our orders from you; but I saw a book,
and I saw a book, and I'll attempt before I die." (p. 125, 186-201)

The representations are clear: the union man stands for the popular front; the blonde equals the middle class; the captain represents the government who takes orders from the capitalists represented by the financier; and the sailor is the working man whose support the others need. As the poem continues, the ship’s population grows more desperate in their isolation and lack of resources. Babies who are born during voyage die, and passengers grow ill. In Rukeyser’s vision, those who can communicate with others outside their own circumstance (and social order) prove the leaders. Thus, the poet “stands with his face into the vocal night” and translates the ringing he hears coming from the Spanish shore where “bells invite, strong, with their Latin chiming”: “Calling of funerals, breaking the lightning, pealing the Sabbath,/ waking the lazy, dissolving wind, peace to the evil” (p. 129, 288-294). From the poet’s translation of the night’s music, the sailor and blonde understand that vital commonalities are shared with others, but they are unsure what is being communicated. What the poet hears—“vox ego sum vitae; voco vos”—he translates it to reveal the empty life of the ship: “our age broken like stone, all grace run out of grasp,/ perfected music I could never reach” (p. 130, l. 308, 315-16). In response he strides the “length of the deck, rising up tall” towards the bells and dives overboard, becoming lost in sea foam (p. 131, l. 318-19). This act proves the catalyst for the dissolution of the ship’s social order, and over the next four pages the union man, barmaid, and radio operator seek the shore, leaving the rest, who still are afraid to go ashore, to “slaughter polo ponies for meat” and divvy out the remaining supplies (p. 132, l. 347). In his log the captain records the “faltering engines” and despair as the ship drifts “through continual waste of waters” until all aboard either abandon ship or float, mad, on board (p. 133, l. 364, 371).

America’s ship of state, Rukeyser entails, is no longer a place of refuge. But neither is there refuge in the war torn and plagued lands. Instead, those who can communicate with each other beyond their own social orders discover “obtainable things” that can change the world. While some popular and political reviewers praised the directness of this poem, poets and literary critics found it reductive. Nevertheless, “The Cruise” served as Rukeyser’s set up for “Mediterranean” (135-45), a six-part poem, which gives her personal testimony about the violent outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and her prediction that “hypocrite sovereignties go down/ before this war we must win” (p. 144, l. 208-09). The events narrated occurred in July 1936.
Rukeyser had come to Barcelona, Spain, to cover the People’s Olympics, and her experience with Republicans and foreigners against Franco’s forces there revealed that opposition to the Olympics in Berlin was indeed a matter of life and death. “Mediterranean” was one of the myriad poems written by and translated by Americans about the Spanish Civil War, and its particular place as the finale to U. S. 1 casts the earlier poems in a truly global perspective.¹⁹

Unlike her retrospective reconstruction of others’ fates in “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser was a participant witness in Spain. Concluding the book with her personal confrontation with violence and fascism posits the regional conflict in Appalachia as proof of America’s looming internal confrontation with such forces. While it is a poem of memory that represents the violence of war, “Mediterranean” is a summoning prediction that authenticates the role of the poet in the social order.²⁰ The poem begins with Rukeyser’s personal memories of violence and retreat: “The truck ride to the city, barricades/ bricks pried at corners, rifle-shot in street,/ car-burning, bombs . . .” (p. 136, l. 10-12). But part one concludes by recounting the necessary withdrawal of foreign nationals who could not fight or tend the wounded. Part two seeks to answer a question asked by a French printer on the escaping boat: “In Paris there is time,/ but where its place now; where is poetry?” (p. 138, l. 74-75). Rukeyser scans through Western history, searching for correlations, in other times of “madness and persecution” (p. 139, l. 85) from the Minoans to Franco’s contemporary troops who mutter, “‘Do not burn the church/ . . . it brings tourists’” (82, 84). She then answers:

Whenever we think of these, the poem is,
that week, the beginning, exile
remembered in continual poetry. (89-91)

The poet’s work is to document resistance to dissolution. With this declaration, the poem turns from the singular “I” into the plural “we.” This stage of unified resistance is key for Rukeyser, but the “we” here is not the plural “we” of America. In part three, she instead speaks to the “we” being evacuated on the ship—those who have adventured beyond their strictures to witness what seems their coming fate.

---

²⁰ “Mediterranean” was first selected for published by Horace Gregory in the New Masses (14 Sept. 1937): 18-20.
If we had not seen fighting,
if we had not looked there
    the plane flew low
    the plastic ripped by shots
    the peasant's house
if we had stayed in our world
between the table and the desk
between the town and the suburb
slowly disintegration
male and female

If we had lived in our city
sixty years might not prove
    the power this week
    the overthrown past  (p. 140-41, l. 126-139)
The images in these lines resonate with the poems in U. S. 1’s middle section, “Night-Music.” For Rukeyser the solution to “corruption of consciousness” is to situate oneself in the world by leaving one’s place—both by taking the roads that lead into one’s own country and by breaking out of national boarders. With this sense of interconnection, parts four and five of “Mediterranean” undertake a calm, almost scenic, description of her ship’s voyage to France. Part five ends with a burning a Yeatsian meditation when the narrator notices, “Deep in the water Spanish shadows turn” (p. 143, l. 189):

    Once the fanatic image shown,
    enemy to enemy,
    past and historic peace wear thin;
    we see Europe break like stone (p. 144, l. 204-07)
If the national past is broken, people find their new definitions in response to international crisis. Part six describes the unity of the labor to be conducted. In Spain, the German athlete, Otto, who is tenderly described throughout the poem, must now fight like “No highlight hero” (216). In Europe and America, Rukeyser and others must spread the news and gather resources because
“we believe, we remember, we saw” (235). Modeling action on her own panegyrical, Rukeyser went on to organize support and kept up correspondence with Otto (until he was killed) and her fellow poet and friend, Edwin Rolfe. However, most reviewers did not find themselves so inspired by her poetry.

Part III: Reception

Did the reception of U. S. 1 affect American’s understandings of pluralism? It did not have a palpable effect, although Rukeyser had hoped otherwise, at least if the structure of the book is taken into account. “The Book of the Dead” draws upon the accumulated associations between labor and Appalachia within regionalism and proletarian writing; “Night-Music” situates is reader-witnesses to a familiar world in urban New York; and “Two Voyages” confronts the readers with their potential role in fighting international fascism. Yet none of the reviewers—and no scholar to date—has read the book as a coherent, interlocking text, but they have instead reduced it to a vaguely related triptych. What does this say about the reviewers, most of whom dismissed “The Book of the Dead” as reductive journalism, “Night-Music” as elitist, and “Two Voyages” as dated? In large part, reviewers responded to the book based on their place in the literary field.

Each of the twelve reviews spent half to three-fourths of its space discussing “The Book of the Dead,” assessing it as U. S. 1’s major contribution. However, reviewers were split, with half seeing the sequence as banally journalistic, unpoetic, and unorganized. The comments of Selden Rodman in his magazine Common Sense aptly represent this response. For Rodman, the poems functioned to recreate a scene much like those in the “spoon river anthology,” but he found them flat and “stripped,” having “turgid imagery” in a sequence that was “presented too obliquely.” He found the writing boring and without an accessible narrative. Similar responses were published in The New York Times Book Review, The Southern Review, and Poetry.

Reviewers on the other side of the split, such as William Carlos Williams in The New Republic, valued Rukeyser’s “documentary sense” which was inspired by her “moral indignation” (141): “She knows, in other words, how to select and exhibit her material. She understands what words

21 Rukeyser’s commitment to the Spanish cause was fueled by personal connections. For instance, on January 4, 1937, Rolfe wrote: “It would have been fine having you here in Madrid. But in another sense, I’m sure it’s best for you to remain in the United States, writing, talking, doing the things that you can do so well, without exposing yourself again to illness which might hinder your work as a poet. It’s tough here, Muriel, especially during the winter months” (Letter to Rukeyser).
are for and how important it is not to twist them in order to make ‘poetry’ of them.” Yet even Williams called the sequence “very uneven,” with some poems being nothing more than “a piling up of words.” Untermeyer, another positive reviewer, felt that “the individual poems combine to stir her reader with angry determination.” In the end, the reproach or praise of the reviewer depended very much upon the venue for which they were writing, with more positive reviews in The Nation, the New Masses, and The Herald-Tribune and more negative evaluations coming from those mentioned above and The Partisan Review (discussed later).

As a whole, opinions were inverted about the lyrics in “Night-Music.” In The Southern Review (that New Critical flagship), Morton Zabel panned the “Book of the Dead” but admired Rukeyser in “Night-Music” for her “lyric realism,” calling her one of the “best social realists” whose poems achieved “achieves a pathetic force beyond [other proletarian poets’] scope.” Similarly, in Poetry, Willard Mass gestured, “I favor Miss Rukeyser’s more subjective poetry rather than that modeled after leaflets” because in the lyrics one can see “a woman who has her own maladjustments which she places against and relates to larger universal ones” (102, 103). Similarly, the reviewers who found “The Book of the Dead” successful had little or nothing to say about the second section: Williams praised their “compactness” and diction, and Untermeyer described the poems as “tart yet tender.”

At conflict were the rising ethos of the New Critical and confessionalist modes against the quieter resistance of the more socially oriented critics. In The New York Times, “Night-Music” was found to fuse “personal emotion and its social cause” (Walton). These poems, valued by the more academic and New Critical reviewers, were the most difficult, even more so than the previous non-linear sequence. What was at issue was Rukeyser’s accessibility, for she was deeply engaged in social critique, yet her poems seemed inaccessible, which some reviewers valued and others critiqued.

When “Two Voyages” was mentioned at all, reviewers spent a sentence either positively acknowledging or dismissing them. William Rose Benét explains in his review why so many may have been silent about Rukeyser’s poem: “‘Mediterranean,’ which ends the book and throws sidelights on the Spanish Civil War, is less successful. We have learned so much since she wrote it, and so many heroic things have happened, that the Barcelona she then left seems to have existed in another world” (“Four American Poets”). In short, Rukeyser’s poem was seen as a worn occasional piece, engaged as it was in summoning support at the start of an event that
carried continuing, difficult importance and to which hundreds of Americans had already sacrificed their lives. Benét spent most of his review, however, cutting to the chase about the issue of Rukeyser’s accessibility: “Miss Rukeyser is incisive. But for a poet so interested in a cause she maintains a particular intellectual aloofness from her audience. She writes for the few who can understand.” Benét was editor of the Saturday Review of Literature, and his discussion of Rukeyser’s book came after his praise of Stevens’s Man with the Blue Guitar and his casual dismissal of Allen Tate’s Selected Poems as “extremely literate and often interesting, if sometimes sapless and dry.” Like his brother Stephen, William was a champion of making literature a part of a common American culture, and he thought that Rukeyser’s obscurity obstructed that goal.

Similar complaints came from the mainstream press and the right. The reviewer for the New York Herald-Tribune identified Rukeyser’s “chosen public” as “intellectuals” rather than any “particular audience which demands comprehension before appreciation” (Quinn). And even then, the reviewer thought intellectuals would need greater access. With the leaps of association made between images and ideas, the review found “an obscurity which renders passages of the poems, sometimes even a whole poem, impossible to decipher with any amount of pondering and rereading.” But Time’s condescending review most precisely located the audience: “Taken all together, the poems are an exciting and, on the whole, a trustworthy appeal to all the belligerents who (and only who if you ask Poet-Rukeyser) know the world” (“Rukeyser 2”). Literary intellectuals were just as unkind. In Poetry, Willard Mass first praised “Night-Music” but then noted, “It is interesting, if disturbing” that the lyrics were “obscure” because they drew upon a “complicated symbolism and imagery” (103). But, not to be daunted, he continued, “The meaning of the poems is rarely difficult, but the final effect is as if the poet doubted the value of her content and hid it beneath a barrage of unintelligible language.”

Rukeyser was similarly attacked from the left by John Wheelwright in The Partisan Review. He noted that with a “proper audience poets are the best agitators,” but they needed to win that audience (54). Wheelwright judged that Rukeyser’s failed to do so because her literary “manners” rose from “the accepted canon of culture of a ruling class.” Her poems, he continued, “do not flatter our self esteem, making us feel bright, meeting us with knowledge, but rather do they browbeat us by making us feel stupid even before their erudition” (56, 55-56). Wheelwright described the combination of telegraphic language and fragmented story line as indulgence in the
“snob superiority” of “the prevailing manners, whose purposes are, precisely, not to tell a story” (55). Rather, Wheelwright wanted a straightforward story that cut to capitalism’s “inner nature” and attacked “every day exploitation.” With such attacks upon her accessibility from every side, Rukeyser was caught in the ideological cross fire of competing arguments for the proper relation of poetry to language and audience. Yet it was not purely a matter of Rukeyser’s poetry that led to these arguments. Rather, it was primarily a matter of her place in the literary field. Specifically, she had gained attention first from winning the Yale Younger Poetry Prize (via Steven Vincent Benét), but she only came to do so through the aid of Horace Gregory, the chief mentor for proletarian poets who utilized modernist techniques. After the publication of Theory of Flight, which she dedicated to Gregory and Mayra Zaturenska (Gregory’s wife), Rukeyser became further associated with them. Gregory, the New Masses’s literary editor, had published both of the long poems and four other poems later collected in U.S., which was also dedicated to him partially because he had garnered its publication with his own publishers, Covici-Friede. Gregory was not only Rukeyser’s mentor but also her guide. However, in late 1937, Gregory had a severe falling out with the Communist Party over the role of poetry and its relationship to audience. Following on these observations, Part IV focuses on Rukeyser’s relations in the literary field.

Part IV: The Literary Field

As shown with James Still, the value a poetry book is partially contingent upon the author’s set and visa versa. By set, I refer to the author’s positive relations with other figures in

22 That such an attack came from Wheelwright was surprising because Rukeyser had previously reviewed his quite difficult book of Marxist influenced poetry with sharp appreciation, and she later related great appreciation of his work. Wheelwright’s attack on Rukeyser was more upon the school of Horace Gregory and those allied with the New Masses. Partisan Review was one of only two little magazines to survive after the John Reed Clubs ended in 1935, and it quickly became a bastion for literary leftists (who generally called themselves Trotskyists) who opposed the supposed influence of the Communist Party on the literary work appearing in the New Masses. In many ways, this conflict can be understood as being generational rather than ideological or aesthetic, because the poetry published in Partisan Review was as difficult as any that Gregory published. The stylistic differences might be characterized as two different versions of leftist modernism—Gregory’s versus one more amenable to the rising vision of the New Critics. But what differed most was the publishers and their alliances. The literary associations of the Partisan Review were far flung, including writers who would publish with New Directions as well as writers whose social critique was relentless, such as Allen Tate. Horace Gregory had tried to mend the rift between the two leftist camps by beginning a new literary annual, whose first 1937 issue included an essay by the editors of The Partisan Review. However, his attempts failed because those associated with the New Masses attacked his publication.

23 We can gain a quick map of Rukeyser’s awareness of the literary field through examining select names in her address book, each of which was appended with either a note about their interests in the field or their address (if a
the literary field. Rukeyser’s reception (and her critical fate until the 1960s) was interlocked with that of Steven Vincent Benét, Horace Gregory, and Mayra Zaturenska. Gregory had helped her edit and revise her first two books, which were both dedicated to him, and promoted Rukeyser’s work at every occasion. Similarly, Rukeyser and Zaturenska worked closely, often dedicating work to one another. Indeed, Zaturenska would write Rukeyser, “I do believe our life lines will move together, one linked together and that only by working together can we achieve good things. . . . Do let us stick together, help each other, encourage each other—and in the long run believe & fight for each other” (“Dear Muriel”). But it is through Benét that Rukeyser’s was made a national name.

Most reviewers began their reviews of U.S. 1 by recognizing that Rukeyser had won the Yale Younger Poets Award. To clarify reception of U.S. 1 (her second book) and Rukeyser’s place in the literary field, it is critical to understand what it meant for Stephen Vincent Benét to select her as the winner of the Yale Younger Poets award. Founded in 1919, the award was given to four books a year from accumulated manuscripts submitted to the press by Yale men. The poetry selected reflected the “neoclassicism and anglophilia” of the Press, which reflected the status of poetry in the academy as well (Bradley xxiii). The series, in short, was an in-house job: the editors were old Yale faculty, the winners were Yale students, and the winners reflected the ideals of a passing era. The Series came of age in 1932 when Stephen Vincent Benét, a Yale graduate, became its editor.

Benét was perhaps the last person to hold as a central and an influential place in publishing and American letters as did William Dean Howells (Griffith 18). Benét brought the award the prestige he had earned from the massive success John Brown’s Body, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928 and sold 130,000 copies in 1928 and 1929, becoming Doubleday’s biggest moneymaker from 1924 to 1934 (Fenton 219). Benét’s fluency in images that resonated with the popular American imagination had come from his previous seven-year search for popular

---


24 In 1924, a new judge, who was a graduate rather than a professor at Yale, was appointed and the press began to advertise the Series in literary magazines (Poetry, Contemporary Verse, The Fugitive, etc.), and the number of manuscripts grew from eight in 1925 to a hundred in 1932 (xxvii). Due to the new judge’s lackluster participation (and the fact that his poetic tastes were still neoclassic), the press soon cut down the number published from four per year, to two in 1927, to one in 1932 (xl). In 1930, even though Yale University Press itself held scholarly prestige with the 1,100 volumes it had published (Tebbel, A History 602), the Yale Younger Poets Award held next to none.
success, but he never imagined that his poetry would grant him fame (212). In sympathy, Benét used his connections to help the poets enter the literary field. Other editors, such as Weeks at The Atlantic Monthly, would ask him to send along the work of worthy poets (Bradley xlix). Benét went out of his way to promote the series, carefully read every manuscript submitted, and aided even those deserving writers that he did not chose as winners, such as was the case with Rukeyser (Fenton 262).

Upon his selection of James Agee for the winner in 1934, Benét wrote to Rukeyser to let her know that although he had not chosen her book, Theory of Flight, he believed in it enough to send his recommendations to Random House (Benét, Selected Letters 244-45). When Random House did not accept it, he told Rukeyser she could mention his interest to other publishers (253), and he gave her letters of introduction to presses such as Farrar & Rinehart. Rukeyser, however, could not find a publisher, but when Benét found the Yale manuscripts of the next year merely “competent,” he contacted Rukeyser and selected her book as the winner (270). Forty-five years later, Rukeyser remembered, “A great deal of my life has involved that preliminary ‘no’ and a final ‘yes,’ and I felt very lucky” (“The Education” 227). Even though Rukeyser’s modernist, directly political poetic greatly differed from Benét’s public poetic voice, she would recall that “He saw the book in every detail” and learned about her own work from talking with him (qtd. in Fenton 264).25

In his forward, Benét praised Rukeyser’s mature experimental method, even though, as he pointed out, she was only 21 (5). Benét acknowledged the current fad of “conscious proletarians” that had “afflicted recent criticism,” but he called her mind “an urban and a modern one” that has “fed on the quick jerk of the news reel” but is also capable of writing “delicately” (5, 6). Due to Benét’s and Gregory’s influence, the book would be reviewed in eighteen national magazines and newspapers. Furthermore, the award was even more significant than it is today because it was the only first poetry-book award at the time. In the end, the book went into three editions and sold 1,400 copies (Bradley xlviii).

However, Rukeyser only gained publication because of Horace Gregory’s aid in revising her poems and editing her book before submitting it. In her ground breaking 1980 study, Louise

25 Benét’s choices were socially and poetically startling since they brought the grim fire of the times to life. Notably, he published his own dark poetic portrayal of the era, Burning City, in 1936, which included poems such as “Litany for Dictatorships.” Before Benét died in 1943, his final selection was Margaret Walker’s For My People, a choice which stunned the Press, both because of its visionary anger about racial injustice and because it sold over five thousand copies.
Kertesz explained their work: “Essentially [Gregory] pointed out to [Rukeyser] where her poems began. She says that when she’d show them to him ‘they were lifted from the river dripping wet.’ He helped her with notions of the dramatic moment, the beginning” (68). Rukeyser reports to have sought Gregory out at Sarah Lawrence College, where he aided her in revising Theory of Flight, which is dedicated to both him and Zaturenska.

The connection between Gregory, Zaturenska, and Rukeyser was close but cloaked in some mystery, which is common for relationships between those on the far left who sought protection from prosecution during the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, Gregory had just begun teaching at Sarah Lawrence in September 1934, and Rukeyser had first submitted the manuscript to the 1934 Yale Younger Poets award, the deadline for which had already passed by September. Furthermore, Rukeyser attended Yaddo in 1934, access to which she likely gained through Gregory’s influence. Therefore, it seems likely that they met earlier, perhaps through New York’s John Reed Club, at which Gregory was teaching and which he had helped to found (Gregory, “One Writer’s” 21; Denning 208). Gregory went on to serve as a mentor for a particular set of the young John Reed authors who sought to describe the circumstance of class conflict in America with the resources of modernist poetry.

Informed by his translations of Catullus, Gregory’s second book of poems No Retreat had just been published; in it, he engaged the crisis of modern life through dramatic poems that synthesized popular culture and formal artistic poise. In his review of Gregory’s Poems, 1930-1940, R. P. Blackmur described Gregory’s work as “nostalgic” and “elegiac” but only as means “to recover what is still living” (66). In short, Gregory was not a poet who railed against capitalism, but he wrote as a deeply-read poet of hope:

26 Yaddo is a writer’s colony, access to which in the 1930s was only gained by invitation. In 1932, Gregory and Zaturenska had been invited to attend Yaddo through the influence of Malcolm Cowley and The New Republic (Gregory, The House 197). That Rukeyser knew of Gregory well before the fall of 1934 is clear, because during her attendance at Yaddo in June 1934, she had a list of poems “To Be Written,” which included “US1” and “Citation for Horace Gregory” (Rukeyser I.33 “Notes 1934-1957”). Of course, it may be possible that Rukeyser only met Gregory after gaining his notice when “Citation” was later published in The New Republic (28 Nov. 1934: 75). Another potential route to their interconnection is explained by Alan Wald: after publishing “The Trial” in The Student Review (Jan. 1934), its editor and John Freeman discussed Rukeyser’s poetry, which led to her publication in and involvement with the New Masses (300). Rukeyser and Gregory were also published in Sol Funaroff’s Dynamo in 1934 as well. Of course, these common conjunctions do not necessitate venues of personal meeting, but their myriad occurrences seem to hint that Rukeyser and Gregory knew each other well before Sarah Lawrence.

27 For an overview of Gregory’s work see “Appendix I: Horace Gregory in the 1930s.”

28 This review was commissioned because Myra Zaturenska requested one of Rukeyser, and such acts demonstrate their connection. At the time, Rukeyser was serving as an editor with Decision, a magazine published by Thomas Mann’s son Klauss Mann, both of whom were living in New York after leaving Germany. Randall Jarrell, who was
Do not regret retreat

To memory that strikes through tissue, vein
To wake again new limbs, new eyes, new voices:
Vita Nuova! Every lip rejoices . . . Give me the power
To stay in no retreat and not to die. (qtd. 66)

It is hard to gauge Gregory’s exact influence on Rukeyser’s poetry, but in many ways she too was a poet of hope, who also used modernist techniques to meld history and contemporary culture. But Rukeyser was a poet of active political engagement as well who sought to portray the truths of the relationships—personal, political, historical—that she witnessed. In this sense, Rukeyser was clearly of the next generation, so Gregory promoted and aided Rukeyser whenever possible, including securing her place at Yaddo in 1934, reviewing Theory of Flight for The New Republic, publishing her poems in his own annual New Letters in America (1937) and in the New Masses when he served as literary editor, and securing a relationship with his own publisher Covici-Friede. But the most telling example of both Gregory’s and Rukeyser’s place in the literary field—straddling the Communist and the high literary sets, which ultimately accepted neither author—came when Gregory served as guest editor for Poetry’s 1936 “Social Poets Number.”

Harriet Monroe had published an editorial in July 1934 against the New Masses called “Art as Propaganda.” Stanley Burnshaw, literary editor of the New Masses defended the “revolutionary poem” and declared, “Indeed, the issue is clearly drawn: against you, THE NEW MASSES and the dozen little proletarian magazines flourishing from coast to coast—John Reed Club organs as well as Blast, Dynamo, The Anvil, etc.—fighting with and for the class that is rising into power, fighting against your solid front of reaction” (23). However, such battle lines were not easily drawn because many writers who published in those “proletarian” magazines also published in Poetry and other established journals. Moreover, the New Masses gained prestige with the presence of acclaimed contemporary writers such as MacNeice, and Poetry, through leftist politics by publishing socially committed poetry, gained credence with a literary

understood to be the heir apparent to the New Critics, had written a bitterly negative review of both Gregory’s Poems 1930-1940 and Zaturenska’s third book for The Nation (“Town Mouse, Country Mouse.” 20 Sept 1941: 257-258). So Zaturenska wrote a letter and asked Rukeyser to get more positive reviews published, suggesting Blackmur as a potential reviewer ([1941]).
field that was greatly influenced by the Communists. It is important to note that in the 1930s, the New Masses held as much, or more, influence in the literary field than any other political weekly such as The New Republic or The Nation, both of which it outsold in 1935 (Wald 108). Indeed, it is the gap between Poetry and The New Masses that The Partisan Review arose to fill, but in 1935 to clear the air, Monroe asked Gregory to edit the “Social Poet’s Number,” which only he could do.

The issue included the work of fourteen poets, beginning with Edwin Rolfe and ending with Rukeyser. Gregory published her sequence “Night-Music” to which he granted three times as much space—six pages—than the other poets received. Rukeyser had dedicated the poems in “Night-Music” to Gregory’s wife Marya Zaturenska. Moreover, as the final author in the collection, Rukeyser served as an introduction to Gregory’s own editorial about his selection of “class-conscious literature” (92). Gregory explained that his selection sought to show how “poetic belief” had changed when “poets consciously assume social responsibility.” In his defense of the artistic integrity of poetry, Gregory discusses the difficulty of transcribing the new concerns of “political events . . . within the context of . . . belief” (96-97):

poetic belief by very definition is a cultural term which is dependent upon the synthesis of the literary heritage, of the geographical or physical environment, and of the political, moral, or religious conviction, as well as upon the social adjustment of the poet. From this belief emerges a poetic myth, and at all time in the process of its growth, both poet and reader are confronted with the problem of language. A controversy is renewed every time a new set of convictions enters poetry. As the poetic myth changes, new words, new symbols are introduced and a new cycle is begun. (97)

This diagnosis of changing values in poetry accounts, in large part, for reviewers’ dismissal of “The Book of the Dead,” which was melding the values in regionalist literature with modes of documentary representation, proletarian writing, and modernist poetry. Rukeyser overcame Tate’s early critique of regionalism as a “still-born . . . documentary,” because the material in her sequence—although drawing upon the techniques of documentaries—held a “vital rapport with

29 While the New Masses was the cultural organ of the Communist Party, it is important to say as well that its content was not mandated by the Party but represented a large array of writers with conflicting views, particularly with the advent of the popular front in 1935. These authors were struggling to understand and apply Marxist principles to the American situation.
[Rukeyser’s] own moral temper” (“Regionalism” 158). Similarly, for Gregory, the successful poetry of his era would—against the distrust of human motives—reassert humanity and help restore “order in life” (98).

Gregory’s and Rukeyser’s alliance of mutual promotion continued in 1937 when he published “The Cruise” in the first issue of his annual New Letters in America (1937), which can be seen as a bellettristic counterpart to Granville Hicks’s and Mike Gold’s more influential anthology Proletarian Literature in the United States (1935). Rukeyser came to his defense when Gregory was attacked by the Communists. As narrated by Alan Wald, New Letters—although it represented young writers allied with the Popular Front—was attacked in New Masses by Hicks and others who saw Gregory’s selections as failing to represent adequately class struggle for those who needed to hear about it (123-35). At issue was the ability of poets who utilized modernist techniques to communicate with readers. It is a surprise that these critiques came against Gregory who had published Rukeyser’s most accessible poem, “The Cruise.” So Gregory and Rukeyser both wrote letters in reply. Rukeyser argued against “inert” formulas and for the realization of a living hope in lyric poetry that dared to acknowledge its relationship with suffering (qtd. 125). Furthermore, during this time (June 1-Dec 31), Gregory acted as literary editor for New Masses, where he published fewer explicitly propagandistic poems than had other editors; moreover, he published five times as much poetry whose political import was secondary to its literary nuance than had been published in the magazine’s history (Beary 167-168). This included poetry by Kenneth Rexroth, James Agee, and Richard Eberhart.

That June, Rukeyser wrote Gregory, sharing that she had dedicated U.S. 1 to him. Gregory responded, “I’m greatly honored by the dedication,” and he begged Rukeyser to send him poems to increase the quality of the poetry in the New Masses:

Your note on the progress of the book of poems is very good news: that book is your important work. And don’t take on any job until you’re certain that the book is almost finished. Do everything you can to protect yourself toward completing it; if work is moving forward in Hollywood, stay there until you must come East to finish U.S.1. (20 June 1937)

Gregory saw Rukeyser’s book and poetry as an important piece of the developing conflict over the direction of poetry and the Popular Front, whose literary coherence was devolving into embattled groups. Gregory described this conflict to Rukeyser as “dangerously provincial.” In
Gregory’s view there were at least four groups: figures such as Cowley, “who are reviving dead horses,” led the hope for a “united front”; those associated with the Partisan Review, who opposed the League of American Writers, which they saw as Stalinist; Hicks and others who sought to renew a more purely proletarian writing; and finally there were Gregory and his allies. Gregory warned, “Don’t misunderstand me; I’m not trying to found the Gregory brand of Communism—I’m merely saying that the times are much more dangerous than they were two years ago.” In response, Rukeyser sent along “Mediterranean,” her long poem about the start of the Spanish Civil War that served as the unrepentant climax to U. S. 1. Gregory would publish in it in New Masses that September (14 Sept. 1937: 18-20).

The argument about poetry continued when New Masses published an editorial entitled, “Is Poetry Dead?” (21 Dec. 1937), which asked readers to debate which was of more value: (A) poets “who were obsessed with image of death and decay” or (B) poetry that “talks the language of the people” (qtd. in Wald 128). The case against Gregory and his cohort was put most succinctly by a teenage Communist, who served as secretary to the new “Poetry Group”: in order to make the case to the workers against the “profit system,” “the popular front has to become popular” (qtd. 129). With the weight of opinion against them, Gregory soon left the New Masses. And it is within the conflict about the proper relationship of intellectuals to the working class that the negative and halting appraisals of U. S. 1 can be best read. This tension is also found in terms of reviewers’ associations with Rukeyser’s publishers.

When searching for a publisher for her second collection, Rukeyser was guided by Gregory to his publisher, Covici·Friede, a house that was closely associated with leftist intellectuals. Paschal Covici and Donald Friede had formed the house in 1928.30 The history of their press has been primarily defined by the publication of Radclyffe Hall’s best-selling The Well of Loneliness—which was censored because of its portrayal of lesbianism—and of Steinbeck’s novels Tortilla Flat (1935), In Dubious Battle (1936), and Of Mice and Men (1937). The story of Covici·Friede has been generally related in light of Donald Friede’s memoir The Mechanical Angel (1948). Reminiscent of the glory-days in the 1920s, Friede emphasizes the

30 Best known for his close editorial relationship to Steinbeck, Pat Covici (b. 1888) was a native of Rumania and was brought to the US at the age of 12. In 1922, he opened a bookstore in Chicago and began publication of authors such as Ben Hecht and Rebecca McGann (Paschal Covici 29-30). Donald Friede was born at the turn of the century and his father made a fortune as the Czar’s agent to Ford Motor Company but lost most of his money with the Russian Revolution. Friede either dropped out or was expelled from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, but eventually invested $110,000 of his inheritance to buy a position as vice-president with the Horace Liveright’s ailing Boni & Liveright (“Donald Friede”).
eclectic nature of the press: its sale of limited editions, its publicity schemes, its involvement with the arts, and its work with high-profile authors. Yet Paschal Covici was deeply involved in publishing leftist authors, the story of which is reduced to three pages by Friede (119-121). Most presses in the 1930s published some degree of left oriented literature, but Covici·Friede published many central and best-selling texts that came to define the proletarian era. While Covici did not publish public statements of his political vision, the books that he published tell the story of his deep personal belief. Covici published little poetry—besides Gregory, the house only published one anthology of imagist verse, Cummings and Aldington—Covici’s publication of Rukeyser can be understood as support of her politics.

Although highly attuned to the material experience of theatre (both movies and plays) and the relations between the author, the poem, and the reader, Rukeyser held publishers in suspicion and failed to account for the fact that a poem was primarily transferred from a writer to her readers via the text they encountered in books. But Rukeyser was lucky that Robert Josephy, the leading typographer of the 1930s, designed U.S.1. Thus it is with interest that I evaluate Josephy’s design of U.S.1. Josephy designed literally thousands of books and changed the entire way the books were produced in America; moreover, his artistic philosophy and political involvement manifest Rukeyser’s poetics.

In specific, Josephy’s social engagements mirrored his design principles, which allowed him to give vital force to his design of U.S.1, whose author held similar goals. Josephy’s personal goal was to give the reader access to the text through manifesting its content in “simple, clean-cut, and tasteful” typography (Farrell qtd. in Josephy 81). Although publishers often held liberal values, most still paid low wages to designers who were trained under the “apprenticeship

31 There is some danger in deriving the political interest of a publisher from the authors and texts published, but Covici was known as an editor who worked closely and carefully with his authors. In addition to Gregory’s books, the list of leftist authors and publication is impressive. Covici·Friede published Lewis Corey’s The Decline of American Capitalism (1934) and Crisis of the Middle Class (1935), both of which became central books that informed the Popular Front (Denning 100). They also published John Strachey’s The Menace of Fascism (1933), The Coming Struggle for Power (1933), Literature and Dialectical Materialism (1934), and The Nature of Capitalist Crisis (1935). And they published the speeches of Franklin Roosevelt (1932), a biography of Karl Marx (1935), two books by Diego Rivera, and many novels by Nathaniel West and Jack Conroy. Notably, they published Clifford Odets’s first plays, including the era-defining Waiting for Lefty (1935). Covici·Friede would also publish Don West’s fellow Southern radical Howard Kester’s Revolt Among the Sharecroppers (1936) and James Wenscher’s Revolt on the Campus (1935). While Friede claimed that this “deadly-serious, if-it-can’t-be-proletarian-it-can’t-be-good” (119) phase ended with the publication of Odets, he left the firm in 1935 after despairing of its financial state to work in Hollywood. Yet Covici continued to publish leftist political texts, including Seeds of Destruction: a Study in the Functional Weaknesses of Capitalism (1938) and Rukeyser.

32 For details about Josephy’s early career and his connections to Judaism see “Appendix J: Robert Josephy.”
system” (Stern 20, 22), so in 1935 Josephy helped to establish the CIO affiliated Book and Magazine Guild, which he led as president for ten years. Unlike “the purely intellectual worker, [who], no matter how strong his sympathies with labor may be, often tends toward an abstract approach to labor’s problems” (Stern 22), Josephy understood the deep interconnection between labor power-relations, skill, industry, and product. Thus Josephy was known for how his innovations in design corresponded with his advances in labor and in mechanical production. Josephy functioned with intimate awareness of the material realities of publishing, which he sought to put into service of writers and artists: “He is convinced that the machine must be the servant and not the master of man. Interested as he is in mechanical methods, he is more interested in human value” (23). But he was frustrated as well:

Many people working in the arts, especially writers, seem delighted to classify their peers—and themselves by association—as intellectuals. Theirs is an assumption of superior intelligence and perception, even a capacity for elevated political judgment. The commercial and cultural apparatus that promotes and sells their work, that makes their names known, helps to establish public belief in their cerebral power. (Josephy 88)

With Rukeyser’s mistrust of the publishing industry, these accusations hold particular relevance in consideration of her relations to the literary field and her pragmatist poetics, which idealized the relations between poet, poem, and witness.

Nevertheless, Josephy expertly executed the design of U. S. 1. The book’s last page is dedicated to explaining the basics of its design and production: “THIS FIRST EDITION OF U. S. 1 BY MURIEL RUKEYSER CONSISTS OF THIRTEEN HUNDRED COPIES, DESIGNED BY ROBERT JOSEPHY, SET IN BASKERVILLE TYPE, AND PRINTED ON WARREN’S EGGSHELL WOVE PAPER BY J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK” (n.p.). These details provided tremendous authentication to those in the book’s contemporary literary field. Josephy’s name alone carried great weight, and attention to the book’s paper, quantity, and font lent Rukeyser’s poetry aesthetic credence against accusations of its political nature. Yet reviewers, as we have seen, had difficulty in evaluating poetry that united politics and aesthetics, regardless how typography brought them together.

The poems are set in 11 pt baskerville with 10 pt leading (with a maximum of 27 lines per page). Meticulous attention has been given to proper spacing, because Rukeyser sought to convey meaning with special relations. Reflecting the power of Rukeyser’s exact diction and use
of space, baskerville type was considered “the epitome of neo-classicism and eighteenth-century
rationalism in type” (Bringhurst 168). Moreover, the 11 pt font is assertive, and the large leading
between the lines guaranteed that the poems would dominate the page. Further, the right margin
is often one-fourth an inch. This minimum margin is smaller than in any other poetry book,
allowing Rukeyser to indent sections of the poem to show their relationship to other sections.
Josephy provided similar attention to the book’s cover.

_U. S. 1_’s simple cover offsets Rukeyser’s complex critique of American institutions. The
front cover’s dark background is blazoned with a large, white shield (a federal highway sign) that
heralds the title: “U. S. / 1.” The starkness draws upon the authority of the highway shield,
which holds much in common with law enforcement icons. Rukeyser, it promises, is going to
show the reader America. Below her name, the reader is reminded that she is the author of
“THEORY OF FLIGHT,” and the back cover quotes seven critics all of whom praised her first book.
William Rose Benét’s quote, which is both the largest and the last, reminds the reader of
Rukeyser’s age (twenty-one) and goes on, “When you hold this book in your hand you hold a
living thing [. . . .] If the bitterness of our day is here, the hope of it is here also: the new youth
that is already rising and shining.” That Covici-Friede reprinted this assurance by the premier
mainstream literary editor demonstrates that they anticipated the conflicts in the literary field into
which the book was entering.

Rukeyser took guard against such attacks by contacting Louis Untermeyer. Rukeyser had
been the youngest poet that Untermeyer had included in the 5th ed. of _American Poetry: A
Critical Anthology_ (1936), as well as in the 6th ed. in 1942. It is of some surprise that
Untermeyer did not group Rukeyser with the proletarian poets but rather as a New Lyricist, and
in his introduction to the 6th ed., he framed her in terms of being a woman: “Tracing the swift
mutability of time, and in particular these times, Louise Bogan, Marya Zaturenska, and Muriel
Rukeyser outlined a poetry with was both sensuous and cerebral, intricately designed but deeply
impassioned” (28). On December 12, 1937, Untermeyer would respond to Rukeyser’s inquiry
with delight, explaining that he had contacted William Rose Benét about reviewing _U.S. 1_; he
continued, “If [Benét] decides not to do it, I will leap into the breach with seven well primed
adjectives. I’m all ready. Where’s the book?” Benét, however, did the review, so Untermeyer
went on to review both U. S. 1 and Marya Zaturenska’s Cold Morning Sky, which was dedicated to Rukeyser, for The Yale Review.  

Part V: The Paradox of an Ideal Pragmatist Poetics and a Living Audience

With the waning of regionalism and the ascendance of New Criticism, anxiety about accessibility grew to a fevered pitch in the 1940s. Rukeyser had few literary allies in the debate, and her work was the site of sustained debate in The Saturday Review of Literature (August 1940). Louis Untermeyer served as her champion, and he even sent her a draft seeking her approval of how he explained her “central position” (21 June 1940). His essay, “The Language of Muriel Rukeyser,” recognized her poetry as a “new speech” that was “swift, abrupt, syncopated” and used “mingling fragments” for kaleidoscopic effect (11). U. S. 1 was praised as a “nightmare of responsibility” constructed from “many points of view” that were rendered in a “condensed diction” that alternated between “abstractions and concrete images.” Untermeyer then declared his unhesitating support of her recent long poem, “The Soul and Body of John Brown,” which had just been published in Poetry. “The Soul and Body of John Brown” was Rukeyser’s unabashed moral call to Americans to honor the spirit of John Brown and stand up against exploitation rather than, as Untermeyer relates, resorting to “disciplined militant unity” or abandoning “all our gains.” However, the essays of William Rose Benét and Selden Rodman decried the same complexity that Untermeyer praised.

Rodman called for writers to realize a “socialized democracy” by composing poetry that had a clear narrative and drama. Drawing upon the poets’ intimate awareness of their own place in and relationship to the world, this poetry should show that “labor . . . is sacred” and help people “work with dignity” (15). Fascism had succeeded, he pointed out, because such leaders “spoke in a language that could be understood” (14), but many poets inspired by Marxism were guilty of a “Hegelian . . . gibberish.” While some writers activated by Communism had “traveled intensively, perhaps attending meetings, and took part in strikes as a ‘sympathizer,’ documenting [their] work with evidence as well as with feeling,” most wrote with “a sophistication, a privacy, and a downright snobbism that by comparison [made] the frank escapism of the Ivory Tower at least look intellectually honest” (15). Although not mentioning

---

33 For details about Zaturenska’s and Rukeyser’s close and stormy relationship, see “Appendix K: Zaturenska and Rukeyser.”
Rukeyser, both statements might be readily applied to her. Benét wrote in less political terms but also condemned “inchoate, obscure, and highly specialized” poetry that made the “average reader . . . apathetic” (3). Poets guilt of obscurity—which included both the New Critics and poets such as Rukeyser—wrote “as though [they] were a member of an esoteric cult who desire to appeal only to other members” (4). Instead, he called on poets to use accessible formal features to facilitate “expression” that would allow them to “tell us . . . something that cannot be said” (17, 4). Through this oxymoron, Benét expresses the great power of poetry to acknowledge what lies beyond the boundaries of the symbolic order’s recognition. The urgency (and difficulty) of such creative “order and precision” was seen by Benét as a necessity because of America’s diversity: “After all, we are a polyglot nation. In that lies our greatest weakness and greatest strength in this challenging hour” (17). While Benét’s editorial practices and publications did not reflect the scope or hierarchy of that “polyglot,” Rukeyser sought a poetic practice that would recognize intercultural relations within that “polyglot,” but her methods fell outside what Benét recognized as accessible poetry.

John Malcolm Brinnin—whose poetry was also published with Rukeyser’s in Gregory’s New Letters—evaluates the juncture between accessibility and social creativity in his essay, “Muriel Rukeyser: The Social Poet and the Problem of Communication” (Poetry 1943). Brinnin defined a “social poet” as one who strives to “develop his talent in the full resources of language and accumulated techniques” in order to communicate (555). But he or she also wishes to express issues of social plight that the culture represses and that the reader might not be able to grasp. Brinnin considers this issue during his focus on the second section of U. S. I, “Night-Music.” On the first poem of the section, “A Flashing Cliff,” Brinnin comments, “the new verse is built upon a use of language so complex and a compression of ideas so intense, that it is unquestionably removed from the grasp of the lay reader, not to mention the proletarian” (567). Yet without such compression, new features of Rukeyser’s world might not be able to be communicated. Brinnin precisely explains that the problem is “whether to insist on first premises, even though that means a static repetition of familiar ideology, or to exercise full imagination and the resources of language in an endeavor to contribute a new dimension to poetry” (567-68). Thus, even when Rukeyser comes to the world she knows best—New York—she also draws upon “special, intangible, almost private symbols” (569). Brinnin catches the contradiction of Rukeyser’s work well and explains that while she had gained a range of
expression by leaving behind use of “the radical vernacular,” her “inherent revolutionary ardor” is lost within “the tangled welter of symbols” that prove inspirational only to other similarly minded poets (569).

Critics found that readers were lost in Rukeyser’s poems, but Rukeyser was not surprised at this conclusion, even if she hoped for more. Poetry, she felt, was capable of showing the “inter-dependent elements” of systems (The Life 19) and revealing the emotional energy tied into them. Rukeyser sought to bring the reader into relationship with their “resistance” to poetry (and society), which she saw as a resistance to realizing the interlocked brutality of the social order: “There are relationships which include so much that we can bring to them our own wishes and hostilities, our value judgments and our moralities; they will serve to illuminate all our other relationships. Among them are such key targets for our attitudes as . . . the Negroes, the Jews, . . . the ‘place’ of labor, the ‘place’ of women, and poetry” (9). Yet to follow a poet as she unravels the intense emotional charge of such symbols—rather than merely using them as the fascist did—is a trying task for readers. Thus, Rukeyser found Americans had “aversion . . . to emotion,” so they could look at poetry and say, “‘I have not the time,’ or ‘It bores me’” (45). She explained that readers acted out this “impoverishment” and “contempt for people” by turning their heads; similarly, publishers declared “the imaginative level of the American audience to be that of a twelve-year-old”; and critics lied about writers’ political, personal, and artistic associations (46-47). In the end, Rukeyser judged that “our culture as a whole does not produce an audience with belief in its own reactions” (146).

As noted by Kate Daniels, the writer-scholar who renewed attention to Rukeyser by editing Rukeyser Out of Silence: Selected Poems (1992), “[Rukeyser] was profoundly aware—as well she might be—of the power that critics are capable of wielding over a writer’s reputation with the reading public, and she reminded readers over and over again to trust above all their own responses to the books they read” (258). Thus Rukeyser fancied herself someone who

---

34 In her discussion of critics, Rukeyser implicitly referred to figures such as Louise Bogan, whom was described by Kenneth Rexroth as having “a malevolent vendetta” for Rukeyer (“Forward” to Kertzesz), and Randall Jarrell who sought to defame the reputation of Rukeyser, Gregory, and Zaturneska throughout the 1940s (Daniels 248, 260). Moreover, reviewers and critics associated with the Partisan Review undertook a full fledged assault, as seen with Wheelwright’s review. In 1942, Weldon Kees would write a single sentence of Rukeyser’s Wake Island: “There’s one thing you can say about Muriel; she’s not lazy” (qtd. in Daniels 248). Slanderous attacks continued in the Partisan Review with the 1943 article on Rukeyser called “Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl.” For details, see James Brock’s “The Perils of a ‘Poster Girl’: Rukeyser, Partisan Review, and Wake Island.” In Herzog and Kaufman. 254-263.
wrote for a “prepared” audience capable of emotional honesty whose imaginations allowed full engagement: “You cannot imagine falsely. The imagination is a function of belief and experience: that is, of course, why they realization of a poem is an event of belief and experience” (The Life 50, 49). She hoped to express the multiplicity and tension of culture through poetry that causes social “growth” (rather than social change): “Possibility joins the categorical imperative. Suffering and joy are fused in growth, and growth is universal. A society in motion, with many overlapping groups, in their dance” [sic] (211). Given her focus on the contingency of meaning, Rukeyser understood why New Critics negatively appraised her work: “In poetry, the relations [between symbols] are not like crystals on a lattice of words” (166).

But even with this sense of complex relations within the poem and between the poet, poem, and “witness,” Rukeyser recognized only a single system of literacy that would give people a route to participate within interpretive acts. Rather than critiquing the education system for failing to provide the skills necessary to engage her poetry, Rukeyser blamed her readers’ “corruption of conscious” that caused them to disown emotion and imagination (48). That “corruption” was, in turn, caused by a culture that turned repression into “dissociation” and structured those dissociations into “fantasy” (49). Rukeyser’s purpose was to break those fantasies, but she recognized that readers found such revelation jarring. In so explaining, Rukeyser was hitting on one common truth of poetry—that it breaks social conventions and explains the world in such a way that the new vision is threatening to the social order.

At issue is what Rukeyser called the “usable truth” of her poems (The Life, 27; “The Usable Truth”). Rukeyser claimed that her poetry’s “usable truth” rendered, in its full complexity, what Melville called “the absolute condition of present things as they strike the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him” (qtd. in The Life, 27). Rukeyser’s poetics was one of process, growth, and relationship—a poetics of pragmatism. As Kertsz explains, Rukeyser worked in “the tradition of American meliorism of Emerson, Whitman, and William James. Meliorism holds that there are no absolutes, that a person need be neither an optimist nor a pessimist the reasonable way to relate to the universe is to accept it and work to make it better” (37). Rukeyser hoped her poems would “sow the seed, or the arrangement” of change (qtd. 37) within a cultural order that controlled the social options.
Rukeyser recognized that society’s coherence hinged on the fact that most readers could not act on such repressed gaps in the reality of the social order, but she theorized that people desired to touch and recognize such gaps (or took pleasure from doing so): “People want this speech, this immediacy. They need it. The fear of poetry is a complete and civilized repression of that need” (26). In her essay “The Usable Truth” (1941), Rukeyser proposed poetry as a way “to expand continually the limits to liberty that the present itself presents on us”: “The attitude of poetry, capable of facing the tragic, the complex, the fantastic, is capable of meeting the process of reason that works, not in the single-track a, b, c, d of logic, but rather in the cluster-to-cluster progress of an emotional sequence moving from group to group of idea and feeling” (207). Such a structure is an accurate description of U. S. 1; however, the full force of that structure was lost upon audiences who read the book in new critical terms. At the time that “The Usable Truth” was published, just before the United States entered World War II, Rukeyser declared that her poetics uphold the “values we knew . . . when the country itself was formed. This is our tradition. And if it sounds to you like so much dancing on the grave, I can only say our life now—any age of life this earth produces—is lived in a rare and carnal dancing on the grave, the solemn beautiful dance over the home of the dead of the living mystery, the living truth.” And from that history, poets could choose to emphasize those truths that would promote communication of possibility to confront the “complex danger” within which Americans then found themselves (207-08).

Thus Rukeyser fearlessly wrote poems that cultivated artful complexity to reveal the relationships upon which American depended but repressed. She hoped her readers would throw off their protective reticence and leap into her poems, whose meaning she saw as a mutually creative act: “Both artist and audience create, and both work on themselves in creating.” Rukeyser hoped her readers would dare to be as fearless and complex in their honesty as herself. In this belief, Rukeyser forwarded an idealist version of pragmatism. She held that meaning was created through the mutual work of a community, and Rukeyser used the techniques of modernism to engage readers in discovering, building, and acting on a mutual truth that operated beyond hegemonic control.

To generate a matrix within which new truths could be made, Rukeyser borrowed a wide set of references and conventions from different interpretive communities. She synthesized those conventions through grounding them in narratives around relatively common symbols
(image-collections) such as mining and Appalachia, John Brown and race, New York City, or Spain and fascism. Yet, if most readers were hard pressed to function in systems outside of the mainstream culture, they found difficulty in suspending their literacy training in how references (i.e., semiotic systems) functioned. Kate Daniels diagnoses Rukeyser’s critical exile (roughly 1940 to 1970) as resulting from her refusal to work within clear boundaries: “It seems the onus of our critical establishment that critics—like the American society from which they arise—must travel in packs, responding to the latest fads and fashions, and crushing the efforts of those unrecognizable, out-of-sync writers whose ideas are theirs and theirs alone” (259-60). But as I have shown, Rukeyser melded discourses in such a way that almost no critic who held a place within a critical interpretive community of the day. Although Rukeyser quickly came to national attention through her close alliances within the far left and the aid of Benét and Yale, her notoriety occurred during the height of proletarian writing. With the rise of New Criticism, the dissolution of the Popular Front, the defeat of Republican forces in Spain, and the United State’s entry into the Second World War, not only would regionalism’s prominence fade but so would Rukeyser’s. There is a clear trajectory of weakening critical attention to Rukeyser’s work (Daniels 257): Theory of Flight (1935) had 15 reviews; U. S. 1 (1938) had 12; Turning Wind (1939) had ten; Beast in View (1944) and Green Wave (1948) each had eight; and Elegies and Orpheus (1949), which were reviewed together, had only six. In Rukeyser’s studied attempts to develop a “useable truth” that worked across discursive fields, she had defied the principles of particular interpretive communities and had worn out her critical welcome.

Conclusion

Centered within a conflict about aesthetics versus politics as well as complexity versus accessibility, Rukeyser’s network of authentication had already suffered a tremendous setback with Gregory’s conflicts with the Communists, and Zaturenska’s conflict with Louise Bogan and her supporters. The next reversal came with the bankruptcy of Covici·Friede in late 1938 when their printers (Little and Ives) demanded payment for services. Known as an editor who went to remarkable lengths for his authors, Covici had overextended advances on royalties. Although Covici had worked closely with Steinbeck and was about to release The Grapes of Wrath—

35 Rukeyser recognized both the power of her poetry and its inaccessibility to most, so she would attempt to influence popular cultural literacy through converting “The Book of the Dead” into a movie. For details, see “Appendix L: The Movie.”
which would outsell every other book in 1939 when published by Viking—but Little & Ives dismissed the battered manuscript, which they deemed to be unkempt (Friede 130).

When Pat Covici became an editor with Viking Press, he invited Rukeyser and her “friends” to come along (8 Aug. 1938). However, Gregory distrusted Viking and told Rukeyser that he would “fight to stay away from them” ([1938]). But Rukeyser went along with Covici who delivered extra copies of U. S. 1 to her before Covici-Friede’s holdings were sold by their printers to collect debts (“Agreement”; Friede 130). Rukeyser later claimed that U. S. 1 was published by Viking, yet the house never put the book on its list. Still, they did buy 756 copies at 20 cents per copy from Rukeyser and distribute them, paying Rukeyser $273.20, with $122.00 of that as an advance upon royalties of unsold copies. Although she would publish her next book, A Turning Wind (1939), with Viking, Rukeyser would have a sour relationship with the house, which refused to do more than minimal publicity for her books and allowed them to go out of print (Eisenberg, 9 Nov. 1939; Covici, 24 May 1944 and 3 April 1947)

1938 was a fateful year. Louise M. Rosenblatt released Literature as Exploration, which focused on educating readers based on their personal experience with texts. Although Literature as Exploration is commonly cited as the headwaters of reader-response pedagogy, it too was washed away in the slew of New Critical texts which were initiated by John Crowe Ransom’s The World’s Body (1938) and Robert Penn Warren’s and Cleanth Brook’s Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students (1938), a text that was regularly republished through 1976 and was most recently released in 1988. Furthermore, Randall Jarrell—the New Critics’ young squire who they had trained and promoted since the mid-1930s—would continue to disparage Rukeyser throughout the 1940s.

Although Zaturenska’s diary notes her jealousy and suspicion of Rukeyser’s “electric energy and brilliance” (89), she appreciated Rukeyser’s friendship and loyalty, qualities which were ever more important as the Communists came to be pushed to the side after the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939. That shift separated them. In The Culture of Cities, Lewis Mumford held that “The task of modern civilization is to live in a wall-less world” by expediting corporation between regions and authenticating their local cultures (370). But upon the fall of the Spanish Republicans and the Hitler-Stalin pact, Rukeyser expressed a vision of wall-lessness that would be realized only through terrible threat:
and all the walls decay and all the world stands bare
until the world is a field of the Spanish War

from “Otherworld” l. 150-51 in A Turning Wind (Viking, 1939)

As the United States entered World War II, Gregory and Zaturenska continued to grow apart from Rukeyser, who kept up her support of the far left. But even with the walls between them, Zaturenska felt deep ties to Rukeyser, and in 1942, Zaturenska would write, “Impossible not to like her, difficult and disappointing as our friendship has been. We have rapport anyway. . . . But the breech is deep too” (148). Eventually in their 1946 history of twentieth-century American poetry, Zaturenska and Gregory would praise only Rukeyser’s first book of poems, writing of the next three that “[h]er poems seem to show the effort of moving forward on too many fronts, as though the poems were conceived in terms of slogans and commands” (438-439). Rukeyser felt the sting of such attacks, which would eventually lead to her vastly lowered clout in the literary world.36

1948 saw the publication of Rukeyser’s The Life of Poetry as well as Allen Tate’s On the Limits of Poetry: Selected Essays: 1928-1948. Few more divisive poetics can be found. The next year, with great controversy, the Fellows in American letters awarded the new Bollingen-Library of Congress Award to Ezra Pound’s Pisan Cantos (1948). The Bollingen award had been the project of Allen Tate, who had served as Consult for Poetry at the Library of Congress since 1944 (for which Rukeyser had also vied, but MacLeish had passed the office onto Tate). In his role as Consult for Poetry, Tate had compiled a bibliography with brief commentaries called Sixty American Poets, 1896-1944 (1945). Upon Rukeyser, he would pontificate: “Miss Rukeyser’s gift for language is very superior; she is inventive, fluent, imaginative; and she has a good ear. Her poems, however, are less impressive as a whole than as brilliant fragments. . . . I feel that she is primarily a lyric poet who has inherited the tradition of the thirties . . . [so] she has written a kind of poetry which is not congenial.” Tate’s influence supported his conservative

36 In the 1950s until his death in 1982, Gregory purposefully distanced himself from all his old left connections, and the couple would share with a friend that they “had nothing in common with [Rukeyser] this poet of protest. They found her demeanor too demanding, too pushy, and her later poems dishonest and politically misinformed” (Phillips 28). However, Rukeyser would begin teaching at Sarah Lawrence in 1954, and Gregory did not retire from the college until 1960, and he likely helped her win the position. So it is clear that their connection was close, regardless of later denials. For instance, Zaturenska claims minimal contact with Rukeyser in the 1950s but acknowledges that in the early 1970s when Rukeyser came to their aid when she heard of Gregory’s hospitalization; she would again be dismissed because they found her poetry still failed to meet their criteria of success (Phillips 28).
vision. From his position, Tate would establish the Fellows in American Letters and gain appointment of his friends or protégés—such as Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Louise Bogan, and Leonie Adams—to the Consultancy, all of whom also served as Fellows who had awarded Pound the Bolligen Award (Coley 810). Even though Rukeyser would find herself outside the new literary hegemony, in the mid-1940s she was still a valued member of the surviving radical community who held popular influence.

Drawn from her acclaimed biography of William Gibbs, Rukeyser’s essay, “The ‘Amistad’ Mutiny,” assumed the mantle of authority about race relations when it followed W. E. B. Du Bois’s introduction to Primer for White Folks (1945). The primer was designed to inform the average white American, who was “disturbed” by “the raising racial tensions” and by “the paradox of white and Negro relationships in a democracy waging a war of liberation and equality” (Moon xi). The book sought simply to tell “White Folks” about “the Negro—his background, his relationship with whites, his everyday denial of first-class citizenship, and what he really wants in American life.”37 That Rukeyser’s portrayal of the legal battle around the Amistad was given such prominence demonstrates her ability to write history that had contemporary currency. At the end of World War II, white regional and ethnic identities were effaced before attention to their larger racial category, which was highlighted in opposition to the rising power of post-war black America. As had been the case with Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk, the “White Folks” in the title addressed all whites. On the one hand, this unifying nomenclature can be seen as presupposing a common history and essence; on the other hand, it might be seen as a pragmatic move by progressives to educate a widening identity group against negative influences. Similarly, the next chapter shows how regionalism had charged Don West’s identity as an Appalachian so strongly that he might use it to sway the relationship between whites and blacks throughout the South (and the nation).

Copyright © Chris Green 2004

37 In another important forecast of the discursive shift from region to race, Henrietta Buckmaster (who I discuss in Chapter Four) provided the final essay of Primer for White Folks’s first section and hers was longest essay in the collection.
Chapter Four
The Tight Rope of Democracy and Don West’s Clods of Southern Earth

Introduction

Of the books considered in this dissertation, Don West’s Clods of Southern Earth (1946) is both the most simple and the most complex. In an era when poll taxes severely restricted the voting rights of the black and white working class, Clods of Southern Earth argued for racial equality and commonality, which West demonstrated from his childhood experience of sharecropping and the value of his northern Georgia, Appalachian heritage. The book’s testimony, whose ideal audience was working- and lower-class whites, was also designed to speak to working- and lower-class blacks who were further restricted from voting by the threat of lynching and Jim Crow laws.¹ But the advent of WWII changed the conditions of social power upon which such laws and traditions of exclusion were built. The war necessitated that millions of African Americans enter the Southern working class and national military service. At the close of the war, black troops returned with quite a different sense of their relation to and rights in the United States. Georgia had repealed its poll tax in 1945, and with the banning of white-only primaries in 1946, 135,000 newly registered black voters allowed African Americans to emerge as influential political players. Race tensions flared when the social infrastructure began to accommodate this shift of power.

Setting the frame for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s, this shift emerged after decades of active social intervention and political organization. The interlinked network and global nature of that struggle has come to light in books such as John Egerton’s Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South (1994) and Patricia Sullivan’s Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (1996), which unify the scattered studies of Southern interracial activism written in the 1970s and 1980s. This network was composed of activist, community leaders—educators, preachers, business people, social workers, labor organizers, artists, politicians, publishers, etc.—forming another integral audience for Clods of Southern Earth whose direct address to the lower- and working-classes

¹ I use the term “working class” to refer to those people employed in labor by the owners of capital, and I use the term “lower class” to refer to a people’s place in the social hierarchy. The difference is important since many small-farm owners, rural professionals (such as preachers), and migrant vagrants are not technically working class but hold a similar position in the social hierarchy to the working class.
reaffirmed the vision and role of the activists. Narrating the social life of Don West’s book takes us directly into those networks.

Clods of Southern Earth was mobilized by Boni and Gaer and the book’s various distributors to meld a wide-based progressive coalition. West’s book stands out from other political media because it activated its readers’ association with the literary field. Designed for accessibility and applicability, the volume gained cultural capital for progressives as a result of its opposition to the New Critical literary values then coming into ascendance. Writers contributing to the poetic field did not produce commodities—poetry itself had little monetary value on market—but produced artifacts that would be recognized by experts as standing out from other such poetic artifacts (Bourdieu 38-40). But West would say some thirty-years later, “I’m not trying to revolutionize the alphabet, myself. I’m trying to communicate, and I regard poetry as a medium of communication” (“Don West, Poet and Preacher” 56). While not designed for mass consumption (which its values, like the literary field, argued against), Clods of Southern Earth was a vehicle of popular communication and sold, within its first year of publication, 14,000 copies (“Boni & Gaer”). Such sales were unheard of for a poet who had not previously published with a major New York House. Indeed, such sales were remarkable even for the most well-established authors.

Yet West’s role as a high-profile white poet arguing for racial equality in Georgia quickly came to an end. The same wartime economic and social shift that led to a chance for greater racial equality also brought the United States into the Cold War, and many of the networks that had fought for economic and social rights in the 1930s were red-baited and persecuted by whites who linked racial equality with communism. This persecution often included imprisonment and exile form cultural history. West was one such victim. Thus, less scholarly research has been conducted on West than any other of the authors in this study precisely because of his role in those activist networks, but the social life of Clods of Southern Earth can be finely detailed because of West’s relentless labors in those networks during the 1940s.2

2 The last decade has seen a renaissance of scholarship on such leftist writers, including Barbara Foley’s Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941 (1993); Walter Kalaidjian’s American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Post Modern Critique (1993); James Smethurst’s The New Red Negro: the Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946 (1999); Cary Nelson’s Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left (2001); and Alan Wald’s Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left (2002). However, West is only briefly discussed by Smethurst and given a short biographical portrait by Wald. For a discussion of what scholarship has been conducted on Don West, see “Appendix M: The State of Scholarship on Don West.”
In a 1979 interview, when West was director of the Appalachian Folklife Center in Pipestem, West Virginia, he shared an anecdote that exemplifies the value that *Clods of Southern Earth* held for its readers:

A few years ago I was out here on Bottom Creek just visiting with an old disabled miner; I was just moseying around, and he asked me to come in. We were talking and he said, “I used to read a fellow named West.” And I said, “Well, tell me a little more about that.” And he said to his wife, “Go back there and get that book.” So she went back there and brought out an old dog-eared copy of *Clods of Southern Earth*. . . . People bought *Clods of Southern Earth* that ordinarily didn’t buy poetry. (“Don West, Poet and Preacher” 56)

That aged miner is emblematic of one class of readers from the original dispersed network in which the book circulated. These readers were coping with the changing structure of democracy and racial relations in the American post-war South. This chapter investigates transformative passage of *Clods* through the central nodes of that network. Drawing on testimony from his mountain heritage and culture in north Georgia, West’s poems argued that interracial equality and democracy were part of the South’s heritage and living culture.

West was part of the struggle in the South to gain voting rights for lower-class whites and blacks, who had largely been banned by the poll tax. The consequences for attempting to change the social order were great and even lethal for African Americans who faced lynching among other terrorist acts. The causes and consequences of lynching form a central meditation in *Clods of Southern Earth*, and West sought to help his readers see their common circumstance as a way of uniting them to promote racial and class equality. *Clods of Southern Earth* was part of a wide discursive shift in post-War America where race again became the defining characteristic of pluralism. West radicalized regionalism’s portrayal of rural white poverty by showing how rural whites were systemically debased in the social order. In doing so, West refabricated common understandings of racial hierarchy. Recognition of blacks’ and whites’ mutual abasement serves as one of West’s main arguing points. But he goes beyond fostering awareness of that denigration to demonstrate the common moral integrity that lower-class whites and blacks derived from their religion, work, and relationship to the land. At the start of the Cold War, such a call to join was like forming a bridge of human hands over a chasm; nevertheless, against
segregation, West dedicated himself to building such interconnections and facilitating democracy.

Consideration of West’s book takes us forward ten years, out of the mountains, and into the dense matrix of Southern history and radicalism. Unlike the books of James Still and Muriel Rukeyser which were published early in their careers, Clods of Southern Earth was West’s fifth book, and in its first year sold more than U. S. 1 and Hounds on the Mountain. This chapter investigates the rich tangle of relations and discourses that made Clods such a potent catalyst for social action. Such discursive exploration means clearing fifty years of overgrowth from a once fertile field, for West’s story and the story of such Southern radicals in the 1930s and 1940s are just now beginning to be told. Thus, I necessarily contextualize West’s book within the tale of conflict over racial segregation in the 1930s and 1940s. To help my readers negotiate this complex matrix of relations, I now provide an outline of the chapter so that my analysis of a particular event, poem, figure, or institution can be understood within the larger context.

The chapter begins by demonstrating the shift in pluralism from region to race by discussing three books published in 1944. In Part II, I establish an overview of Clods of Southern Earth by evaluating the postures and positions held by its reviewers and by examining their particular interpretation of the poems themselves. Reviews throughout the South held that the book reflected the situation of millions—a point of view that gained validation when mainstream reviews in the North dismissed the book as crude of craft. However, the book was also read by those without access to popular media, and in Part III, I uncover the book’s distribution to a hidden, large, radical readership—the People’s Institute for Applied Religion. Yet readers first had to be convinced to read the poems, so part IV analyzes the design of the book’s matter (i.e., cover, blurb, introduction, biographical statement, etc.) that framed how readers encountered the book’s contents. The book was designed by Boni and Gaer, and Part V relates how their cultural project joined with the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) and Henry A. Wallace’s Progressive Party. Their mutual labor to unite labor and race issues shows why Boni and Gaer were interested in publishing Clods as their first volume. In Part VI, I explain the network of cultural, labor, and community activists through which West met his publishers and into which Clods of Southern Earth was distributed as an organizing tool to fight for racial equality. West’s involvement in this struggle was primarily conducted through his affiliations with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare: Part VII examines the relationship of race,
class, and region within the SCHW’s membership and sets forth West’s goal to radicalize their politics. In doing so, West drew upon his newly earned professorship of Human Understanding and Citizenship at Oglethorpe University (Atlanta, Georgia), and part VIII discusses how he used his book and professorship to become a central player in racial politics in Atlanta and Georgia. By the end of 1946, the SCHW was undergoing a political crisis when it was pulled toward radicalization by West and the Progressives. This crisis led to the SCHW’s close work with the Progressives, in which West’s took role as the executive vice-chairman of Georgia’s Progressive Party in 1947 and 1948; however, the SCHW, like other progressive and popular-front organizations collapsed under the pressure of red-baiting during the presidential election of 1948. Although West had been able to transfer the cultural capital generated by Clods of Southern Earth into political capital, his public prestige was not enough to protect him and his poetry from the red-baiting of Ralph McGill, the editor of The Atlanta Constitution, leading West to be stripped of his professorship and, after the election, to take cover in the background of life in Georgia as a farmer peddling produce.

Part I: From Region to Race

Three books published in 1944 mark a shift in the focus of pluralism from region back to race. Commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation in 1937, the Swedish social-scientist Gunnar Myrdal oversaw a collaborative project published as An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy. In 1,483 pages, Myrdal lays forth the crisis of race relations in the United States, identifying those forces that would change America in the next twenty-five years. Myrdal emphasizes, “America can never more regard its Negroes as a passive submissive minority. . . . They will organize for defense and offense. They will be more vociferous” (1004). In that fight against the unofficial caste system of separate but equal, “the Negroes are awarded the law as a weapon” to realize “the glorious American ideals of democracy, liberty, and equality to which America is pledged not only by its political constitution but also by the sincere devotion of its citizens” (1009, 1004). America had put its democratic principles on the line when it came into the war against “[f]ascism and nazism [which were] based on race” (1004), confronting the nation with its internal contradictions of race hierarchy and democracy. Among those organizations of “sincere” and devoted citizens fighting for racial equality, Myrdal mentions the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and Southern Conference for Human Welfare.
(SCHW). Describing the SCHW as the first coalition of Southern liberals to gather since the Revolution, Myrdal called their endeavor “a foretaste of freedom and power which large-scale political organization and concerted action can give” (469). Don West would be an important participant in the SCHW’s national support of the Progressives.

In seeming answer to the issues raised in An American Dilemma, W. T. Couch, director of the University of North Carolina Press, commissioned Rayford Logan, a historian at Howard University, to edit What the Negro Wants. Although the book’s purpose was simple—“that the country, particularly the South, ought to know what the Negro wants” (Couch ix)—its publication was not. Logan requisitioned or reprinted essays from fourteen of the most well known African Americans in the country, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Willard S. Townsend (member of the CIO’s Executive Board and Secretary of the CIO Committee to Abolish Race Relations), Mary McLeod Bethune (educator, founder of the National Council of Negro Women, and board-member of the SCHW), Fredrick D. Patterson (President of Tuskegee and member of the SCHW), Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes. Although these essays represented both conservatives and radicals, they unanimously called for the desegregation of America.

Couch and his readers at the press were taken off guard.³ Even though white liberal Southerners had long lobbied for an easing of Jim Crow, they had not imagined that blacks, no matter their political stance, would so forthrightly condemn segregation. Couch feared for the press’s reputation and for the consequences to race relations, so he refused to publish the book. University of North Carolina sociologist Howard Odum, who had so long worked to advance race relations, agreed with “the great harm” the book could do (qtd. in Janken 165). Because he found the essays to be filled with “Extreme statements, cynical references, [and] misstatement of fact,” Odum encouraged Couch to publish the essays as they were so that the public could directly appraise their supposedly poor quality. Other reviewers demanded major changes, including the deletion of all references to racial intermarriage (166). Couch sent the critiques to Logan, who in turn shared them with his authors, but they refused to change their essays and encouraged Logan to seek legal action (166-171). When Logan threatened to do so, Couch gave in but wrote a publisher’s introduction to the book that disclaimed responsibility and shared his own vision of race relations.

³ The fascinating history of the book’s publication—and Logan’s temptation to change the manuscript to fit white sensibilities—is told by Kenneth R. Janken in “African-American Intellectuals Confront the ‘Silent South’: The What the Negro Wants Controversy.” The North Carolina Historical Review 70.2 (1993): 153-79.
That introduction explores the possibility of racial equality in terms of racial difference, and it discounts anthropologist and sociologists, such as Myrdal, whose call for equality and integration might destroy American (i.e., white) culture. Couch argued that only certain aspects of equality were possible given black’s racial inferiority; he held that they had to earn the right to become part of white culture through first demonstrating “qualities of greatness.” He counsels patience on that long walk: “The South, white and brown, must transcend the agitation, the hatreds, the foolish charges and counter charges, the pressure and threat of pressures with which it is encompassed” (xx). To reconcile his press to white readers, Couch soothes, “The White Southerner, reading this book, must remember that the task of the superior man is not to prate of being superior but to be really so.” Couch’s introduction was an apologetic mask that veiled his reprehension at the essayists’ answer to the question, “What does the Negro want?”

Fredrick D. Patterson, one of the anthology’s most conservative contributors, laid forth, “The American Negro wants to become a fully participating citizen in every sense of the word” (264). Patterson then explained the reciprocal relationship of an individual and democracy: “Democracy is a form of government and a way of life whose tenets require full participation by its adherents. Each citizen experiences and enjoys democracy in full proportion as he fulfills the responsibilities related thereto. The proper discharge of these duties is possible only through the experience which participation will give” (265). As Mary McLeod Bethune enumerated, myriad hurdles had to be crossed before full participation could become possible: “equality before the law,” “abolition of lynching,” “abolition of the poll tax,” “the chance to work and advance in any job for which [one] has the training and capacity,” federal support of housing and relief programs, and “elimination of racial barriers in labor unions” (254-55). Her unending support for those goals led her to become a central figure in the SCHW in 1946, showing the radicalization of the group whose first president in 1938 had been Frank P. Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina.

The third 1944 book announcing the shift from place to race was Henrietta Buckmaster’s novel Deep River. Although basically unknown today, in the 1940s Buckmaster was the most well-known white author who championed the Negro cause. Buckmaster was nationally recognized for Let My People Go: the Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolitionist Movement (1941), which conducted an impassioned account of its history and featured the role of blacks at each point. Her intention might be seen through her assertion that
Let My People Go “tended to fulfill the only valid function of history: the illumination of present experience” (qtd. Wallenstein 862). The protagonist of Buckmaster’s third novel, Deep River, is the daughter of a slave-owner in Georgia in the 1850s who falls in love with a young abolitionist, Simon Bliss, whose real-life model, Buckmaster explains in her blurb on the cover of Clods of Southern Earth, was Don West.

Rufus E. Clement, the President of Atlanta University and who sat on the SCHW’s executive board, praised the book as a “credible” model that “shows how white men and women came to see and know their brothers in black (and serfdom) as human beings” (“This Side of Jordan” 387). Although Clement had not met West at the time he wrote the review, his conclusion anticipated the work West would undertake upon moving to Atlanta in the autumn of 1946: “The central figure, Simon Bliss, gives us the real feeling of the book, of himself, of his mountain followers—free and poor whites, and of all liberals of whatever time and place when he says: ‘I guess when a man comes to set store in free ways of living, he just naturally thinks about the whole world. It’s hard to leave anything out.’” What Clement’s review did not foretell is the distance he and other black leaders would assume during the 1948 Presidential campaign toward the unrelenting heralds of racial equality, the Progressive Party, the SCHW, and Don West.

Part II: Reading the Reviews

West did not use the term “cultural pluralism” or “Appalachia” (until the 1960s), but he mobilized all his skill as a poet (and an activist and organizer) to help create a society where the lower classes could join together regardless of work, race, gender, or locality to struggle for political, social, and economic rights. West understood that the various components of these dispersed lower classes needed to find commonality through recognition of mutual struggle. He had witnessed the power of locally coordinated action as a cofounder of the Highlander Folk School (1932), an organizer for the Communists and International Labor Defense (1933-34), a leader of the Kentucky Worker’s Alliance (1935-37), a Congregationalist minister in Ohio and Georgia (1938-1941), and a school superintendent in Lula, Georgia (1942-1945). During this time, West had continuously written poems but put other labor first, but with the publication of

---

4 For details about the first stage of Don West’s work as an activist, see “Appendix N: The Founding of Highlander Folk School.”
Clods of Southern Earth (Boni & Gaer, 1946), which included the strongest of his poems from the previous fifteen years, he began to inhabit more fully the role of poet.

In Southern newspapers, leftist politics were not casually discussed and, when discussed, were commonly dismissed. Nevertheless, readers and reviewers praised Clods of Southern Earth for presenting a realistic version of the world they knew. In The Atlanta Constitution, Alex Hite begins by rehearsing West’s biographical sketch, reporting his pending professorship at Oglethorpe University and his comparison to Simon Bliss, the mountain abolitionist in Henrietta Buckmaster’s novel Deep River (1944). With that synopsis setting the tone, Hite calls Clods of Southern Earth “a vigorous collection of unpoetic poems.” Similarly, he turns what might be understood as a problem—mentioning that West is “no accomplished literary craftsman”—to praise: “His writing is powerful and earthy and crude. He is Walt Whitman in overalls.” Glad to read a work that dares to state its morality clearly, Hite calls West “a born crusader” fighting against “man’s blindness and injustice to his fellow man.” The reviewer takes fierce pride because West, with “deeply Christian feeling […] attacks the organized, so-called Christian church for its failure in fighting our social and economic evils.” Hite jovially notes how West “satirizes the pusillanimous Southern poets who make pretty songs about Greek culture and an antebellum South that existed and ignore the masculine, emotionally appealing South today.” While not quoting any of West’s poetry in the review, Hite undoubtedly refers to “They Take Their Stand (For some professional Agrarians)” (Clods 29).5 Composed in ballad form (ABAB iambic tetrameter), the poem gleeful rails against the Agrarians’ removal from the South that West knows:

In Dixie Land they take their stand,
Turning the wheels of history back
For murder, lynch and iron hand
To drive the Negro from his shack.

In Dixie Land there’s many an ass
Braying loud in every school,
But never sees the growing grass

---

5 The titles in the book are all printed in bold and italics, a typographical feature which continually emphasizes the book’s energy.
That might be had by any mule. (9-12, 17-20)

On the previous and facing page (28), West juxtaposes the poem “What Shall a Poet Sing?” which is also a ballad (ABAB). Written in an iambic trimeter over-meter, the poem’s rhythm breaks at the beginning of lines with either gasping anapests or harsh trochees. This stifling of the rhythm emphasizes the brutal breakdown of life:

```
\| / | / / / \\
What is a poet saying
\| / | / / / \\
Down by a Georgia pine
\| / | / / / \\
Where a broken body’s swaying
\| / | / / / \\
Hung to a cotton line . . . ?
```

```
\| / | / / / \\
With his folk all burdened down,
\| / | / / / \\
Pinched by hunger’s pang,
\| / | / / / \\
Whether he’s white or brown,
```

```
\| / | / / / \\
What shall a poet sing . . . ? (entire poem quoted, ellipsis in poem)
```

The last line paradoxically fulfills the iambic trimeter that has haunted the poem, as the final iambms slice the word “poet” in half. The consequences of metrical fulfillment are echoed by the aching slant rhyme of “pang” and “sing.” Ending in an open, lingering question about how to address the suffering and grief of poverty and power in the South, the humorous “They Take Their Stand” takes on a throat-clenching quality that assumes the level of condemnation. While on the surface West presented himself as a poet whose work Hite lauded as “blunt” and “crude,” West was anything but—as seen in the metrical nuances of “What Shall a Poet Sing?”

---

6 Although unmentioned in Clods, the poem was first published in New Masses (27 Aug. 1935: 13). The previous issue of New Masses contained the article “Way Down South” that contextualized the poem though by writing about the prison system in Georgia, the current state of Angelo Herndon’s defense, and black miners struggle to unionize in Birmingham, Alabama.

7 Depending on emphasis an alternative first foot might read | - / | or | - |. Regardless the stress starts on a low key, as if searching for voice.
In Clods of Southern Earth, West sang as a mountaineer who proclaimed his own ancestors’ resistance to slavery; he sang as a preacher of justice who decried the class system which set black against white; he sang as a white Southerner whose father had died sharecropping and who now dared to ask his fellow working-class whites to, as he puts it in the introductory poem, “clasp the hand of a Blackman/ And say:/ Brother!” (“Look Here” 13). West sang for 133 pages, an impressive amount of poetry regardless of the time period or target audience, which makes the number of copies sold—over 14,000 in the first year—even more impressive.

The book’s first review appeared appropriately enough in Mountain Life and Work and aptly outlines its structure. In Clods of Southern Earth’s first section, “No Anger in a Dead Man,” West takes the stance of a “compassionate observer” who “holds up the wrongs and needs of the Southland, and heralds the waking and rising complaint of the wronged” (“Clods” 27, 26). The second section, “Folks A-Living,” conducts portraits of the mountain people with whom West came of age, and they “speak, quietly, often with pathos sometime with lyric quality,” often in ballad form (27). After establishing “the passionate appeal” of the first section and the “patient poignance” of the second, the third section, “No Lonesome Road,” deliberately reviews the “social wrongs” that West wants people to address. The section rings with a “note of excitement, of prophecy, of optimism” as West gives “the final realization that in the suffering, the grieving, the struggle, no group and no one bears a lonely burden.” That the review in Mountain Life and Work praises West’s book is not surprising, because its readers felt their labors heroized. Although they may not have been thinking about their origins when Southern uplift and educational workers retreated into the mountains before the onslaught of Jim Crow, certainly they were glad to see what they believed about the mountains—the integrity of its culture as demonstratively American—being deployed in service to a unifying call for the South. Notably, however, the review does not mention West’s poems to and about blacks.

Just as West structured each section of the book to create a compelling argument, so he crafted each poem in straight-forward language to facilitate engagement with a brief but richly

---

8. This review mentions that Clods of Southern Earth is dedicated to Alva Taylor who taught West in Social Ethics at the Vanderbilt University School of Religion from 1929 to 1932. After being fired at the age of 65 from Vanderbilt for his social activism, Taylor had begun editing Mountain Life and Work in 1942. The journal was the voice piece of the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers, an organization which brought together hundreds of Southern Appalachian benevolence workers to share ideas, experiences and enthusiasms (see Chapter One, Part I, “Appalachia and Regional Ethnogenesis”).
rendered experience. In July 1946, The New York Times Book Review recognized this quality and called West “a homespun writer, with a fondness for short-lined free verse compositions and with a strong didactic bent. Perhaps the best that can be said of Mr. West is that he is earnest and coherent” (Burger). However, the reviewer continues, those qualities are “not sufficient in themselves to make a poet.” The review exactly excises and recounts West’s thesis about the oppression and division of the Southern “mass of workers” by “a small minority of land-owning Southerners and factory-owning Northerners,” and it recounts particular images of suffering whose goal is to lead to “a day of ‘solemn judgment’. . . in which white worker and black will clasp hands.” Yet read in the context of modernist poetry and the ensuing Cold War, the reviewer ends by condemning the book: “It is a romantic, simplified South which will be readily recognized by every school boy from Moscow to Vladivostok, but it has several features which will bewilder most Southerners, white and black—and especially those ‘workers’ who have just gotten through sending Bilbo . . . back to congress.” The reviewer notwithstanding, Bilbo’s supporters were a narrow segment of Mississippi’s population: the poll tax in Mississippi, the state which sent Bilbo to the U. S. Senate, caused only 15% eligible voters to vote in 1944, while non-poll-tax states averaged 63% (“The Votes Cast”). The New York Times Book Review demonstrates that the world of readers who valued poetry in the North were not cognizant of the complex, oppressive political realities in the South.

A few months later, a slightly less-scathing review by Ruth Lechlitner appeared in the New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review. Lechlitner, who once conducted reviews for the New Masses, neutrally recounts that this is the first book by a man who describes himself as a “‘poet in overalls’” who “scorns those ‘literary gentlemen’ who write only for ‘the elite”.

---

9 New York reviewers considered West’s book only because of his publisher’s literary reputation as one of the great New York literary publishers. As discussed in Chapter One, in the 1920s Charles Boni brought out such foundational modernist books as Alain Locke’s The New Negro (1925), William Carlos William’s In the American Grain (1925), and Gertrude Stein’s The Making of Americans (1926).

10 Throughout the South, the poll tax was a result of Jim Crow, but it resulted in the disinherintance not only of blacks but of the majority of white voters. For instance, in the 1936 presidential election only 19.6% of adult citizens in Georgia voted, and throughout the poll-tax South, on average, only 24.1% voted (Bingham 6). The New School for Social Research ran a project called “Suffrage in the South,” which worked to explain the system: in one case, the levy in Georgia ran $1 per year, which if it went unpaid was cumulative with interest (Stoney 11). It is important to point out that for Arnall, the liberal governor of Georgia from 1943 to 1946, and many of those who opposed the poll tax, the issue was not one of race but of empowering the general electorate. After all many states—like Texas, Georgia, and South Carolina—still had white-only primaries. However, in May 1944, U. S. Supreme Court declared the Texas all-white primary unconstitutional, and in October, 1945, a federal judge ruled Georgia’s white-only primary was also unconstitutional.
cent.”

After recounting West’s introductory discussion of being from “the freedom-loving mountain folk” who oppose “poverty and oppression,” Lechlitner denounces West’s poetry as “militant regionalism” whose theme is “over simplified and over sentimentalized.” For her, West’s only redeeming feature is his love for the countryside. After dismissing his free-verse as “little more than chopped-up, cliché-studded, indifferently bad prose,” she attacks his lack of “appeal to the ear,” which she tells the reader must be well done if West is to appeal to a Southern audience who she imagines is “conditioned to the strong rhythm of work in field or factory; to the musical variations of wind-blown tree or cloud or of running creek water; to country dances and songs; to the full sweeping poetry of the Bible.” Finally, she grants that “the most effective pieces are the traditionally rhymed lyrics in Cracker Dialect” and gives examples of one of West’s ballads, quoting all three stanzas of “Bill Dalton’s Wife,” which was the only poetry quoted in the whole review. Written in iambic trimeter and littered with colloquial diction, the poem recounts the death of a woman from childbirth because her husband could not afford to hire a doctor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hit shore was pitiful} \\
\text{The way Bill Dalton’s wife} \\
\text{Lay up thar on Bull Creek} \\
\text{An’ suffered out her life. (113, 1-4)}
\end{align*}
\]

While providing a message about the consequences of poverty, it is an odd example to forward as the best poem from the book because Lechlitner does not discuss its subject. Perhaps she felt it exemplified childbirth in the mountains and used it to exaggerate the reader’s bias toward the diction even though few poems in the book use dialect. Indeed, out of the 38 poems in the middle section, only thirteen are composed in dialect, nine of which are placed towards the beginning or the end. “Bill Dalton’s Wife” is the final poem of the second section and is prefaced by poems recounting the struggle and wiles of love, children, family, and death (through work, law, and poverty). These poems, more than any in the collection, work out of the tradition of mountain ballads and stories. Most of the dialect poems were composed in West’s early twenties and appeared in his first three books from 1931 to 1932. In these poems West favors the woman’s point of view. Consider “Stillborn,” a lyric monologue:

\[
\text{Stillborn, a lyric monologue:}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Clods of Southern Earth was actually West’s fifth book of poetry. Although his first book of national publication, the claim of its being his first book was a strategy dedicated to foster readers’ belief in West’s native genius.}
\end{align*}
\]
I wasn’t lonely then, little One

[. . .] your kicks filled me full,
So full I thought my heart
Would burst [. . .]

The song was full of you, too,
As April was full of violets
Breaking through.
And I thought the whole world
Was pregnant,
Busting out. (105, l.1, 3-6, 14-19).

This poem might be accused of simple language (“so full”) and assumed images (violets in April), but it recognizes, honors, and touches the losses that many women had suffered—losses few male poets ever addressed. When considered along with a love poem called “Lucy” (88), which recounts how the male lover brings his love tribute of “grey leaves,” “heart-leaves,” “galax,” and “rose-buds” (each in a separate stanza), one recognizes that the stereotypes which the New York reviewers discovered were constructions of their own assumptions. Indeed, the poem after “Bill Dalton’s Wife” also seems directly to contradict Lechlitner’s assertions about West’s unwieldy use of “over sentimentalized” free verse.

As the first poem in the third section, the story and form of “Unity Is An Ax” (117-18) recuperate the sanguinity of the ballads in section two. Drawing upon those poems’ tales of toil and loss in family and love, West proclaims that, if individual families are to survive, they must learn to link arms and provide for each other’s welfare. A verbatim typographical copy of the poem is provided on the next two pages in Figures 2 and 3, because the size, texture, and clarity of the script are essential envoys between the poem and reader, both in this poem and throughout the collection. Indeed, the clarity and size of type are more than an aide to those of low literacy: their clarity and expanse stand out against the normal poetic typography of “cultured” books from which the target audience felt excluded. The typeface, Linotype Benedictine, is set in 12 pt.—a large face of poetry and rare for literary texts. Moreover, the use of 4 pt. leading results in
a maximum of 26 lines per page, a small number compared to other poetry texts. In an era when
textuality was being reduced to tight print in mass-marketed, paperback books, the clear layout
and type (size and face) convey to the reader that these poems and their stories are worthwhile.
This textual design by Joseph Gaer harkens back to his skills as the director of publications for
the Congress of Industrial Organization’s Political Action Coalition.

Fig. 2: “Unity Is An Ax, Page 117”
Drawing upon West’s mention of his family’s continuity and struggle in the introduction, “Unity Is An Ax” is designed for accessibility and strength of voice through simultaneous appeal to clear (and communally meaningful) tropes. In sure dimeter lines, the poem is an apostrophe to “Kim Mulkey,” who stands as a figure that many of West’s readers knew intimately: a manual farm laborer who was deeply informed by religion and had learned the hard work of survival (1-4, 11-14). West appeals to his audience to join together by speaking to a recognized elder figure; readers are called to draw upon their own difficult wisdom and create a world which clears hunger from the land.

West, who possessed an education on the level of his New Critical peers such as Allen Tate, hones his literacy to a particular audience and purpose. Notice the use of decisive line breaks, whose vigor is accented by carefully set dashes, the occasional exclamation point (coupled with direct appeal to Mulkey), and sentences which never run longer than three short lines (see lines 19-31 “It’s . . . . silent”).

Fig. 3: “Unity Is An Ax, Page 118”

Kim Mulkey, who only had a second grade education, was West’s grandfather. In the book’s “Appreciation,” West writes, “to old Kim Mulkey with the unconquered spirit who taught
me to fight.” The rhetorical brilliance of West’s poem is an appeal to a foundational ancestor to go beyond his circumstances, just as West himself had done, just as those who read his poems hoped to do. West proposes they do so through the ax of unity, which is the

The ax of wisdom—
Sharpened in the University
Of Toil and Hunger. (16-18)

Those men and women sharecroppers and farmhands with calluses caking their hands recall the visceral labor of chopping down “fruitless trees” (22). They can remember how squadrons of migrant workers cleared fields, and after reading West’s earlier poems perhaps could see themselves as uniting to mow “down greed/ And exploitation” as well (24-25). By the end of the poem, the readers find themselves hoping that Kim will reach out even though he cannot, but, in doing so, they picture the times they have held out their own “soil-smeared” hands to help others. This poem situates the readers as the ones forging the future if they would only reach back to help themselves before they reach that irrevocable “Lean and stooped” posture (2).

On the page facing “Unity Is An Ax,” an ink drawing by Harold Price, which is presented in Figure 4 (see previous page), shows four men engaged in conversation, perhaps on a loading dock. At the base of the image, straight lines of crates stand in contrast to the curves of the men above, all of whom are clad in well-used overalls. Sitting on a crate to the left, one engaged listener, leaning on his forearm, has clearly just taken a break from his labors since he is still wearing his gloves. To the right, straddling a low barrel, the speaker drives his finger into his palm, making a point. Seated beneath them on the wood floor, as if just coming upon the conversation, rests a traveler (hunter? hobo?) with a bulging bag beside him, his jacket thrown to the side as he rests a spell. Behind them we see a man, pipe in mouth, intently considering the exchange; against his torso, the speaker’s active arm cuts downward as the engaged listener’s arm climbs upward seemingly to support his chin. The figures rest in stark relief against the page, for there is no background behind their upper bodies. On the lower section, a sharp block outlines the speaker’s legs while a low hemisphere of shadow unites the man on the floor with the listener on the crate. The image conveys the developing relationship between these figures and, perhaps, the relationship between the poet and the reader.

That October 1946, Harold Preece, reviewing the book for New Masses, agreed in part with Leclitner, saying that the dialect poems in the second section were his least favorite since
he “grew up speaking the dialect before I ever knew there was any other kind of language” and to hear it made him feel “too sentimental” (29). Preece acknowledges that his view is informed by his personal knowledge of West as a labor organizer, preacher, and farmer, and in the

![Fig. 4: An Ink drawing by Harold Price](image)

review’s second paragraph relates, “I’ve been told with deep affection by Tennessee Scotch-Irish mountaineers and Alabama Negro miners how he had taught them to read and write and, more importantly, to know their brother men of different colors and different creeds” (27). The book, Preece declares, “has let in a fresh, clean wind” across the hills and rivers “where we thought blood and rope to be eternal phenomena.” While few “croppers and miners” had read Look Homeward, Angel, Preece praised the fact that trade unions had ordered “dozens” of copies of Clods of Southern Earth. He also emphasizes the sales: by the time of its publication, the publisher had moved the original count of 8,000 pre-ordered books to 12,300 copies (28).
To illustrate the poem’s effect, he relates witness from Iva Lee Eldridge, a farm-wife with ten children from the mountains of Tennessee, who shared her love of the poem “Naked Words” which she had heard West read. Preece quotes the last two stanzas that begin by describing the “Hard old hands” and “Bent young bodies—/Crooked, like old iron pieces” and ends with those “bent iron pieces/ Sit[ting] in solemn judgment” (20, lines 24-26, 39-40). Perhaps the most startling and vivid image of the entire book comes at the start of the third stanza:

I’ll speak of babies, too,
Bent-boned and sallow
Sucking on tired breasts
At dusk time—
Of black hands,
Hard as hickory
In the warped plow-handles
They clutch [...] (19, lines 12-19)

Here the rhythm and sound of West’s “free-verse” speak with accord and power, weaving together lines with alliteration (“babies” and “Bent-boned”; “sallow” and “Sucking”; “Hard as hickory”) and the careful spill of assonance and rhyme (“bone” and “sallow”; “Sucking” and “dusk”; “black hands,” etc.). In tight three- and two-beat lines, which nevertheless move slowly as they are packed with hard words, each foot demands its own rhythmic space. Key to the careful gait, the feet alternate meters in such a way that stresses are bunched and accentuated as the broken rhythm straddles enjambed lines. Indeed, as the lines break in the middle of syntactic units, the syntax yokes them together unifying the distribution of beats (rhythm) across lines rather than within lines. Consider, for instance lines 16-19. Noting line breaks in the text as well as foot changes in the stress notation, I have transcribed the lines below into two eight-syllable sets, which correspond with major syntactic units:

Of black hands,/ Hard as hickory
In the warped plow-handles/ They clutch

In this metrical mix, there is an even distribution of stress: four stresses in each eight syllabic syntactic unit. Furthermore, three of those four stresses—which are separated by line breaks—are both clumped in the middle of the syntactic unit while coming at the end and start of the feet.
While the poem may appear gnarled and broken, its form, like the bodies of the people it describes, has adapted to its work.

The result of such poems, Preece points out, is to encourage people—students and farmers, black and white—to write poems about their own lives, “often great in their crudeness, about mobs, massacres, and the glorified fraud ‘settling-up’ time on the plantations” (28-29). What matters to Preece, and presumably to the readers of New Masses whose literary tastes were subject to their politics, was that West’s vision sounded the “death knell” of Bilbo and presented “a new picture of the South for the rest of the Nation, which has read too much of ‘Li’l Abner’” (29). What mattered, for these readers, was that other less-literate readers could see the toil and struggles of their own lives.

The editors of New Masses understood West’s vision to be on par with Sinclair’s The Jungle, Drieser’s Sister Carrie, Karl Marx Capital, Alfred Kreyborg’s Selected Poems, Ann Petry’s The Street, Howard Fast’s Clarktown, and Du Bois’s Color and Democracy. At least these were all books that New Masses offered as incentives to subscribe. Each issue of New Masses provided a list of between ten and twenty books, one of which readers selected as a free gift when they subscribed. Two months after it was reviewed in New Masses, West’s book appeared in the December 17, 1946, issue as a Christmas Premium ("Give New Masses” 28) and continued to be advertised through October 28, 1947, when it sold out. Other books by Boni and Gaer about the Spanish Civil War and Jewish refugees from Germany also joined this list in 1946. While it is unclear how many copies New Masses distributed, its audience has been described as “middle-class intellectuals” and Communist “sympathizers” (Harrison 4) and might be seen as progressives and radicals akin to those in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, except those who read New Masses held no qualms about the position of the Communists. Yet after the Communist support of Russia and Stalin—both before and after their alliance with Germany—New Masses’ audience had dwindled since its heyday during the Depression, the popular front, and the Writers’ Congress when its influence equaled or outstripped that of The New Republic and The Nation (Aaron 354-64).

Given West’s work to foster interracial unity across class lines, it is understandable why his role in radical poetic histories—even as scholars have worked diligently to recover the experience of the under and working class as well as the poets who wrote to and for them—
remains essentially unexamined. Yet West recognized nationally in his day by the highest profile Communist literary editor Granville Hicks who included two of West’s poems in Proletarian Literature in the United States, An Anthology (1935), which was released at the height of the CPUSA’s influence.

Just as blacks in the rural South were migrating northward, mountain whites were also migrating to find work in the nation’s new industries. The poem “Dark Winds” first appeared in West’s pre-Communist book Between the Plow Handles (1932). That rendition and its republication in Proletarian Literature feature colloquialized diction, while its republication in Clods of Southern Earth downplays that diction. Moreover, the poem in Clods of Southern Earth is titled “Factory Winds” (49) rather than “Dark Winds.” Compare the first stanza of each (I’ve underlined differences):

From Clods of Southern Earth, “Factory Winds” (49):

Dark winds
Wind’s creeping down from the mountains
To stinky mills,
Callin’ my longin’s
Back to the hills.

From Proletarian Literature, “Dark Winds” (198):

Dark winds,
Winds creepin’ down from th’ mountains
To stinky mills
Callin’ my longin’s
Back to th’ hills.

In the second line, West has replaced the stand-in apostrophes with “–g” and “–e” and maintained standard spelling. Since “Factory Winds” comes near the end of the first section of Clods of Southern Earth, West may have felt that the reader would be better won by using

12 In the cases of other white, proletarian poets (such as Maxwell Bodenheim, Kenneth Patchen, Muriel Rukeyser, and Don West who appear both in Proletarian Literature and in The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949 [ed. Hughes and Bontemps, 1949]), little work has been done to investigate the connection between race and class. James Edwards Smethurst in The New Red Negro, the Literary Left and African-American Poetry, 1930-1946 mentions West several times and conducts an able reading of West’s poem “Dark Winds” as it appears in Proletarian Literature. However, Smethurst is the only scholar to have mentioned West during such an investigation.
standard diction punctuated with the authenticating power of colloquial diction only when the narrator speaks of his/her emotions. West keeps the “e” on “the” in the later version and chooses not to change the “o” in “from” to “u,” yet he maintains the poem’s colloquial feel. Consider the second stanza (changes from the first version are underlined):

Smoked winds,
Fouled with dirt from the sooty stack
Of a fact’ry,
A-scrougin’ fer room
An’ blackin’ me ... (5-8)

Even though the narrator’s outward appearance has changed, this version emphasizes that voice remains the same even as the “Sad winds” blowing from the Northern mills have “drug my people/ Down from th’ hills” (18-19).

Like the changes in “Factory Wind”’s diction, the reason for West’s most major adjustment to “Anger’s Lullaby,” the second poem appearing in both Clods and Proletarian Literature involves adjusting the poem for its new audience. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a mother to her child whose father has been imprisoned for labor activity in a county jail. In Proletarian Literature the poem’s title, “Southern Lullaby,” spoke about the South to outsiders. In first ire-raising section of Clods of Southern Earth the title changes to “Anger’s Lullaby” and speaks directly to Southerners about their lives in 1946. West also drops the entire fourth stanza which asks the babe to “eat well” to become a “Bolshevik” (13, 14). But the tension between protecting the child from rage versus encouraging rebellion remains the same in both versions: “Hate, little baby, hate deep,/ You mustn’t know my fears” (from Clods 13-14).

Although the poems in Clods of Southern were revised for a new audience and period, given West’s long relationship with publishing in Communist papers and magazines, the praise of The Daily Worker’s literary editor, Mike Gold, is not surprising. Gold begins his review by denouncing the reactionary Eugene Talmadge who had just won the 1946 gubernatorial election (discussed in Part IX), which his supporters celebrated by the lynching of four Negro men and one woman. In contrast, Gold states that West demonstrates most Georgians’ anger at those murders: West is a “new people’s poet” who conducts a “defense of the red-neck Georgia cracker, an elucidation of him as a confused and struggling human figure who is capable of all love and humanity.” But discussing West’s poetry, Gold describes his countenance: “a tall man
. . . with deep set eyes . . . [and the] rugged eye brows, strong chinbone, the high-cheek bone, powerful nosebone of a mountaineer.” For Gold—as for others outside the literary field—a man’s image was an argument for why his poems would be worth reading. While few in Georgia may have read Gold’s words, he had struck the keynote: Talmadge was returning, and Don West was standing in the way. National progressives, radicals, and Communists rallied around such calls to block indigenous fascism. While not mentioned in reviews published in Georgia, West’s opposition to Talmadge was central, as we will see, to how the poet sought to mobilize political capital.

On August 30th, The Atlanta Constitution published an article about West’s new professorship at Oglethorpe, emphasizing that his book “broke a publishing record when 13,000 copies were sold” before the book was released (“Poet Don West”). The article explains West’s background as a rural Georgian who frankly declared that “he comes from stock commonly known as ‘pore white trash.’” This article represents the excitement that Atlanta and the South was feeling at West’s success as seen in reviews from The Mobile Register, The Atlanta Journal, and The Chattanooga Times. Not surprisingly, the brief review in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare’s Southern Patriot held, “Georgia gave us Talmadge. It is comforting in facing the future to know that it also gave us Gov. Arnall and now Don West” (“Books in Brief”).

Indeed, Charles Boni, in an open letter distributed to friends, reported that over 1,100 copies of Clods of Southern Earth had been sold at Atlanta’s largest bookstore during a book-signing (Byerly 303). West was a phenomena whose long training as an orator from the pulpit and the factory-floor now manifested in his presence at readings, or maybe his presence as a poetry reader had manifested in his oratory: the causal sequence is hard to pin down. In a letter to the editor, Atlantan S. T. Capps, who had read West and heard West read, wrote in to The Atlanta Constitution to testify that “the book took hold of me” as if it was “the earth of his North Georgia mountains speaking.” The full experience of West, Capps explained, was only to be had when he read his poetry aloud: “there you can see for yourself how he moves his listeners with emotion and stirs their minds.” Capps continues to praise West’s ability to “reach people who are not ordinary readers of poetry” and ends with a bit of poetic praise: “Like the pungent

---

13 Eugene Talmadge was elected governor of Georgia on four separate occasions: 1932, 1934, 1940, and 1946. During his governorship from 1939 to 1942, Eugene Talmadge oppressed the freedom of speech of those academics who spoke in support of Negroes, which resulted in the disaccreditation of all public Georgia’s universities and colleges. Governor Arnall (1943-1946) quickly regained accreditation and went on to abolished Georgia’s poll-tax.
infusion of his native tiger alder it is good for what ails us, and as this pungent ‘yarb’ tea cures our physical ailments, it will help to clear up the spiritual eczema of our times.” As we will see, Capps’s letter was just one of many that spoke for the population whose experience clearly coincided with West’s.

Such tribute was not at first reflected by Harold Martin, who wrote about Georgia culture in his columns for The Atlanta Constitution—the same paper in which Ralph McGill would red-bait West in 1948. Unlike other reviewers, Martin begins by quoting the entire three stanzas of the poem “Funeral Notes” (21) about the burial of West’s sharecropper father, who “ripped up/ The sad red earth” to feed his family and who had “his life dripped down/ in the furrow” (“Toil and Hunger” 22, lines 4-5, 6-7). Yet, like the fisher king, his farmer’s body melded with the earth—“my Dad is there/ Where the grass grows/ And cockle-burrs bristle” (“Funeral Notes” 21, lines 14-16)—only to return “in March days/ When seeds sprout” or in autumn at “picking time” when he comes “Bursting out” from “The white speckled stalks” (17-18, 20, 23, 21). Given such a noble beginning, the poem is sadly republished without regards to its line breaks, turning the original lingering and scratching 23-line poem into a lumbering twelve lines. Perhaps this layout reflects lack of space and Martin’s assertion that the poems are “strange”: “They say what they mean . . . West never sacrifices meaning to melody. He hits, hard, with a blunt and heavy hammer” (“New, Angry Voice”). Martin notes the focus on the “lives of common people” but writes that the book is “hard to evaluate . . . in any respect save of [West’s] anger and sincerity.” He finishes with a detraction: while the “average man in the street, moved by a nebulous liberalism, will feel there is truth in his writing . . . the picture [West] paints is truer 30 years ago than now.” Moreover, like the reviewer from The New York Times, he asserts that even though West dares to speak for “the sharecropper, the mill worker, the man down in the mine,” they will “repudiate him when he says the black man has an equal right to economic opportunity.” But in the next weeks, Martin found himself inundated by reader mail arguing with his political and poetic analysis.

In Martin’s column a few weeks later, he grants a retraction: “I was surprised to learn that West is a controversial figure, much loved and deeply hated.” The hatred was expressed by a man from Lula who opposed West’s work as superintendent and complained that West was mentioned in Communist literature, had published a newspaper with “Communistic leanings,” and published articles “in the East” that gave “an untrue picture of the South.” This reaction—
for which the FBI had investigated West during the War—foreshadowed the fate West would meet as he forged ahead in Georgia politics. But letter after letter praised West. The Postmaster at Lula—one of West’s most staunch supporters—wrote that the “poems help many of us to see ourselves . . . [and] quicken our conscious and sharpen our zeal to make a better Georgia and a better South.” A reverend wrote in and explained to Martin that “there are thousands and thousands of workers who will tell you that paternalism has been replaced by exploitation and bitter hate.” Similarly, a teacher’s letter shared that West’s “stories are as true now as they were in his youth,” even if Southerners believed things like that happen only in the slums of Chicago, New York City, or “the gutted areas of Europe.” After considering these opinions, Martin agrees, “Don West is one of us. He knows what’s wrong with us. . . . The trouble with us is there are too many folks who say that Georgia is the finest State in the United States and Georgians are the noblest people, and that anybody who questions that is a traitor to his homeland.” Martin’s insight would prove prophetic for West’s future in Georgia.

Part III: Hidden Readers

The number of copies that Clods of Southern Earth had sold, which was often noted in the reviews, was essential to garnering mainstream credence. What the reviewers failed to ask was to whom these copies had been sold. We have seen that New Masses was one central purchaser and node of distribution, and in Parts VI-VIII I discuss the book’s most public audience, members of Southern Conference for Human Welfare, with whom West would play out his political moves in 1947 and 1948. Yet 8,000 of the 14,000 copies sold in the first year were purchased and distributed by the People’s Institute for Applied Religion (“Boni & Gaer” and Williams, Letter to President 1 Oct. 1946).

The People’s Institute for Applied Religion (PIAR) was founded in 1940 by Claude Williams, West’s fellow student under the guidance of Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt. PIAR sought to realize democracy and equality (of wealth and race) via the radicalizing power of religious literacy to join together the tenant farmer, the impoverished family farmer, and the working class. West served as a board member and organizer for PIAR, and Williams acted as West’s political confident in 1946 and 1947.¹⁴ No scholarly work has been conducted on PIAR;

¹⁴ For instance, at the start of World War II, West was a pastor for four small Congregationalists churches in Southern Georgia, and he had one sermon, “Blessed Are the Peace Makers,” reprinted as a pamphlet for PIAR. The
however, in the 1970s two articles were published in *Southern Exposure* that recounted its work. One author recounts that PIAR’s purpose “was to work with the natural leadership of the South’s poor, always in an interracial setting; to engage them on their own terms, in light of their own experience and their own religious world view; to translate their religious perspective into the need for collective struggle for economic justice; and to develop concrete leadership skills in union organizing” (Troy and Williams 48). PIAR brought together groups of some fifty people for three to ten days, uniting whites and blacks—many of whom Williams recounts “had never sat down for a meal together” (qtd. 48)—in common learning. Literacy levels were low, and even those who could read were not prepared to delve into tracts on economics and politics. Yet Williams desired to educate them in just such knowledge. West’s book proved the perfect pedagogical tool for this radical literacy, which can be demonstrated through showing their similarity to carefully-crafted posters that PIAR used to convey its theories of the social, moral, and economic order.

The posters translated stories and concepts from the Bible into contemporary content via pictorial representation and precise language (Troy and Williams 49-50). For instance, one poster, “The New Earth” presented an equation: “Victory + Faith – World = Righteousness” or “Victory is the faith that overcomes the world and equals righteousness” (50). Each word served as an acronym for key terms and supporting Bible verses:

- **F** – ELLOWSHIPPING WITH ONE ANOTHER (1 John 1:7)
- **A** – DMONSIHING (Rom. 15:14)
- **I** – NSTRUCTING (2 Tim. 3:16,17)
- **T** – RUSTING ONE ANOTHER (James 2: 1-4)
- **H** – ELPING ONE ANOTHER (Gal. 6: 2-5) (50)

On the one hand, considered bluntly, Williams taught Marxism through religion:

---

15 Scattered references to Williams and PIAR are made in Anthony Dunbar’s *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets: 1929-59* and John Egerton’s *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South.*
I know that Mark is not Marx . . . I know that Luke is not Lenin and that Joe Stalin is not Jesus Christ. But these men all have one thing in common—they were and they are all despised by a common enemy. I speak as a devotee of religion, and therefore as a radical. There is enough dynamite in the Bible to . . . blow institutional religion with its Wall Street investments into primordial stardust. (qtd. in Belfradge 272)

On the other hand, Williams had developed a system that was capable of both uniting, responding to, and guiding America’s lower and working classes.16

At the core of Williams’s work was the belief that behind spokesmen, like Christ’s disciples in the Scriptures, rested organizations which were formed when people came together in common struggle to improve their lives. In Williams’s view, the work of organizers was to show that “people are not isolated individuals but social beings who are inevitably bound to one another. They do not live in a world where spiritual and material are separate. The intangible meanings of life are to be found, here and now, in our daily actions” (Troy and Williams 52). Given PIAR’s goal of catalyzing unity and reforming circumstance through unionization and common action, Clods of Southern Earth served as an excellent educational device.

Working with images and symbols rendered in accessible language and form, West’s poems articulated the interconnection between people that Williams hoped to reveal. When the poems are working at their best—with the right reader, in the right circumstances—they seem to dissolve the distinctions between region and race, between culture and nature, between self and group. Some of West’s earliest poetry addressed the religious issues that continued to inform his moral resistance. In 1933, West published “I Have Seen God” (52) and “Prayer” (99) in The Christian Century. In Clods of Southern Earth, “I Have Seen God” operates with two other poems (“Lord, I Prayed” [31] and “Preachers” [54]) in the first section to muster support for the Social Gospel: religious belief should manifest in earthly action. Beginning with a description of God in the weather and earth, “I Have Seen God” insists that God is manifest in matter:

I’ve seen God—

In the tired eyes

16 Williams had first developed this system when organizing sharecroppers in Arkansas and Mississippi for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU).
Of a factory worker
Bound by chains of circumstance. (10-14)

Similarly, the dramatic lyric, “Lord, I Prayed,” explores the consciousness of an impoverished figure who is bound by his situation and is trying to discern who is morally responsible for his actions. The poem is composed in couplets, synthesizing William Blake, Langston Hughes, and the Blues:

Lord, I prayed, and I prayed well,
Why send a poor man down to hell?

Lord I prayed, now don’t you know
A poor man’s sin is bound to show!

A poor man’s sins, Lord, can’t you see
Are tragic fruits of a poisoned tree! (1-2, 5-6, 9-10)

Opposing those conditions—that Jesus is to be found in the impoverished who are more easily prone to and blamed for sin—stands the poem “Preachers” (54-55). Written as a choral apostrophe, the poem takes a similar stance toward religion as “They Take Their Stand” assumes towards poetry: “Preachers” condemns the “platitudes” spouted by preachers from “a limousine,” who don’t know the “toil-racked bodies/ and gaunt eyes hard and keen” of “working folks” (1, 6, 13-14, 11). The working-person chorus in the poem speaks out against those preachers “Who rant and rave and yell/ About a poor man’s sinning” (18-19). They reclaim religion in the name of struggle:

So Wake up, pious parsons,
We miners can’t abide
That you soil the name of a Toiler
Who hung with a spear-rent side! (21-4)

Untwining the contradictions instilled in working-class moral systems, West’s poems investigate the systems’ moral foundations and re-weaving them in a system that focuses attention on the circumstances of daily life. In “Prayer” (99), the narrator admits that people say he never prayed in church but then shares his sharp-eyed vision of the rural working-world:
I saw a silver spray
Bathing a slender birch.
Saw sycamore trees
With white leaves caressing
Pools colored like the sea,
Deep blue and blushing.

[And an] old farmer working
Digging weeds from his corn,
Heard a child singing
At the break of morn . . .

Feeling these, I bowed and stayed,
But they say I never prayed! (3-8, 13-18, ellipsis in original)

For West, prayer was realized through touching and being responsible to the things in one’s immediate world. The truly religious, that is, “challenge men to strive/ To bring a fuller kingdom near” (“Prophet” 137, 3-4).

At the end of the book, after having almost completed the journey of awareness and transfiguration, West includes several poems dedicated to close friends who had long struggled for justice. Williams must have quietly waited for those attending PIAR to read “For Claude Williams” (144), which encapsulates the transformative experience of the Social Gospel:

Oh, he who clambers through the stars
And plants his toe on highland peak
Shall not again be satisfied
To Tramp the level waters seek.

For he who tastes life deep and hard
Shall not trip lightly upon its rim,
But surging strong against its barbs
There’ll be no quiet peace for him. . . . (entire poem quoted)
When the participants of PIAR woke up to their suffering and the possibility of its resolution through social action, Williams and West succeed. Yet other than the testimony of Williams’s biographer Cedric Belfrage, the methods used are difficult to pinpoint because such work was undertaken with those who had low levels of written literacy. Nevertheless, Williams and PIAR did distribute and use West’s book. But this dissemination only became possible through an important revolution in publishing—the development of the low-cost paperback book.

In 1927, Charles Boni had initiated the first paperbacks (Tebbel 7). He produced a high-quality line, but the low-cost paperback revolution did not begin until 1939 with the Pocket Book series whose low prices and high sales resulted from cheaper paper and printing, distribution via newspaper wholesalers, and tasteful design (7). While the hardback version of Clods of Southern Earth sold for two dollars, the paperback version sold only for one dollar. This allowed the whole-sale prepublication price to drop under 30 cents, and the post-publication price to remain at 37.5 cents per copy, with 7.5 cents going to West’s royalty (West, Letter to Claude Williams, 18 Nov. 1946). It is of some irony that the book’s value in the popular literary field increased due to sales that resulted from great economy on the part of the publishers who discounted the book to bulk buyers such as PIAR, SCHW, CIO, and New Masses. The publisher’s savvy was also demonstrated in their decision not to include the blurb that Williams provided.

Williams’s blurb too directly proclaimed a militant posture toward well-known Southern political leaders such as Bilbo and Talmadge (“Don West Sings”). William’s declared, “Don West is enemy #1 of that Old South of belchers, bigots, and blighters.” “[B]orn of hatred against hate,” West’s poems would promote bonds of “militant unity” in the “spirit of righteousness” as they “lash out like two-edged swords at hypocrisy and intolerance.” If such a blurb had flared forth from the back of Clods’s cover, one can imagine the unkindly (or even bellicose) reaction of mainstream reviewers, whom the book’s design, matter, and poems had been carefully crafted to sway.

Part IV: The Material and Matter

Reviews demonstrated how readers evaluated the poems in light of the information on and in the book that frames the poems. Part IV considers how Clods of Southern Earth’s introduction, matter, and cover lobbied readers to read the poems and to read them in a particular
way. Such apparatus carries perhaps as much weight in the book’s reception as the poems themselves because readers consider the poems through the interpretive tools provided by that material. West prefaces the poems with a twelve-page introduction followed by the poem “Look Here, America,” which together served as an invitation to the reader and familiarized with them West’s defense of poetry. The introduction forwards the reasons that a reader, who probably were intimidated by reading poetry, might brave the 133 pages of poetry that follows.

West writes in a conversational tone of direct, familiar address, speaking to the reader as “you.” He employs tropes and conventions that any Southern reader would instantly recognize, such as Southern heritage and family. West’s inversion of these tropes shows that he knows how they work but that he also thinks they tell mistruths, which he then corrects by sharing stories and experiences that the trope would normally exclude. Those revisions evoke material from the store-house about the target audience’s common experience. That is, West attempts to persuade a wide range of readers of their common substance. As Kenneth Burke proposes, “consubstantiation” (Rhetoric 20-21) is a central technique of rhetorical persuasion: “You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his” (55). West’s introduction provides a case study of how to prepare the way for the poems in his collection to do so.

The introduction begins, “ONCE upon a time . . .” and then talks about how stories and poems were once mainly about the noble “aristocracy” and “omitted” consideration of “the misery of masses of peasants, slaves, or workers” (1). West employs the tropes of story telling and fairy tales, which posture the reader as a child-listener, but he then explains the limitations of that approach. West proceeds to share how contemporary poetry also exiles most readers: “You may be one of those Americans who say you don’t like poetry anyhow. No one can blame you for that. I’ve often felt that way too” (1). Therein, in short, direct sentences, West acknowledges, forgives, and identifies with his readers. He goes on to share how most poets use “obscure and ‘subtle’ private language” because they write for “the little clique of the ‘highly literate’ elite” who are oblivious to the “dirt and misery” and “beauty and heroism of common folk life” (1-2). Speaking desire, West writes, “You say you want a poem with its roots in the earth . . . and perhaps a poem that may sometimes show the reasons for heart ache and sorrow of plain folks and sometimes point the way ahead. I don’t blame you. I sort of feel that way too” (2). West wins a range of readers through the use of tentative, open recognition in his diction:
“perhaps,” “sometimes,” “sort of.” Seeking to disestablish the alienation of cultured authority that threatens to lecture about what is correct, West admits his own lack of knowledge and uses generalities to allow a range of readers to link their experience with his introduction.

West’s rhetoric strives to invite and to include (rather than lecturing to or arguing with) the reader who has felt exiled from literary culture, which sets their eyes on the stage to watch and think about his point of view. In short, West masterfully employs maneuvers that his target readers—lower- and working-class whites—used in their own lives to maximize consensus. Of course, not all of West’s readers were lower class or white. But by “reading over the shoulder” of this audience, African Americans could appreciate recognition of their repression and discern the common cause, circumstances, and culture of the lower- and working-classes. At the same time, progressive intellectuals would feel validated in their allied work and struggles because they were becoming even more familiar with the lives of those with whom they worked.

Before arriving at the introduction’s thesis—that white and black lower-class Southerners needed to join with each other in order to break the South’s class system—West gains further validation by sharing his varied work experiences. West’s resume spans geographic and labor locales: a preacher (in Ohio and Georgia), a coal miner (in Kentucky), a textile worker (in North Carolina), a radio commentator (in Georgia), a deck hand (on the Mississippi), a sailor, farmer, a farm owner, and now a superintendent of schools. Only after this list does he forward his first argument: “And I’ve wondered why it always seems that the folks who work less get more and those how work more get less” (2). To see where he got that “strange notion,” he explores his “family background” from “an old Southern family”—a trope he turns on its head, for his readers expect to hear a story about those “professional Southerners who claim to be kind to Negroes” (2-3). Instead, West claims to be “more Southern than that” and passes along that his “folks” wore “jean pants” and “linsey petticoats.” Some of his ancestors were the first to settle Georgia, and “some were already settled when the white ones came” (3). West gains authority by identifying his ancestors as working poor, as colonialists, and as American Indian.

He quickly upsets the trope of the ideal colonialist, sharing that one branch of the family tree consists of “jail-birds” who “couldn’t raise money to pay their debt”—a point which would gain further validation with readers from the South’s lower classes. Those ancestors, he imparts, arrived with “a man named Oglethorpe” who convinced the “old King” to allow importation of criminals to be “‘arrow-fodder’ for the Indians” and “a nice buffer of protection for the more
blue-blood settlers” (3-4). After that West employs the family boast, a trope which he again reverses, declaring that “There’s nary a slave owner up my family tree” (4). With grim humor he then unleashes yet another inversion. Mentioning that families don’t like to talk about how an ancestor was a “'horse thief,’” he agrees that Americans want better: they want to tell about an ancestor who was bold enough to “steal a continent, a nation; steal the lives and labor of thousands of black men and women in slavery; steal the wages of underpaid workers; steal a railroad, a bank” (4). And one of the victims of that thievery was West’s own ancestor.

West relates how one remote grandfather was the child of “a white slave (an indentured servant) in Carolina and a kind hearted old Indian of the Cherokees in north Georgia” (5). He tells their fatal love-story (reminiscent of then popular romance novels) where they became pregnant, escaped, were pursued, and how the Cherokee died so that “the girl” might escape and live as part of the “Indian settlement around Tullulah falls in north Georgia” (5). West’s blood was American by virtue of being progeny of pre-America Americans. He then asserts that this story is not abnormal but shared by “the real men and women of the South”: the “'pore white trash’” who were taught by the whites from “the big houses” to say “the hateful word ‘nigger,’” just as Hitler taught Aryan Germans to speak of Jews (6).

He next draws on his life as a “hill-billy” (that third group of poor Southerners): “My folk were mountain people” (6). West uses his familiarity with mountain landscape to demonstrate how he is one with the land, and he describes how the Cartecay “crawls and gurgles” over “the cataracts and through the fords” since “nobody knows when.” Drawing upon the associations with Appalachia in magazines, novels, and movies, West assures his readers that they are “plain people to whom it is natural to ask a stranger to stay all night.” The ethics of kindness, indeed, are what West claims drove them to the mountains to “escape the slave system.” They were “fearless and freedom loving” people who had “escaped persecution in the old country” only to be confronted with “the ever-encroaching wave of slave-holding planters in the lowlands” (7). Through the hard work of making a life in the mountains, they escaped the “[d]isease, starvation, and illiteracy” of those whites “forced to live in the hard, unfertile regions of the South” (8). A perfect description of one audience West sought to mobilize.

West proceeds to show that many settlers in Georgia were “bitterly opposed to the whole institution of slavery.” He quotes letters from Rev. Oglethorpe in 1776 and an anti-slavery resolution proposed by “the District of Darien in the Colony of Georgia” at the first American
Against these ideas of “freedom and justice,” the blue-bloods established “a ‘culture,’ an aristocracy reared upon the institution of slavery, built upon the bent backs of human beings bent and sold like cattle,” which created misery and poverty among those four-million whites who did not own slaves (9-10). At this point—having done what he might to gain his reader’s ear—West opens full throttle. Those three percent who owned slaves put themselves over all others: “Culture, education, and wealth were limited to this narrow oligarchy of a few hundred families” (10). West then invokes the poll tax and contemporary structures of “wealth and privilege”: “The local and state governments were virtually executive committees of slave masters.” Against such exclusion stood the poor communities in “these Southern mountains” who, West claims, refused to fight in the Civil War for the “‘lost cause’” of slavery.

Moving to his own life, the following section describes the poverty faced by West’s family in “the Devil’s Hollow region . . . in north Georgia” where days seemed like “an iron fist mauling them in the face” (10). His parents had nine children, three of whom died young, with those who survived being “progressive thinkers” (again affirming associations with the white mountaineer). West goes on to list the colleges he has attended—“Vanderbilt, Chicago University, Columbia, Oglethorpe, University of Georgia, in European schools”—showing that he could move from mountain roots to succeed in American education (11). In a brilliant rhetorical maneuver, West dismisses higher education (even as he still realizes the value his readers would give it) and insists, “real education has been beaten into me by the ever lasting toil and hunger I’ve seen” in the struggles for people in mines, textiles factories, and share-cropping. He states that “this education” of experiencing “prisons and jails for innocent men” instills in people the desire “never to rise upon the shoulders of others” but to work together so “the great mass of plain people can also have a richer life.” He begins to draw the prose section to a close by reasserting, “I love the South.” His roots “are sunk deeply” there, and his father died when he brought his family down from the mountains to pursue sharecropping in the cotton lowlands.

West’s ancestors stand at the headwaters of America (both colonial and aboriginal) and have died in the desperation of modern life. Thus, he concludes by offering the reader his poems: “So I pass these poems on to you who may care enough to read,” inviting the embrace of these “little pieces of life—and death—picked up along the way.” This act of physical giving, of communal holding, of care-taking is then manifested by the poem on the facing page, the only poem in the book entirely set in urgent italic script, “Look Here, America” (13-14).
The title’s phrase, “Look Here, America,” is a locution directed at a listener who needs to pay attention to something about which the speaker feels strongly. The poem begins by recognizing that “America” and “victory” live in “sharecroppers, tenants/ Black men and Crackers” (lines 1-4). In short lines, West is insistent about the need to learn: “And you must listen/ And look/ And think deep . . .” (4-6, ellipsis in original). He replaces earlier suggestions and generalities with a language of gentle imperative. In the second stanza, West forecasts a future where a “Georgia Cracker” would proudly “clasp the hand of a black man/ And say:/ Brother!” (12, 13-15). After that hopeful instigation, West repeats the title, “Look here, America,” and pulls the reader back to the page after such a radical consideration of interracial brotherhood (16). “Bend your head toward me,” he calls, listen to these “tales,” and touch these “little pieces/ Of twisted life” (17, 20, 21-22). The poem concludes in a dwindling voice in the final stanza set on the next page. America, West implores, “must” look because even he

[ . . .] a Georgia Cracker—
One of your own mongrels—
Am grieved
By looking
At what I’ve seen . . . (27-31, end ellipsis original in text)

The facing page quietly introduces Part One’s title, which deepens the reader’s consideration as it brews together the threat of purposeful death with the resulting vacancy: “NO ANGER IN A DEAD MAN” (15). But before reading the introduction, readers had to first decide that the book was worth opening because they were convinced to do so by either what they heard about it or by the information presented on the book’s cover.

In addition to its title, the first feature of a book that draws value is the author’s name. In 1946, what did people know about West? He was not recognized as a poet in the mainstream or in the academy. In the mid-thirties, his poetry had appeared in venues such as New Masses, The Daily Worker, The Christian Century, and the Negro Liberator, a CP journal whose African-American audience understood it to be a “Negro” journal (Smethurst 39). In the late thirties and into the forties, West published in Mountain Life and Work, the magazine put out by the Council of Southern Mountain Workers. But unlike other poetry books, Clods of Southern Earth did not include information about the venues in which West had published—a purposeful deletion to minimize the associations that readers had with those titles. The goal was to maximize readers
who had developed a negative judgment of literary publication (or against those magazines in which West had published). But another effect of that deletion was to demonstrate to literary critics that West had not been “consecrated” by the editors of literary journals, the first line of public authority and “symbolic sanction” in the literary field (Bourdieu 121).

The decision not to mention where poems had been previously published along with West’s lack of publication in mainstream literary venues, in little magazines, and in academic quarterlies, was a big strike against him in the eyes of the reviews published in *The New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Herald-Tribune Review of Books*. What gained *Clods of Southern Earth* a read by critics in those venues was neither West nor his poems; the book gained attention because of its prepublication sales and the reputation of Charles Boni—whose canon-making work twenty-years earlier was by then legendary—who had chosen to issue the book as the first publication of Boni and Gaer. While a portrait of literary innocence emptied the book of alienating associations with high-culture for most non-literary readers, it began the book’s exile in the eyes of the literary establishment, which largely evaluated poets based the venues in which they had published.

West was known to many in the popular-front audience, and if he was not considered mainly as a poet, it was because those who knew him had met him either as an organizer in the mid-thirties, whose voice was heard on radios and who gave speeches at action-rallies, or as a preacher for the Congregationalists, where he led churches in Ohio and Georgia from 1938 to 1942. West’s most recent incarnation was as the superintendent of a rural school system in the hills of northern Georgia in Lula. There he had put the students in charge of discipline, built vocational education, validated and empowered teachers, and brought in the Farmer’s Union to help set up processing facilities so the school could be in service to the community. Profiles were written about his work in *The American Teacher* (May 1944), *Readers Scope* (January 1946), and *Seventeen* (June 1946). In 1945, he was offered the lead professorship in rural education at the University of Georgia, if he chose to complete his PhD. Thus, when *Clods of Southern Earth* came out, West was best known as a leading and innovative educator in rural

---

Southern schools, where the problem of illiteracy and minimal education had been highlighted by the Roosevelt administration.

The biography on the jacket’s back flap highlights West’s varied working-class experience as a “farm boy, textile worker, coal miner, deckhand, lineman.” These beginnings are juxtaposed to his education at Vanderbilt, his work as a preacher, his job as Superintendent (which the bio highlights “attracted the attention of educators around the country” for its focus on training students in democracy), his 1945 Rosenwald fellowship, and his new professorship at Oglethorpe University. This biographic statement demonstrates West’s credentials as an organic intellectual, highlighting his connection to his roots, showing his determined self-education and travel to Europe, and ending with his return to his “native Georgia.” To fully establish his presence, the back cover (on the paper version) or jacket (on the hardcover version) presents a large photo of West in an open front shirt and sweater, his eyes deep and shadowed but wrinkled with smiling. A bare tree trunk rises behind him. The decision to print the photo announces the publishers’ intention to play upon West’s demeanor as an intellectual who is down-home, worn, joyful, and white. The significance of the biographical synopsis and of West’s photo are demonstrated by their reiteration in numerous reviews.

For instance, the review of Clods of Southern Earth in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, “Georgia Poet Points to Plight of Downtrodden,” ends with the following description:

Don West, trail blazer in education and torch bearer in the South’s dark social scene, faces the future with a crusader’s zeal, tempered by a scholar’s understanding. All that he is and all that he has are in the fight. At 36, six feet three, 195 pounds, he is as physically fit as when he was as an all-around college athlete. Life has battered him some, for he has chosen to take it at its hardest. His blue eyes under shaggy brows are clear and steady and his jaw is strong.

(Behymer)

A photo at the top center of the page shows West batting at a typewriter and dressed in a tie and long sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled back. At the end of World War II, sacrifice, hard work, honesty, and physicality were statements of worthy participation—particularly in light of the trials of trust to come over Communism, when Americans had already begun to worry about identifying fascists in their midst.
Advancing the sense of genuine native-intellect, the first sentence on the cover’s back flap announced that this was West’s “first book,” when in reality it was his fifth. At 147 pages with 88 poems, Clods of Southern Earth silently functioned more as West’s new and collected poems. 61 of those poems were reprinted from his first collections. West’s first book, Crab-Grass, was published by The Art Print Shop at Tevecca College in Nashville, Tennessee, while he was still a student in the School of Religion at Vanderbilt in 1931. It is unclear where or who published the second book, Deep, Deep Down Living, which is mentioned on the title page of his third book. Handset in Virginia and published by Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, the third book, Between the Plow Handles (1932), runs 32 pages (so is really a finely crafted chapbook). The fourth, Toil and Hunger (1940), came out with the Hagglund Press in San Benito, Texas. This book reprinted thirteen poems from Crab-Grass and Between the Plow Handles as well as Jesse Stuart’s introduction to Crab-Grass. Although Stuart and West knew each other well when they attended Lincoln Memorial College and Stuart had been West’s best man, they had taken very different directions (see Chapter 2, Part VII). Stuart was the best-known author from Kentucky in the 1930s and 1940s, and West shows his marketing sense by reprinting Stuart’s words of approval. Stuart’s 361-page book of sonnets, Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow, recounted life in the Kentucky mountains and was greeted with national acclaim in 1934. But West showed his disapproval with Stuart in a poem that originally appeared in Toil and Hunger as “For Jesse Stuart” and was reprinted without Stuart’s name as “Lost Leader” (32) in Clods of Southern Earth:

Why does he mumble to himself
The praises he loves to hear
When all around are mountain men
Who toil with hunger near? (5-8)

West harvested and revised poems from his previous collections for the new task at hand. One important way to judge how West and his publishers sought to mobilize value is to examine how they forecasted their audience’s taste based on how poems were revised from previous publication. At times these decisions were stylistic and structural; at others, they were a direct decision about minimizing or maximizing West’s identity as a mountaineer or of changing or deleting mention of his connections with leftist organizations. So while he appeared as a

---

18 This count does not include poems from Deep, Deep Down Living, of which no copy could be located.
beginner (a further devaluation in the eyes of the literary establishment), his book was a compilation designed to influence readers who would value him more because this was his first book. One can hear the stories of the mountaineers’ native intelligence and ability with language—if not with the formal tools of academic literacy—ringing in the background.

For all its invocation of stereotype, the front cover is no less purposeful. A New York Time’s review claims that West was not speaking to locals but merely employing international leftist stereotypes: “It is a romantic, simplified South which will be readily recognized by every schoolboy from Moscow to Vladivostok, but it will have several features which will bewilder most Southerners, white and black” (Burger). The book jacket does seem to illustrate knee-jerk stereotypes: enwrapped by hills, a stark cabin rests behind a denuded tree with gnarled limbs clutching at the air. The image of this depleted cabin marks the book as being about the mountains and the struggle for survival in rural America. In comparison to the cabin in front, which is shrouded by the barren tree, West’s body on the back cover seems to support the tree.

Unlike other poetry books, Clods of Southern Earth is punctuated with three high-contrast ink drawings, whose situational tropes would be recognized by the working class of the South. In them, angular figures are defined against shadow, reminiscent of graphic design in post-Revolution Russia. Harold Price, the artist who composed both the cover and interior images, was also active in far-left politics, producing images for the National Maritime Union’s opposition to the Taft-Hartley Act.¹⁹

On the jacket’s front flap, Henrietta Buckmaster provides a long paragraph of consecrating testimony: “Out of the South, out of its beauty, and its poverty, its good human beings and its sufferings has come again and again an intensely poignant magnificence . . . . Here in the stark, simple poetry of Don West, coming out of the very red earth of Georgia, is that compassion, that beauty, that identification with life . . . that molds our own hope.” In 1946 Buckmaster was known as the expert on the history of the underground railroad and the abolitionist movement. Her Let My People Go (published by Beacon) came out 1941 and was received with hails from both white and black reviewers.²⁰ With the praise by leading blacks and

¹⁹ Eventually passed in 1947 as the “Labor-Management Relation Act,” the Taft-Hartley forbade unions to force employees to become members, banned closed-shops, banned union-contributions to political campaigns, allowed employers to replace striking workers, and authorized the president to impose an 80-day delay in any strike that threatened national-security. (Barbash “Labor-Management”)

²⁰ In Let My People Go, Buckmaster not only carefully charts the history of the underground railroad and abolition but measures America’s success as a democracy based on the struggles of African Americans, whose story summons
her work with civil rights, Buckmaster’s consecration of West opened his work to liberal scholars, teachers, civil-rights activists, and educated readers—both black and white—throughout the country. Her authorization shows how the book was being called upon to influence the civil rights struggle in the CIO, the SCHW, and the PIAR.

After the title page come the appreciations. Reflecting my focus on the social life of poetry, West acknowledges, “Every good book has a lot of people mixed up in its making.” A two-page list of twenty-one names and explanations follows. Only the names of Langston Hughes and Carl Sandburg—influential writers whose work West acknowledges as having been “trail blazing” and filled with “beauty”—hold great meaning for the 21st-century reader, and they clearly orient the book as part of a tradition of writing dedicated to the political and social work of literature that recognizes the life of the working class. A more central actor in West’s life was Alva Taylor, whose name is prominently displayed on the next page in large outlined font: “To Alva Taylor/Teacher.” The exact set of connections leading to the publication of Don West’s work are yet to be established, but it is certain that Alva Taylor, to whom the book was so fervently dedicated, was a key player. Taylor served West as a mentor from the time they met at Vanderbilt in 1929 until Taylor’s death in 1957.

An intellectual and activist who began this professional life as a pastor, Taylor in later life served as a critical hub for labor, radical, religious, and political activists, but West first met Taylor in his capacity as a Professor of Ethics in Vanderbilt’s School of Religion.21 In a 1956 tribute, West touched on what Taylor offered his students:

Beacon and Harpers both published the book, with Beacon’s last edition coming out in 1959. The most current edition was brought out by University of South Carolina Press in 1992. Validated by the leading black intellectuals, writers, and educators of her day, Buckmaster was not only known as a novelist, a historian, and an activist, but was a participant in the black community, and her articles appeared in the Negro Digest and Opportunity.21 See “Appendix N: The Founding of Highlander.” West graduated with his A.B. from Lincoln Memorial University in 1929, where he went to school with Jesse Stuart and James Still, the latter of whom West did not come to know until they both attended Vanderbilt. After LMU, West had gone in search of the next step and hitchhiked to Nashville to inquire about admissions to the Vanderbilt School of Education even though he could not pay tuition. West relates that he was assigned to coach basketball at “the Martha O’Brien Settlement house, which was right near Fisk University in the black ghetto” (Wigginton 70). Then he found what he was looking for: unlike Stuart and Still who both pursued graduate work in English, West discovered his salvation with Alva Taylor.
I was just a raw, green, gangling mountain boy from back in the Georgia hills. He was a professor of Christian Ethics and sociology. Like a lot of other young students, I was groping around—hungry, searching, hunting, looking. We didn’t know exactly what we were searching for, but some of us understood in a vague way that it was that elusive thing called “Truth.” (“Alva Taylor”)

West took every course with Taylor that he could, also attending seminars at Fisk, visiting settlement houses and slums, and becoming active in labor problems and strikes. West’s fellow students Claude Williams and Howard Kester, who helped form and lead the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, would go on to become leading labor and religious activists in the south. Alva Taylor, West relates, “made us hungry. He made us want to know why.”

A minister for the Disciples of Christ, Taylor struggled to promote the social gospel and led careful campaigns documenting the abuse of strikers earlier in his career. At Vanderbilt, Taylor taught Social Ethics for the School of Religion. Four professors in Vanderbilt’s School of Religion (VSR) had lost their jobs during the depression, so to protect his own, Taylor attempted to keep a low profile. In 1934 to 1935, his friends—who Taylor said included “not only students and ministers, but also Negroes, labor unions, Jews, and Progressive businessmen” (qtd. in Harbison 258)—raised the money for his salary. However, in May 1936, Taylor was informed that Chancellor Kirkland and the trustees had abolished his chair in Social Ethics due to lack of money (263). Taylor had just turned 65. Faculty from the VSR, the Sociology Department, and the Chair of the Philosophy Department all asked that Taylor be retained, and a group of businessmen offered to secure his salary (264-65). Once the money had been raised, the Chancellor declared that he “could not allow outside donors to name the professors for chairs they supported” (265), so although 40% of the students in the VSR had majored with Taylor, he was released (269). Kirkland died the next year, but the trustees enforced his ban on Taylor, who had, paradoxically, raised more money for the VSR than any other faculty member. Of course, Taylor knew the real reason for his release was conflict with the Vanderbilt University power structure, who he said were taking “a stab at liberal social teaching” (qtd. 271).

Taylor was a man of committed action and connections, so in the 1940s Taylor had become a mediator for the U.S. Department of Labor because he was known as a trustworthy

---

22 For details on Taylor’s life work see “Appendix O: Alva Taylor.”
arbitrator by labor, companies, and the government—a rare combination. He had also been a consultant for Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was the earliest Federal program to monitor race relations in the workplace, and in 1944 was appointed as part of its staff, which The Atlanta Daily World—the only daily African-American newspaper in the country—cheered (365). In short, Taylor was a man of connections, belief, and action who not only modeled social action for West but used his influence to foster West’s participation. In 1944, as one of the only two non-CIO members in Tennessee to be asked, Taylor became a member of the CIO endorsed National Citizens Political Action Committee (407). No doubt it is by virtue of Taylor’s work with the CIO that he met the whirl-wind energies of Joseph Gaer, publicity director of the CIO’s national Political Action Committee. 23 Their mutual interest was reinforced by the relations between the CIO and the SCHW (the connection between which is discussed in Part VI).

Plumbing Taylor’s interconnections provides an important study of how West’s opportunity for efficacious publication was cultivated and how literature comes directly into political play. When West was taking classes at Columbia University in 1945 on his Rosenwald Fellowship, he met Joseph Gaer and Charles Boni, who were establishing a new publishing house on East 40th Street dedicated to political change. Without their vision and resources Clods of Southern Earth would never have been published, so I now turn to the history of their cultural work and its relationship to pluralism.

Part V: Boni and Gaer

Boni and Gaer’s focus quartet of subjects—progressive politics, fascism, the Jewish people, and Soviet Russia—reveals their goal as publishers: they sought to rally Americans to defend human integrity against the violence of fascism, which they felt to be a threat in the United States. Their choice to herald their project with Don West’s Clods of Southern Earth demonstrates that they believed his poetry—the only poetry they published—would speak to the core of progressive political hope in and from most American of places, the South. Through Boni and Gaer, West became part of a wide national movement to invigorate the American left.

23 As part of the American Federation of Labor, which unionized workers based on their craft and trade, the CIO was originally set up in 1935 as the Committee for Industrial Organization, which explored unionizing entire industries. In 1938, the AFL expelled the Committee, which became the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The primary conflict was over whether or not to unionize mass-production industries along craft (the specific trade) or industrial (the entire set of workers) lines. (Barbash, “AFL-CIO”)
While topical, West’s book also served the pragmatic purpose of uniting Southern progressive political coalitions—the CIO and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. In many ways, the story of the social life of his book is the story of how those two groups struggled to forward their projects from the time of Roosevelt’s death to the 1948 presidential election (discussed in Part VI).

At the beginning of the Cold-War in 1946, Charles Boni and Joseph Gaer joined together to form the publishing house of Boni and Gaer. Boni and Gaer would release 24 books by the end of 1948, all of which forwarded a strong brand of leftist politics. Boni had co-directed the publishing house of Boni and Boni, which brought out influential, cutting-edge cultural and literary books from 1924 to 1929, including Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (see Chapter One Part II for details). Gaer had been a Federal Writing Project field director, worked in the federal government, and became publicity director of the CIO’s Political Action Committee from 1943 to 1946. The press joined together Boni’s reputation and skill in literary publishing with Gaer’s expertise in crafting political material for the public.

Boni and Gaer’s list shows that Charles Boni was extending the radical cultural and political project that he and his brother had begun in their Washington Square Bookshop in 1913. Along with two books on progressive politics in American history and a biography of Henry A. Wallace, three of Boni and Gaer’s books addressed Soviet Russia; five addressed fascism (from Franco’s Spain and the Nuremberg trials to fascism in America with HUAC and Hollywood); two described the plight of Jews in Germany and their flight to Palestine; one 1948 book described the political situation in Palestine; three addressed science; one addressed crime in New York; and five were literary (West’s poems, two novels, and two collections of short stories). Of these books, the two big sellers in 1946 were *The Great Conspiracy Against Russia*, which sold 161,273 copies that year, and *Wind in the Olive Trees* (about Franco), which quickly sold 50,000 copies (“Boni & Gaer”). That these books sold so well in post-war America represents both the sales savvy of the publishers and the strength of leftist networks.

If Boni lent the press his prestige, Joseph Gaer lent it his political know-how. Described as a “[m]ystic as well as a man of affairs,” Gaer, who was also Jewish, was born in Bessarabia (a region in southeast Europe long in dispute between Romania and Russia) in 1897, where he lived until the age of thirteen when his family immigrated to Canada (Walbridge). Studying pre-med at the University of Minnesota in the early 1920s, he began publishing reviews and stories in the
Menorah Journal, where he published under his given name of Youssef Gaer. For Gaer the social order in the United States, unlike many countries, allowed for the advancement of people, regardless of their race or ethnic origins—even if advancement came from political organization and hard work.24

Gaer soon changed his name to Joseph and moved to southern California to pursue his literary writing.25 He taught extension literature courses for University of California from 1930 to 1935, and then became editor-in-chief of the New England Guides and chief field supervisor for the WPA Federal Writer’s Project from 1935 to 1939. In his work with the FWP, the “ubiquitous” Joseph Gaer chaffed his supervisor because he encouraged field workers to follow their own interests rather than guidelines from Washington (Mangione 111). Yet Gaer was never reprimanded because he was better able to secure the manuscripts from various state offices than any other staff member—of five manuscripts turned in on time, four came from the states with which Gaer worked (62, 92). Of slight build, Gaer was called on to solve FWP problems all over the nation (144, 188) and took initiative to publish authors whose work promoted the FWP’s vision (212). Because he had a pronounced accent (having immigrated as a teen), his supervisor kept him out of the Midwest and the South where his accent might lead strangers to believe him a radical (62-63). This worry was demonstrated when Gaer’s name was brought up before the

---

24 Gaer’s vision at that time is conveyed by his review of Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers, which he describes as her attempt to write “an authentic book about Jews.” But Gaer takes Yezierska to task for “tempting the palate of your typical American” with depictions of “half-savage” Jews from Russia who “possess savage and fierce tempers” and are “totally ignorant of the use of linen, bath-tubs, tooth-brushes, and the like American institutions” (“Her One Virtue” 105, 106). Gaer would continue to resist both stereotyping of Jews as well as the fear of prejudice against Jews in America. In his essay “The ‘Jewish Problem’” (1932), Gaer notes that one of the perennial topics of Jewish conversation is discrimination against them in America, which he calls a “verbal shadow-fight” (457). In an article filled with Jewish vernacular and inside jokes, Gaer claims, “the discrimination [against Jews] exists only in the imagination” (459) and proceeds to discuss education, social advancement, and religion. He concludes, “The Jewish masses do not adhere to their faith in order to gain the world’s respect, nor do they cast it off in order to avoid being penalized for it.” Rather, most hold to their beliefs and instead of saying “Nu?”, the “great majority of younger generation prefer to say, ‘Izatso?'” (462).

25 While in Calinfornia, Gaer published stories, one-act plays, and poetry in The Dial, New Masses, Bookman, and the Southwest Review (Walbridge). His first novels were then published, The Magic Flight (1926) and The Legend Called Meryon (1928), as were his texts on religion: The Burning Bush (1929), How the Great Religions Began (1930), which went through numerous printings, and The Unconquered (1932). Gaer’s self-understanding is illustrated in a collection of short stories that he edited, Our Lives: American Labor Short Stories (1948). The collection begins with Sherwood Anderson, who Boni and Liveright had published, and includes Theodore Dreiser, Erskine Caldwell (who had written the best-selling Tobacco Road and wrote You Have Seen Their Faces [see Chapter Two]), Mike Gold (literary editor of the Daily Worker), Langston Hughes, John Reed, John Steinbeck, and Thomas Wolfe. Tellingly, Gaer included one of his own stories because he saw himself in the tradition of those other authors who had made class struggle a focus of their literary work. How he came to that point in his career is an important inquiry since his life informs the goals of Boni and Gaer and, hence, West’s place in national culture.
Dies Committee in 1938, but conclusive testimony was given about his lack of Communist sympathies (303). Gaer’s work with the FWP paved his way into the federal government, and he served as consultant for the Farm Security Administration (1939-41) and as special assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury (1941-1944). During that time Gaer wrote four books promoting consumer and citizen education, which one reviewer for School and Society noted as “teaching social studies around significant national problems” in a concise manner and providing a needed resource to the “schools of the nation” (Crawford 375). Gaer’s work with the FWP in nurturing self-reflective awareness during the depression, his knowledge of the Federal government, and his desire to educate citizens led to his appointment as publicity director for the CIO’s new Political Action Committee (PAC).

The CIO’s PAC aimed to mobilize and educate voters in order to win seats for politicians who supported labor (Foster 5). To mobilize a broad voter-base who would support such a vision, the CIO sought to show people the commonality of need regardless of race, gender, or locality. To achieve that goal, Joseph Gaer authored pamphlets that can be read as a proto-type for the architecture of Clods of Southern Earth. To fully appreciate the book’s rhetorical strategy, one needs to understand how it extended and drew upon the influence of this pamphlet-genre, which the working class knew better than the design of contemporary poetry books. Not only did West’s book and the pamphlets share political goals, but they shared a common editor. Gaer tells the story of the CIO-PAC in The First Round: The Story of the CIO Political Action Committee (1944) where he also reprinted key pamphlets. Gaer’s first pamphlet was This is Your America, and its composition marked out the strategies on which West’s book would later draw.

Running 32 pages, This is Your America, orchestrates simple, clear writing with full page photos of landscape—natural and industrial—and facial portraits of men and women coded to show their ethnic backgrounds. The pamphlet begins by appealing to a wide range of work-identities—“a worker, earning your living honestly—/ . . . a farmer, a small business man, or a

26 The theory behind their 1944 election plan was set by the Textile Worker’s of America’s 1943 pamphlet called “Toward a New Day” (Foster 17). As explained by James Caldwell Foster in The Union Politic: The CIO Political Action Committee, “The CIO worker had to become a CIO voter; he had to become aware of the pressing political issues of the day and the injustices of the existing system” (17). The CIO worked to articulate a long-range political vision that would inform all moments of its operation. The core goal was to vote in representatives who would support an “international organization of nations” and a domestic order that could “guarantee full employment at reasonable wages aid for the farmer, taxation based upon the ability to pay, and an industrial system controlled by the ‘many’ (meaning nationalization)” (18).
housewife”—based on their common belief in America (Gaer, The First Round 19). Facing the image of a hydro-electric dam, the next page summarizes America as a nation of immigrants: “They came from England . . . . They came from Russia . . . . They came from Italy . . . . They also came from Mexico and South America . . .” (20-21). While acknowledging such diversity to garner reader-identification, the pamphlet’s explanation of pluralist politics comes in answer to the question “What is it is we love about America?” The question is repeated through the following pages, which show America’s natural beauty, the wealth of its urban expanses, and its vast resources (natural and industrial). But the answer comes on the pamphlet’s sixteenth page where an African-American man (the first portrait of a black seen) looks straight at it: “WE LOVE FREEDOM ABOVE ALL” (32). Asking “How can you tell an American?” (34), the pamphlet answers, “[anyone] who lives in the United States . . . and who believes in . . . the Democratic Way” (37). The “Democratic Way” is forwarded as belief in equality for “all men” regardless of “race, religion or nationality,” belief in freedom of speech and freedom from want, belief in equal opportunity for “men and women,” belief in educational opportunity, and belief “in the right of all workers to organize, protect and improve their conditions.” Those beliefs, the reader is then told, are realized by the duties of understanding and participating in Democracy “to create a more perfect union.” This point is emphasized by showing a photo of a black woman in a welder’s mask and a group of older white men on the facing page, who are clearly voting at a meeting by raising their hands (39, 42-43). The pamphlet ends by discussing the CIO’s role in the 1944 elections to realize those goals.27 While the CIO had few and ambiguous victors in the 1944 elections, PAC-CIO helped to instill in American workers a particular brand of positive pluralist rhetoric, upon which West’s book would capitalize.

Boni and Gaer reported to Publisher’s Weekly in February 1946 that they had “order for 8,000 copies [of Clods] on hand, as the book goes to press” (“Charles Boni”). While it is unclear exactly who ordered these copies, the sales were assuredly through the networks of social action within which West and Gaer participated, including the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, readers of New Masses, and the People’s Institute for Applied Religion. In a letter to

27 Not only were the goals articulated through the pamphlet’s crafting, but 450,00 copies of that pamphlet were distributed (307). Gaer authored ten other pamphlets including a manual on public speaking, use of radio broadcast, A Woman’s Guide to Political Action, The Negro in 1944 and This is the Church. Over two-million pamphlets, sixty-million leaflets, half-a-million posters, and fourteen-million fliers were distributed (307-09). Before the PAC-CIO began its work, Dr. Gallup estimated 37 million people would vote but raised his estimate to almost 60 million by election day, of which some 50 million voted (266-67).
Myles Horton on March 15, 1946, Don West noted that he had talked with “the Southern Conference folk” who “are going to use my book, THE CLODS, as a premium offer for subs to the Patriot.” The remainder of the books ordered by the Conference were advertised in the November “Southern Farmer Issue” of The Southern Patriot to entice new subscribers with a free copy of West’s book for every three issues subscriptions ordered (“Christmas Offer”).

The Conference and The Southern Patriot mobilized support for civil rights, equity of health and wages, desegregation, equal opportunity, and support of labor. One estimate places SCHW’s interracial membership between 12,000 to 15,000 in 1943 (Reed 212 n.72), and in mid-1945, 1,224 Southern Members had paid dues as well as 1,525 non-Southern or associate members with 10,000 subscriptions to The Southern Patriot (Krueger 164), which sometimes published runs as large as 17,000 copies (P. Sullivan 202). The SCHW was an extended alliance of liberal and progressive, white and black, community leaders throughout the South who fought to promote racial equality, civil rights, and justice through building a coalition of working-class whites and blacks. While Part VII conducts a closer examination of these members as reflected in The Southern Patriot, many thousands of copies of West’s books clearly arrived in the hands of people deeply involved in the progressive cause, who then gave it their affirmation as well in an economy of mutual validation. Yet the SCHW could not have reached their level of influence without the support of the CIO, many of whose unions also ordered West’s book (Biggers 171).

Part VI: Labor and Activism

The publication of Clods of Southern Earth capitalized on eight years of careful coordination between the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). Part VI conducts a quick overview of their work to create a political block by intertwining the interests of labor, race, and activists, forming the matrix of relations that West would use to help form and influence Georgia’s Progressive party from the cultural capital he amassed from Clods of Southern Earth. Attempting to mobilize voters and expand their membership, both organizations were involved in political action in the South. Together, the CIO and the SCHW sought to negotiate alignments between identity divisions—between insider (Southerner) and outsider (Northerner), between black and white, between working/lower- and professional/middle- classes—necessary to promote progressive
politics and pluralistic values. In doing so, they helped mobilize and produce readers who would appreciate West’s poetry. Not only would they read West’s poetry, but the esteem that West’s book won with members and leaders in the SCHW would allow West to become a leader who radicalized the direction of the SCHW. To appreciate West’s intervention and the difficulties he faced, one first needs to understand the history of the relationship between the SCHW and the CIO.

The CIO viewed the unorganized 14-million-person labor force of the South as an important and naturallocale to spread industrial unionism (Zieger 228). And with unionization in the South, race was key. For unless blacks and whites joined the same union, separate, racially-uniform unions—such as were actively promoted by northern industries—would undermine one another’s negotiating efforts, leading to lower wages, uncertainty, and conflict between the races (Foreman, “A Decade” 138). Unions held little promise for African Americans, so validation from the SCHW offered double substantiation because CIO organizers were also seen as outsiders desiring to “subvert traditional southern values” (Patton, “The Popular” 233).28

Many southerners were members of both CIO and the SCHW, and the work of Lucy Randolph Mason to foster cross-cultural political alliance and social identification serves an apt inroad to understand their relationship. Indeed, Mason’s work created the relationships that led to the publication of West’s book. While she and West would both seek to increase the membership of more grassroots Southerners in the SCHW, they would come into conflict over who was grassroots—Mason favoring middleclass professionals, West favoring the working class. Daughter of an elite and wealthy family from Richmond, Virginia, Mason seems an unlikely candidate, but she sat on both the SCHW’s executive board and had worked as the Southern publicity director for the CIO.29 Seeing the opportunity for the CIO and the SCHW to

---

28 This close collaboration was possible because CIO members had helped to found the SCHW and, along with members from other labor organizations, hundreds participated in its activities (Patton, “The Popular” 230). The history of SCHW shows the close link between intellectuals associated with labor, the government, and national philanthropy. See “Appendix P: History of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.”

29 In her essay, “The CIO and the Negro in the South” (1945), Mason validated the CIO for blacks reading The Journal of Negro Education: “[Unions in the CIO] cut through the barriers of craft-skills, race, nationality and religion to unite workers in an industry into one union for the common purpose of improving working conditions and standards of living for all. The great strength of this form of organization lied in the interdependence of each group in the factory or mill” (552). Mason provided powerful anecdotes about how the CIO included blacks and then explained how not only the workers would benefit from collective bargaining but how the entire community would: “Few people outside of union circles realize the extent to which the spread of collective bargaining in the
supply each other vital resources, Mason wrote a memorandum to CIO leaders (30 Oct. 1944):
“the CIO could provide the ‘largest financial contribution’ and the mass base for a ‘people’s movement’” (qtd. in Patton, “The Popular” 234), while the SCHW’s middle-class, progressive Southerners could provide authentication for those masses to overcome their resistance to outsiders and unions. Together, Mason explained, they could create a “coordinated, widespread, [progressive] movement in the South” (qtd. 234). Her argument and influence were strong enough that, from the end of 1944 to early 1947, the CIO and the SCHW would provide mutual support.  

At the beginning of WWII, the CIO only had 150,000 members in the South—half of whom belonged to the UMW, which left the CIO in 1942 (Zieger 229). By 1945, with great organizational skill and the aid of organizations such as the SCHW, the CIO had 225,000 Southern members and hungered for more. At the war’s end, cooperation between the CIO and the SCHW began to show stresses brought on by changes in power relations and the organizations’ differences in how to manage the relationship between labor, race, region, electoral politics, and communism. The CIO was no longer in need of support from non-labor cultural organizations since they could now strike and actively unionize, so they initiated the ill-named “Operation Dixie” in 1946 to further expand unionization.

Two weeks before the publication of West’s book, on April 18, 1946, with sudden ferocity, Van A. Bittner (head of the CIO Southern Organizing Committee who had also led the failed UMW strike in Harlan in 1931) attacked the SCHW and made national headlines when he “repudiated . . . the support of all ‘outside’ organizations” (“CIO Stands”). Said Bittner, “No crowd, whether Communists, Socialists, or anyone else is going to mix up in this organization . . . . That goes for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and any other organization . . . . That goes for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and any other organization

---

South had made civil rights more real for the least advantaged of both races” (558). The CIO claimed to stand for full suffrage and provide not only a sense of individual dignity for its members but political power in the community, where its members could fight for civil rights and an increased standard-of-living (556-57). At its core, concluded Mason, “[The CIO] acts on the principle that economic democracy and political democracy are inseparable” (561). Economic and political power would amplify pluralist values and visa versa.

30 As a show of support, in February 1944, the SCHW’s eight-page monthly paper, The Southern Patriot, ran a full-page story that outlined the plan for the CIO’s Political Action Committee. The article on facing page updates the anti-poll-tax campaign, implicitly linking the two. That April’s The Southern Patriot conducted a back-page portrait of the CIO-PAC’s new Southern Director, Dr. George S. Mitchell, with whom West was in correspondence about his candidacy for a seat in the state legislature (25 Feb. 1944). Learning educational tactics from the CIO, the SCHW brought out pamphlets of remarkably similar design to Gaer’s. In 30 photo-laden pages, For Your Children, Too (July 1945) explains the reasons for Southerners to support unions, and Would You Smile? (July 1946) put in plain words the inequalities faced by African Americans.
living off of the CIO” (qtd. in “CIO Stands”). The attack was a tangible sign of an upcoming power struggle that would split labor and the progressives: during the nation’s anti-communist tirade that escalated with the Truman Doctrine, the CIO had begun to sever ties to organizations suspected of Communist contacts. Van Bittner’s move anticipated HUAC’s, which would lead to West’s exile from Atlanta and bring down the SCHW in late 1948. The cause of Bittner’s maneuvers and the effect of HUAC’s work in the South, however, had less to do with the U.S.S.R. than race relations in the U.S.A.

The situation to which Bittner was reacting came about when Osceola McKain, the first black field representative of the Conference, had written the CIO’s vice president and asked him to look into “the attitudes of a certain number of white CIO organizers” who had racial attitudes akin to the AFL (qtd. in Krueger 140). Seizing the opportunity, the CIO turned McKain’s request into an affront. After being confronted by the Although Bittner made the verbal gesture of apologizing and renewing support for the SCHW, union monetary support was cut back. $28,000 in union contributions in 1945 dropped to under $18,000 in 1946, with the CIO national office cutting off all donations in April (142). Even as the SCHW’s membership number would peak in 1946, their total income would be cut in half.

Yet McKain’s observations were not off target. Operation Dixie had been by-passing industries in which blacks worked and discouraged them from applying for organizers’ slots (Zieger 234). As voiced by an article in May’s Chicago Defender: “the CIO has dodged the issue of the Jim Crow local. Like its Dixie predecessor, the AFL, it has knuckled to Southern tradition and allowed all-Negro and all-white locals” (Smith). Even with these problems, the CIO’s financial support of the SCHW was crucial, so Clark Foreman tried to heal the rift with an essay, which had been accepted by the American Mercury, that spoke magnanimously of the CIO’s work with race and democracy. However, Foreman first shared it with Van Bittner, and

---

31 This polemic was problematic, because three high-ranking CIO representatives were sitting on the SCHW executive board, including Lucy Randolph Mason and Paul Christopher, a leader of the CIO’s Southern campaign and a vice president of the SCHW.

32 “A major turning point in American foreign policy, the Truman Doctrine marked the beginning of the U.S. effort to contain Communist expansion. President Truman initiated the policy in an address to Congress on March 12, 1947. His action was occasioned by a crisis in Greece involving pressure on the government from Communist-led guerrilla forces.” (Kirkendall)

33 Writing to Mary McLeod Bethune, a leading African-American educator who had been sponsoring a SCHW event in New York City to support the CIO, Clark Foreman explained that Bittner “has nothing but the friendliest feelings for the Southern Conference. The reference to us was apparently the result of an unfortunate criticism which one of staff made directly to the CIO” (22 April 1946). Foreman’s essay attempted to explain the close connections: “In
the essay was never published because Bittner asked that its publication be delayed. The consequences of the rift for the CIO were great: by late 1947 the CIO had expanded membership in the South by 280,000 new members (Zieger 239), but the financial costs were tremendous and the membership increased far less than expected.

Contrary to the outward conflicts and as a result of the direct collaboration between members of the CIO and the SCHW, Don West’s *Clods of Southern Earth* was released in May 1946. Involved in defending the African-American community since his days of activism (he was suspended from high school for protesting *Birth of a Nation*), West’s poems unified class and race in terms of rural, working-class moral and religious rhetoric. Accordingly, the book served to articulate the commonality of purposes shared by the CIO and the SCHW. But West’s vision of justice, equality, and democracy—while directed at the situation in the South and Georgia—went far beyond the realm of polite resistance. He spoke of a spontaneous democracy that would arise when people gave aid to each other’s mutual suffering. Thus, as we have seen, *Clods of Southern Earth* received disdain from New York literary critics, abhorrence from Southerners opposed to the values of the SCHW and the CIO, deep appreciation from thousands of rural and working-class Southerners, and fanfare from those involved with civil rights and labor.

Part VII: Clasping Hands over “A few charred bones”

The highly-literate activists from the Southern Conference for Human Welfare formed an influential readership of *Clods of Southern Earth*, which was offered to them as a membership and subscription incentive, as related above. To gain a sense of how these readers valued *Clods of Southern Earth*, this section first evaluates how progressive discourse manifested in specific acts of literacy found in *The Southern Patriot*, the SCHW’s monthly. West used the capital his book generated to work with Lucy Randolph Mason to influence the SCHW to broaden its...
membership into the grassroots citizenry. But just who constituted the grassroots differed for West and Mason, both of whom sought to activate people of their own socioeconomic background. This difference is illustrated in this section’s conclusion, which explores how Don West’s relationship with Langston Hughes enabled his work with the SCHW.

Subscriptions to The Southern Patriot already numbered some 10,000 in 1945, and it sometimes published 17,000 issues in a run (Krueger 137 and P. Sullivan 202). Highlighting issues critical to both middle-class progressives and the lower-class southern, whose quality of life had been lowered due to regressive politics, The Southern Patriot published stories and data about a collection of interrelated social problems that could be pragmatically addressed through influencing political and judicial mechanism at hand: unequal education for the races, the need to raise the minimum wage, medical conditions, problems of women in the work place, unionization, the poll tax, Negro veterans, support for farmers, white-only primaries, etc.

Another key tactic was to publish features about or by central figures of the progressive cause (such as Eleanor Roosevelt or Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women) and juxtapose them with stories about the political wrongs of establishment figures and groups (such as Senator Bilbo or the Dixiecrats). Each issue also dedicated a page to new books and information sources, including critiques of Howard Odum’s Race and Rumors of Race (April 1944) and reviews of Margaret Walker’s For My People (in the Jan. 1944 issue), of Lillian Smith’s Strange Fruit (March 1944), of Howard Fast’s Freedom Road (Oct 1944), and of Henrietta Buckmaster’s Deep River (Nov. 1944). Attention to these texts and their authors’ direct involvement show that the members of the SCHW understood literature as an essential tool of social explanation and engagement. Notably, West’s book was the only one offered as an incentive.

By late 1946 the Conference had 10,000 members, the most in its brief history (Krueger 143). These members represented an influx of newly invigorated citizens. Thousands of new black members joined at the behest of Mary McLeod Bethune who undertook a speaking tour for the Conference (137), and thousands joined because the SCHW established state committees to involve more non-professionals and non-intellectuals. This infusion of newly politicized,

---

35 The critique of Odum reflects the degree of difference in the approach of the SCHW and Southern Regional Council, which Odum helped to start in 1944. James Dombrowski takes Odum for task for not recognizing the work of the labor movement to foster wealth in the black community, or of the NAACP “for equalization of teacher’s salaries,” or of the “courageous work of Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling in that excellent magazine The South Today” (“Smoke in the Eye”).
grassroots members had been a long-term goal of Lucy Randolph Mason, one in which West joined.

Mason had promoted such a focus on membership since 1938. After the first conference of SCHW in Birmingham, she had written to Frank Graham (president of the University of North Carolina and then president of the SCHW) to insist that “the South cannot be saved by its middle class liberals alone . . . they must make common cause with labor, the dispossessed of the land and the Negro” (qtd. in Salmond 155). Yet due to its dispersed nature and dependence upon the written word, such a “common cause” was difficult to realize. In April 1945, Mason wrote to Clark Foreman, president of the SCHW, and warned, “I have a deep, uneasy feeling that plans are being made with too little reference to their effect on Southern membership” (qtd. in Salmond 162). In order to survive and be effective, Mason held that the SCHW must “really be a membership organization,” which it could not do “unless its roots are in Southern soil” (qtd. 161, 162).

Don West’s book was a powerful tool for illuminating non-Southerners, validating progressives, and activating new Southern members such as black and white factory workers and sharecroppers. Signaling his appreciation of Mason’s work to activate a membership with “its roots . . . in the Southern soil,” West dedicated the poem “My South” (36-39) to her in Clods of Southern Earth. Originally appearing in Toil and Hunger (1941), “My South” was not dedicated to Mason, but the poem, a love poem for the South, once extended to Mason demonstrates West’s admiration. One of West’s most sensual pieces, the poem drifts over four pages, touching the “slender willows” (2), the “lazy pools” (11), and June corn blades that “Glisten under a Southern moon” (14). Reflecting Mason’s urge to nurture a grounded membership, West writes,

And I love you who toil
In the dirt
And factories
And mines—
You whose skin is ebony
From a tropic sun
And my own bleached brothers… (30-36, ellipsis in original)
Yet it is the presence of “deep sorrow” (43), of the “cruel chains of hunger” (50), and of the “Negro’s blood/ Smeared over your mouth” (57-58) that makes the poet-narrator want to sing “With you/ To tune your songs/ Into keen blue blades” (47-49). Certainly, Mason would have been flattered by West’s dedication. Still, as much as they seemed to have in common, West pushed for even greater inclusiveness and more radical politics, which would bring him into conflict over the role of the SCHW in Atlanta and Georgia, where she made her home. Testimony to the unifying power of West’s poetry and vision is the inclusion of “My South” in The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949: A Definitive Anthology (1949), edited by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes.

In that anthology, Hughes and Bontemps conduct a project of recovery and recognition, renewing attention to poets whose names had eclipsed or were as of yet unappreciated. Thus they included African Americans, international blacks (including being the first editors to republish poems by the now famous Derrick Walcott and V. S. Naipaul), and allied white poets such as West and Rukeyser (Rampersad 160). West’s “My South” (297-99) remains unchanged except for the dropping of Mason’s name and breaking one later stanza (the one below) into two. Upon reading “My South” in The Poetry of Negro, the smooth description of landscape now highlights the pain in of the final, closely-measured stanzas whose tight rhyme knits together anger, grief, and hope:

Oh, my South,
My cold-blooded South
With a Negro’s blood
Smeared over your mouth
And a Negro’s bones
Which you blindly make
A few charred coals
By a burnt-off stake—

Tomorrow you must wake
And white hands will clasp
Ebony
Bowed over a few charred bones.
By a burnt off stake . . . ! (55-62, 72-76).
The poem recognizes a Southern violence so profound that the body’s reunification with the earth in death is blocked by whites who burn victims at the stake. The promise of the poem, which began in such lush images of nature, is that people—“ ebony” and “ bleached”—will unite to stop such macabre sacrifice and recognized the dead when they “ clasp” hands “ Bowed over a few charred bones” (73, 75). West’s acknowledgement and anger at the racial atrocities committed in the South won Hughes’s respect and influence. Hughes became West’s greatest ally in the literary field, consecrating West’s poetry and providing links to the cultural resources that led to the publication of Clods of Southern Earth (and, hence, West’s professorship at Oglethorpe).  

West won Hughes’s regard during an impassioned series of letters sent in September and October, 1943, from his position as Superintendent in Lula, Georgia. West’s letters discussed the work he was doing in the Lula schools and defended poor white southerners from Hughes’s accusations in the Chicago Defender:

I admire you and your writing as much as I do anyone I know of. But I think I shall always say it’s wrong for any educated Negro to single out the “cracker”, “poor white trash” and any other group of working white folks, as the chief enemy of the Negro People.

Brother, the poor whites, the crackers, etc. have had their minds filled full of poison. They have often been in mobs and such like, but speaking as a son of the poorest white crackers in Georgia, I say that I still believe it is the working white man and not the smooth, slick, boss who is the best potential ally of the Negro people in their struggle for equality in the South. And, to put it the other way around, I think also that the Negro people are the best ally of the white workers of the South in the struggle for better conditions, more democracy, etc. (30 Sept. 1943)

This suggestion caught Hughes’s attention because he had argued for intraclass, interracial resistance in his columns and poems in New Masses throughout the 1930s. In another letter that justified the political reasoning espoused in Clods’s intro, West continued, “We must drive a wedge of truth between the cracker and the bourbon, the common man who loves democracy,

---

Hughes would continue to offer what aid he could to West in the 1950s when both of their careers were eclipsed by the Cold War. The same year that Montage of a Dream Deferred was published, Hughes supplied the first blurb listed in the back matter of West’s next book The Road is Rocky (1951): “[West] marshals words into poetry to sing for democracy and decency, to picture and plead, to startle and shock . . . . His are the poems of our heartbeats” (“What They Say”). However, by 1951, even Hughes’s unmitigated support was too little and too late.
and the Tory” (10 Oct. 1943). Hughes’s responses were lost when the Klan burned down West’s home in 1948, but that September Hughes did write Arna Bontemps about “a nice fan letter from the white principle of schools at Lula, Georgia, (of all places) who likes my Defender column” (143). Hughes then asked Bontemps if the Rosenwald Foundation had considered West for a fellowship.

Bontemps, who had just been appointed head-librarian of Fisk University in March 1943, was also serving on the committee to select Rosenwald Fellows (Embree 153). On May 13, 1944, West wrote to Hughes again, asking for more information and guidance about applying for the Rosenwald. One may suppose that Hughes wielded what influence he could to help West win a Rosenwald. As a result, West would travel to Columbia University, meet Boni and Gaer, and return to Atlanta, Georgia, as a professor of Citizenship and Human Understanding at Oglethorpe University in August 1946.

Part VIII: Progressives and Agitators in Georgia

Oglethorpe University was a bold experiment designed to enact creative citizenship in a democratic community. Phillip Weltner had taken the Presidency of Oglethorpe in 1944 after the previous president had led the school into bankruptcy and disaccreditation. By the time West arrived in the fall on 1946, the school had 166 students and was well on its way to establishing the $500,000 endowment needed for accreditation. Initiated by Weltner, Oglethorpe University sought to heal the “schism of the soul” that had arisen in higher education between the practical and the spiritual (“The Liberal Arts” 4). Akin to the relationship between pragmatism and pluralism in the New School for Social Research, Oglethorpe endeavored to train, nurture, and educate students as participants in a creative democracy, which can be compared to Black Mountain and Reed, the other great experiments of higher education in their day.  

West was hired as a professor of Human Understanding and Citizenship, which drew upon his skills as an artist, a preacher, and an organizer. To train “competence and character” and demonstrate the “social function of vocation” (Weltner, “Theses”), students took the same

37 Bontemps had been a recipient of three previous awards and the Fund had recently undertaken the renovation of the library at Fisk. Established in 1917, the Julius Rosenwald Fund also proved a central means of distributing resources and assembling networks of actors around issues of Negro and Southern welfare. For details about the Rosenwald foundation’s close support of other interracial projects in the South, see "Appendix Q: The Julius Rosenwald Fund."

38 Weltner heralded remarkable education and political reform in Georgia. Without his numerous interventions, neither West nor the University of Georgia system would have realized their great potential. See "Appendix R."
set of classes all four years in the Divisions of Human Understanding and Citizenship to foster “reverence for life,” “respect for human personality-values,” “convictions about dignity,” and “oneness of humankind” (“The Liberal Arts” 6). In the segregated American South at the close of World War II, which Americans understood to have been fought against Fascism, these words rang with particular resonance, especially when united with Clods of Southern Earth. West took the initiative to educate students and promote Oglethorpe, becoming a faculty advisor to the student paper, The Stormy Petrel. Since Oglethorpe was struggling with enrollment and had a bad name with local high schools due to its previous disaccreditation, faculty were called on to help with recruitment. West was praised for the “fine response from [his] public appearances” and was asked to continue to make “an impression on the community for” the school (“Report to the Faculty”). With the attention that swirled about him from the success of Clods of Southern Earth, West promoted Oglethorpe at every opportunity.

West had a heady time that September when his book was displayed in the front windows of Atlanta bookstores. His would sign 400 copies at a sitting and was being interviewed as a “‘celebrity’” on the radio (West, Letter to Williams 4 Sept. 1946). He had come a long way from “so damn many years scraping the bottom” with the small-run, low-profile editions of his earlier books (West, Letter to Horton 5 April 1946). In a letter to Williams, West even took a little time to revel that key members of the SCHW were asking him to become an executive board member: “Not that I am horsing to get such a place, but it always amuses me these days to have groups like that, the Southern Churchmen, etc. come courting my affections. It is true these days even of the cp. You know how it is. I reckon they’ve all found out that you and I are here to stay – and by god, to places!” (Tuesday AM [Sept. 1946]). West was taking stock of his old connections—even the Communist Party—which now looked to him for support rather than the other way around. West and Williams also were planning how they could reinforce each other’s positions through mutual advertising and distribution of Clods with books about Williams’s

---

39 For instance, the first year of Citizenship was spent studying Western Civilization: Outline of Its History (first quarter), Spirit of the Ages (second quarter), and Epic of America (third quarter). The second year studied economics, the third year political science, and the final year class and international relations. In Human Understanding, the first year—West’s favorite—studied English Speech and Writing (first and second quarter) and Literature: the Prophets (third quarter). The second year focused on world literatures, while the third and fourth year delved into philosophy (such as Interpretation of History, Development of Science, Character and Morals, and Life and Religion). Students also had the choice of pursuing two of the following Divisions: Science, Business, Community Service (teaching), or Fine Arts (painting and music).

40 The Southern Churchmen were led by West’s old Vanderbilt peer Howard Kester, who had rebuffed West’s attempts at contact in the early 1940s.
work. Notably, West had mailed Williams at least 800 copies of *Clods* from his personal stockpile at Lula: West’s investment in buying and distributing his own book was key to its success and making his reputation (Letters to Williams 7 Oct 1946 and Monday morning [Nov 1946]).

Yet with all the positive attention from liberals and progressives, West also became the target of a law suit, hate mail, and threats to his personal safety and to his job at Oglethorpe (West, Letter to Williams 4 Sept. 1946). President Weltner also began to receive letters of intimidation, warning him against keeping West on the faculty, because his extracurricular activities, such as speaking that spring to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in Andalusia, Alabama, proved that him a danger (West, Letter to Williams 30 Sept. 1946).

To overcome the threat that he offered to Oglethorpe, which was trying to establish its financial base and reputation, West repeatedly asked Williams to write Weltner and testify about West’s worth ([Sept. 1946] and [30 Sept. 1946]). As the director of PIAR, Williams did so, officially noting West’s reputation in public education, praising the introduction to *Clods of Southern Earth*, and sharing the Institute’s commitment to distributing his book “among the people of our Southland” (1 Oct. 1946). As much as Weltner was concerned about the status of Oglethorpe, he did not reprimand or question West at this point; indeed, the very concept of Oglethorpe arose from Weltner’s committed opposition to such reactionary threats.

An inclusive, responsive democracy was the focus at Oglethorpe, this “tiny republic of learning,” and the relationship between individual freedom and group welfare was the central point of mediation. Given Weltner’s liberal political background and his Lutheran upbringing, it should not be a surprise that West’s first threat to the university came not from his political involvement but from a poem that spoke frankly about sexuality. “The Four Gifts of Man” appeared in the same issue of the student newspaper (The Stormy Petrel) that reviewed *Clods of Southern Earth*.

---

41 The religious hat was another strategic identity which West donned to communicate with an audience who might best listen to words from that type of authority. West’s wrote to Myles Horton about his trip to Andalusia, “to preach Sunday for the Amalgamated [Clothing Workers of America]. . . . Seems the enemy there is using everything, including Jesus, against the strikers. So, since the union is on the Lord’s side doing his work I don’t see why one of the Lord’s ordained preachers shouldn’t come out to the worker’s side” (5 April 1946). With no mention of his work as an educator or poet, The Amalgamated Clothing Worker newspaper reproduced the sermon of “Rev. Don West.” It began, “The struggle you people are engaged in is the struggle told so well in the Bible” (“Georgia Minister”). As I have shown, West’s poetry takes such an inflection. Indeed, it is hard to tell whether poetry or religion informs his inmost self, because he takes the same attitude toward both: he pries them away from their purposeful removal from people’s daily lives and applies each toward action.
Southern Earth. Therein, West demonstrated that he knew how to craft a poem that would win him a name and open the eyes of a particular audience, in this case young men and women:

I am he who sings
of the beauty in living—
the life process—

the inner urge
compelling the male to seek
the female
and she him;
the love of a man for a woman
and she for him . . .
The sex in it, I say,
Is clean and holy.
I say no function
under the sun
in the life process
is unclean . . .

I will erect no formula
to cramp the dreams of man
nor will I preach obedience
to any law
that binds the eyes (1-3, 6-17, 34-38)

Clearly West was glad no longer to be administering a rural Georgia public school. Yet, given the success and controversy West’s book had already brought, the Whitmanesque love-of-sexuality as a metaphor for human freedom was not a perfect match for the institutional conditions. The day after “The Four Gifts of Man” was published, Weltner issued a memo (called “Liberty and Law”) to the faculty which shared his refined reflections on and rules about
academic freedom. Using West’s poem as his main example, the memo questioned West’s public demeanor.

Central to the theory of community at Oglethorpe was a vision of citizenship as service to the school. Weltner posited, “Every human action carries with it some degree of personal subordination.” The basis of that subordination is the body of rules and goals which guide the community within which that individual functions: “The corrective of freedom is corporateness [sic].” In terms of Oglethorpe, this dictum meant that “as individuals each of us is devoted to the truth, and at the same time we are a group perfecting an educational program which is to demonstrate the finest and best in American undergraduate education” (underlined text in the original). Weltner finished by analyzing the potential effects of West’s poem:

Take for instance the subject of sex. You and I do not tear sex out of its social context of courtship, marriage, and family, the three institutions through which love has sublimated a function which otherwise sinks to the level of the malacious [sic]. How many young people understand this? How may of their parents? How many of Don’s detractors reading his beautiful poem in the Stormy Petrel, if they understood it, would be honest enough to give him the benefit of their approval? We must stay in character; otherwise, we are useless. But we can stay in character and yet follow ways through which each will serve all and all will serve each.

Welter seems to be asking if West would be able to bring his character into service both of its spirit and of the university’s community. This challenge would play out for West in the next two years when he attempted to reconcile his long-term commitment to fight for justice and equality with his new role and stature as a professor at Weltner’s own Lyceum of citizenship, Oglethorpe University.

West’s response to Weltner’s caveat was to lead a group of students straight into the fires of Atlanta’s racial conflict. The week after the memo was issued, West and four students attended a public meeting of the Columbians, a fledgling fascist organization, about which West had been writing to Williams since September. The Columbians were the most organized and public of the white vigilantes taking action around Sells avenue, a neighborhood of modest frame houses historically occupied by lower-class white renters, but African Americans began buying houses there (Ferguson 256). The Columbians soon began patrolling the area around Sells Avenue for Negro “loiterers” and conducting beatings and threats to back up their stance (257).
White mobs confronted the new owners, driving blacks from their homes without their belongings, and white vigilantes dynamited exterior structures or stoned the homes and their residents. The police, when brought in, simply told the black homeowners to leave because the vigilantes had given them "fair warning." Soon "White Only" signs began appearing in front those homes that were for sale in surrounding neighborhoods.

West and his students went on a journalistic excursion to visit a Columbian rally, which they reported on extensively in The Stormy Petrel, leading the student body to unanimously and "publicly denounce the Columbians" ("The Columbian Menace"). By exemplifying Oglethorpe's ideal pedagogical practice of lived citizenship, this "field trip" tested Weltner, but Weltner understood that act as modeling Oglethorpe's mission. What might given him pause was West's larger political involvement with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and his personal conflict with Georgia's reactionary forces who had brought suit against him based on the appearance of the name "Charlie Lewallen" in one of his poems.

On October 23, 1946, West wrote Myles Horton to ask his permission to nominate Horton to the board of the SCHW, seeking to sway its policy in favor of greater radicalism. But most of West's letter involves the controversy Clods had raise in Atlanta, the death threats he had receive in August, and how Weltner had received letters "warning him against having me on the faculty." Even though of great energies, West voiced his frustration and disgust at the "nervous energy" he was expending to counter a frivolous $10,000 law-suit by a "Talmadge Kluxer." The suitor claimed West had defamed his name in a poem about the shooting death of Charlie Lewallen (a name West claimed was fabricated) in a 1934 Harlan County coal strike when West (although he did not share the information) was organizing for the Communist's National Miners Union. The poem, "Harlan Coal Digger, 1934" (122), which occurs three

---

42 A student reporter described Columbian members in their public meeting as wearing a "brown uniform with the red lightning patch and the silver lightning pin of their order" (Slack). The main speaker asked the crowd of three-hundred people, "How can we have fine homes when billions in American money was just spent in a useless war to preserve the Jews?" (qtd. in Lorenz, "Oglethorpe"). After students met with the Columbian leader the next day in the slums of Atlanta, he was reported to be smart and congenial even when spewing statements such as, "The 'nigger' would behave himself if it wasn't for the Jews. It's the Jews fault that the 'niggers' are getting out of place" (Slack). The editorial for that paper announced that the Oglethorpe Student Body voted unanimously "to publicly denounce the Columbians" ("The Columbian Menace"). The Stormy Petrel's editorial demonstrated political savvy. It explained that the Columbians were drawing from the problems caused by the housing shortage and the "explosive line between colored and white settlements." West's students were learning how their world functioned by becoming part of it, by using their analytical skills and book learning to evaluate the circumstances, and by proposing action through the composition of public writing.
poems after "Unity Is An Ax," is filled with ellipses that purposefully stumble between images of the funeral and a man seeking a drugged respite from an exhaustion of mining.

```
Home . . . a box . . .
on four pegs . . .
Oozy drippy shoes . . .

A little whisky . . . warms up
the damp spots . . . soothes . . .

Makes you feel good . . . forget . . .
laugh . . . laugh in the face of a
big black pit . . . laugh at ragged kids . . . (1-3, 6-7, 10-12)
```

the poem juxtaposes the death of his spirit under the comfort of liquor and the wear of mining without a union versus the death of that body he once he dared to join.

```
Sweet land of freedom . . . watch out for
company gun thugs . . . if you’re a
union man . . . if you are a union man . . .
you ought to be . . . Charlie Lewallen shot . . . (22-25)
```

West’s poem was aimed to speak to those whose cultural literacy could recognize that situation, and in his letters to Horton at the end of October, West was clearly involved and interested in influencing and reforming the Southern Conference along more grassroots lines, as suggested by Lucy Mason.

West nominated Horton to the executive board but was unable to attend the conference in New Orleans due to his duties at Oglethorpe (West, Letter to Aubrey Williams): the strategies of those opposing him in Atlanta were taking a toll. In a letter written to Horton on Halloween, West underscores the similarity of his and Horton’s positions on the membership as being “exactly what I’ve been hammering at . . . I’ve been preaching the thing must get rooted among the masses of plain people—farmers and workers—if it’s ever going to do the job.” West is excited that Virginia Durr, a member of the SCHW since 1938 and co-founder of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax in 1941, was going to nominate him to be on the executive
“The leadership,” he explained later in the letter to Horton, needs to be “able to talk the people’s language and meet and cope with their problems.”

Although West would not be elected, the SCHW would soon undergo internal power struggles over its political radicalization (and eventual work with the Progressives), and rifts in the organization allowed West to assume a formative role, which resulted in his eventual firing from Oglethorpe. However, after West’s encounter with the Columbians, Weltner lived up to his ethics, which demonstrated to West that he might go further. But to understand the challenge that West offered Weltner’s resolve, one first needs to understand the racial situation in Atlanta and Georgia, which would eventually be West’s undoing.

In 1947, the Atlanta metropolitan area had about 450,000 residents, some third of whom were African-American, with 90 percent confined to the same crowded areas (Bayor 161; Silver and Moeser 37). Unlike the primary readers of West’s book, who were struggling for economic gain, Atlanta also had the greatest concentration of black wealth in the nation. As overcrowding increased, wealthier blacks began to rent and buy housing where available; this increased market pressure, causing rent to rise, which forced the eviction of white tenants whose homes were sold to those blacks willing to purchase the property (Ferguson 256). White mobs led by the Columbians dynamited porches and stoned their black residents. Moreover, white business leaders wanted to shift blacks away from downtown and confine them behind a commuter expressway (Stone 32). But after Georgia’s Governor Ellis Arnall abolished the poll-tax in 1944 and courts struck down Georgia’s white-only primaries in 1945, an infusion of 17,000 black voters in 51 days forced the mayor and his allies to compromise and agree to decrease Jim Crow, stop white-on-black violence, and permit black developers to built new residences (Holmes 52-

---

43 Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Virginia Foster married Clifford Durr, who FDR appointed to the Committee on Economic Relations in the South (C. Brown 34). Living in Washington D. C. in 1938, she joined the SCHW as vice-chairman of the subcommittee to abolish the poll tax, whose focus she expanded to promoting the voting rights of women and Negroes (35). She went on to co-found an umbrella organization called the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax (NACP) in 1941: in her work, her one rule was to “accept support for any organization or person who wanted to abolish the poll tax” (37). West likely had met Durr when he signed a petition supporting anti-poll tax legislation in 1944 (“It’s True”). In 1947 Durr and her husband, who worked for the FCC, opposed the constitutionality of Truman’s presidential order for the FBI to investigate people suspected of being Communist based on the testimony of any single, anonymous informant. In 1948 as the SCHW and the NACP dissolved under pressures from Red-baiting, Durr ran for Senator on the Progressive ticket and chaired the Progressive Party in Virginia (37-38). After Truman won, he ignored her political affiliations and asked Mr. Durr to remain with the FCC—if he took an anti-communist loyalty oath, which he refused due to his principles (39). Mr. Durr’s new law practice faced difficult times when corporate clients heard that he defended those accused of disloyalty. In 1950, the Durr’s moved to Denver to work with the Farmers’ Union; however, Mr. Durr lost his job after Mrs. Durr spoke out against the bombing of China as an option during Korean War. With four children, soon the Durr’s were forced to move back to Montgomery, Alabama and live with Mr. Durr’s mother (40).
Such civic empowerment allowed blacks to become part of (and modify) the standing power structure—a structure that West hoped to further modify when opposition to Talmadge’s son’s take over in December 1946 presented the opportunity.

Just as many blacks had registered to vote in Atlanta, 135,000 blacks became registered throughout Georgia (which represented only 18% of eligible blacks [Grant 36]), but with the opposite results. Many whites rallied to Eugene Talmadge—the former governor whose racists policies Arnall struggled to reform. That July, the Talmadge Democrats mailed thousands of mimeographed forms and instructed their recipients about how to challenge the voting right of black registrants (Bernd 479). As a result over 16,000 black voters were purged and violence kept thousands more from voting, which sadly reinforced West’s lines, “Oh my South/ my cold-blooded South/ A Negro’s blood/ smeared over your mouth” (p. 98, l. 55-58). Moreover, Georgia’s electoral system judged winners by county rather than by popular vote, so while the candidate to whom Arnall had given his support received more popular votes than Talmadge, Talmadge won the election by winning twice as many counties. But in December, Talmadge died of cancer, and in a planned move, his son, Herman, usurped power from Arnall, using state police to evict him. When these reactionary meteors began to fall, Don West stepped up to bat.

In January 1947, West gave a radio address and called for political organization against the “Talmadge machine” that, West said, moved in “the Hitler pattern” and used the same language about Negroes in Georgia as Hitler had used against Jews (West, “Future of Georgia”). Against “the dust of prejudice in our eyes,” West called for educational opportunities, housing programs, jobs and living wages, which “can only be achieve by guaranteeing them for everyone, including the Negro.” That February, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare mailed out copies of the broadcast to its members, proclaiming, “Don West’s radio speech . . . should be read quickly by hundreds of thousands of people all over the country” (“Don West’s”). Such was West’s introduction as a popular political leader, from which he would begin organizing Georgian progressives to support Henry Wallace—FDR’s old Vice-president and ex-Cabinet member who opposed military confrontation with Russia.

West was able to become the foremost progressive leader in Georgia because of deep conflicts within the SCHW. The rift in the SCHW began when Clark Foreman called an

---

44 For details on the voting drive and the role of clergy see “Appendix S: Mobilizing the Black Vote and Reverend Holmes.”
Executive Board meeting the day most of the board had left the 1946 convention (Krueger 155). Foreman attacked James Dombrowski’s inefficiency as primary administrator for the SCHW and the Southern Conference Educational Fund, which had been founded by the SCHW as a nonprofit unit in January of 1946 to allow the SCHW to undertake direct political activism in electoral politics (Reed 33). Foreman moved to have Dombrowski limited to the SCEF. Myles Horton and Lucy Randolph Mason had conceived of the reorganization with Foreman, but Foreman’s behind-the-scenes maneuver infuriated both absent board members (including Mason) and the membership (120). Foreman’s act reflected an ongoing debate in the SCHW about whether to follow the more radical lead of its president or if, as the members of the Georgia Committee had fought for, political initiative ought to grow from a diffuse democracy rooted in a varied different locales (Krueger 160).

The Committee for Georgia (one of the SCHW state-level organizations) had Margaret Fisher as Vice-Chairman. Fisher helped to make the Committee for Georgia the SCHW’s most influential and dynamic state organizations (Krueger 133). Beginning with 95 members in January 1945, membership expanded to 256 by April 1 (“Report for Georgia”). This success was partially the result of guidance from Lucy Randolph Mason, Fisher’s close mentor (Salmond 142). Said Mason, “We are touching the tap-roots of democracy in this state and are going to release new forces for good and right” (qtd. in Salmond 119). CIO-PAC’s Regional Director commented that people of Georgia were “politicized as not since the days of Watson and the populist movement” (qtd. in P. Sullivan 204). Thus the scene was set for West when he arrived in Atlanta. Yet this liberal group of middleclass activists were not the grassroots people who West had hoped to bring into the SCHW—indeed, West felt that focus on middle-class members hampered the work.

On November 18, he had written to Claude Williams of his disaffection and frustration with Fisher’s role in Georgia. In the face of “the fascist nature of these hate groups [such as the

---

45 Dombrowski had joined the SCHW in 1942, after working as Myles Horton’s second at Highlander Folk School. Dombrowski’s temperament reflected his background—he was quiet, sure, and worked closely with a broad range of people (Reed 121). For more on Dombrowski’s life see Frank Adams’s James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897-1983. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992.

46 The Committee went to work: they produced a pamphlet called Your Part in Georgia Politics that gave basic facts about voting, gaining praise from The Atlanta Constitution (Kruger 133); they issued a newspaper called Let the People Know (133); they helped lobby for the repeal of the state’s poll tax (133); and they organized support for “improvement in Negro school facilities and services in Atlanta” in February 1946 (Committee, “Dear Atlanta Member”).
Columbians].” West found Fisher hampered organizing resistance: “[Fisher is] so dictatorial she’s caused people like Pop Smith, editor of the Macon News and others to pull out. And, anyhow, her own red-baiting attitude is enough to preclude much effective work.” West was particularly sensitive because the expenses from the libel suit had hampered him. He saw the “total aggressive onslaught of fascist forces here” as making him the sacrificial “goat” because “I’ve been in the forefront for progress and liberty.” Although he had done “good work for the progressive cause,” West was confounded that he could muster no “organizational backing” against the libel suit from the SCHW or “the people in NYC” (perhaps the CP), who “patted him on the back . . . but when [a guy] gets it in the neck then by gum its just his neck and he has to bear it.” West’s frustration made him ready to answer Dombowski’s call to serve as a representative on the SCHW’s board.

After the convention, however, West was told that there had been some confusion and that he would not be able to serve in the capacity Dombrowski had offered (West, Letter to Williams 29 Nov 1946). West was irate and felt that the Conference was “in a crisis” due to the “mismanagement of its leadership” and “the reactionaries and half-baked liberals are gunning for it on the red issue.” He was angry at mainstream “fence straddling” and acceptance of figures such as Governor Arnall. West wanted the SCHW to “declare itself on the reds or communism” and more clearly “align” itself with the “left.” West went on to express his vision to Williams: “there is a definite need to orientate the work toward the grass roots folks of the South” rather than follow the lead of “big shot names” like Lillian Smith, who West called a “damned old red baiter.” Although West had been involved in the SCHW, he was not yet able to bring out the changes he desired. Other people saw the SCHW’s situation in quite different terms.

In a eloquent letter to Foreman, Margaret Fisher voiced her passionate disagreement with Foreman, calling his act to limit Dombrowski a “sad commentary and paradox” when compared to the vision of democracy enunciated and enacted at the Conference in New Orleans (3). “I believe,” she wrote near the end of her letter, “those who speak and act in [the members’] name have a sacred trust to keep—a trust which involves democracy, wisdom, and justice” (6). The model of that trust, Foreman, had violated it.

In a meeting on January 5, 1947, the board reinstated Dombrowski as coordinator of both projects, but Dombrowski could not carry out his plans for reorganization, so in the summer of
1947, he moved to the SCEF and began its dissociation from the SCHW (Krueger 157). In the interim, Rufus E. Clement, President of Atlanta University—a man pressed for time and one who walked a careful line as a member of Atlanta’s black reform elite—had agreed to serve as the chairman of the Nominating Committee to appoint a new executive secretary for the SCEF. Foreman lists nine potential candidates to Clement, including Myles Horton and Don West (20 Feb. 1947). Foreman calls West the “leading candidate” but notes that due to West’s obligations to complete the teaching year at Oglethorpe, he would not be able to accept, and the position needed to be filled “at once.” West’s name was undoubtedly foremost in Foreman’s mind because of the role West had taken in speaking out against the armed take over of the state government by Herman Talmadge.

The rallies and protests did little directly, but Talmadge’s power grab catalyzed unity among the varied people and organizations who would go on to form the Progressives. In reaction to Talmadge’s move, West traveled to New York City, Washington, D.C., and Chicago to meet key players such as Foreman and Durr (West, Letter to Williams 11 Feb. 194[7]). West saw this moment as one in which he might take the lead by organizing reaction. After giving his radio speech, West spoke to Georgia’s Religion and Labor Conference, where he became frustrated at the participants—including the SCHW (Margaret Fisher) and the CIO (Lucy Mason)—who refused to take a stand. West took a stand on behalf of PIAR “in the name of good organization,” and PIAR “came to the front as the champion of freedom and human rights,” which he felt “should put the weak-kneed leadership of the Southern Conference to shame.” West clarified that he did not mean Clark Foreman, who “was furious that no stand was taken,” but “the Fisher sabotage.” West went on to help organize a reformation of the SCHW’s role in Georgia.

47 The results of the conflict would tear apart the two organizations’ close connections, which quickly came to differ in their approach to interpreting the “people’s language” and “their problems.” The SCEF would become key to promoting educational desegregation for the next two decades, and the SCHW would undertake the establishment of the Progressive party and campaign for the election of Henry A. Wallace and progressive candidates throughout the nation. Foreman and the SCHW attempted to directly intervene in conditions of blacks and poor whites in the South through supporting the Progressives, who wished complete desegregation, a more socialist state, and peace with the USSR. However, most members saw them as usurping power from the conventional membership. The SCEF would maintain and generate more grassroots involvement, but they were not seen as cutting to the core of inequality and injustice.

48 In March, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that lieutenant governor M. E. Thompson, who Arnall supported, would serve as governor until the next General Election in 1948 (“Historical Roster”). Talmadge beat Thompson in the September primary, and thus won the general election in November.
That April, the Georgia Committee suspended operations when Fisher excused herself to tend her health and be with her family in North Carolina. West and the more radical side of the Southern Conference understood this departure as a fortuitous opening, but others thought it reflected Foreman’s top-down leadership to drive the Conference in a more leftward direction. Torn between the increased estrangement between the CIO and the SCHW, Lucy Randolph Mason was furious at Foreman and pled with the executive committee in a board meeting on April 19. “The Conference,” she pronounced, “is facing slow death at its Southern roots” (qtd. Salmond 166). She proposed to shift the weight of decisions from the top to the members, but withdrew her motion after discussion. She never brought it up again and resigned in October 1947, severing her impassioned ten-year labor to promote the SCHW, a group she had helped form (166). Mason’s prediction proved correct although not from the causes she cited. By the end of 1947, the Conference had dwindled to a membership of 5,500, just half of what it had been at the beginning of the year. Of those members, some 1,250 had joined following Henry Wallace’s tour in November, 1947 (Krueger 162). The leftward swing of SCHW corresponded with a rightward swing in the country as a whole.

That March West kept up the work of generating cultural capital from Clods of Southern Earth. He had grown frustrated at Boni and Gaer for not making his book more available to the audiences he wanted to read it (rural Southerners), so he used William’s PIAR offices in Alabama as a distribution point for buyers and for “the 2 thousand copies donated to rural teachers” (West, Letter to Williams 3 March 1947). He and Williams also printed up “dodgers” on their books and sent them along with the thousands of copies of West’s speech that were being ordered throughout the South. Nationally, The Daily Worker held up West an example of the fight against book banning, reporting that “Clods of Southern Earth is still under fire” (Sillen). The article praised West’s “excellent volume of verse [that] attacks the white supremacists and stands up for the working man” and then recounted the “far-fetched” libel suit that had been brought against West, which was still brewing in the courts. The article ends by quoting an editorial published the “Macon, Ga., News” which called the suit a continuation of the attacks made against West because “he taught real democracy” to his students in order “to blaze a new idea of education among a people who had been for years the victims of narrow-minded school bosses.” In May The Daily Worker continued its coverage: “the organization of anti-fascist writers” had formed the “‘Committee to Defend Don West’” (J. H. Jones).
names of many on the committee still carry recognition and weight: Arthur Miller; Genevieve Taggard; Langston Hughes; William Rose Benét, editor of the Saturday Review of Literature; Eve Merriam, winner of the 1946 Yale Younger Poets Award; and Henrietta Buckmaster. The court battle clearly drained West; nonetheless, he used it to gain attention for his message.

Early that June, Contemporary Films arrived in Atlanta and shot footage for a movie based on Clods of Southern Earth for widespread distribution. West was pleased to share with Williams that they had filmed scenes around his “old home section” in the mountains and that he was going to New York to do narration and record poems for the film. But hard news regarding West’s Communist past was breaking on the national scene.

That summer Wallace toured the South. At his final engagement in Washington D.C., which was sponsored by the Southern Conference, he declared the need to form a third party to oppose Truman’s anti-labor, pro-War policies. In anticipation, two days before the speech, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) release a report citing the Southern Conference’s Communist influences, and Don West was one of the names mentioned. Such red-baiting caused the Conference to lose half its members, so in November, Wallace returned South under the sponsorship (and for the benefit) of the Southern Conference. Under West’s guidance thirty students from Oglethorpe ushered Wallace’s speech in Atlanta, which was given at Wheat Street Baptist Church to an audience of more than 3,000, 60% of whom were Black, “one of the largest non-segregated gatherings in Atlanta’s history” (qtd. Sullivan 245). Wheat Street was Atlanta’s largest black church, whose reverend, W. H. Borders, had also been a key figure in the voting drive. Wallace concluded his talk by discussing the flaring tensions between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R, emphasizing that red-baiting “is used by men whose great fear is democracy, not Communism” (qtd. “Henry A. Wallace” 1). The week before, Ralph McGill, editor of the Atlanta Constitution joined the fray, proclaiming that the Southern Conference was a “Communist-infiltrated” organization whose officers’ bore the mentality of “Ku Kluxers” (“Mr. Wallace”).

On New Year’s Day 1948, when the Freedom Train rolled into Atlanta, Georgia progressives, led by Don West, launched a movement to place Henry Wallace’s name on the Georgia ballot. The following day, The Atlanta Constitution’s editorial praised Phillip Weltner’s success at Oglethorpe. West’s dangerous passage between Scylla and Charybdis was becoming ever more turbulent. In February, Rosa Lee Ingram and two of her sons—who were black
sharecroppers—were put on death row after being found guilty of murdering a white sharecropper by an all-white jury in a one-day trial. Blacks from all around the nation rallied against that “legal lynching” (Raymond 11). Georgia’s Citizen’s Defense Committee began its work under the chairmanship of Reverend Borders, and the NAACP sent in lawyers as did the Communist aligned Civil Rights Congress. Moreover, Ben Davis—the same black, International Labor Defense lawyer who had snuck West out of Atlanta in 1934—wrote the introduction to a Daily Worker pamphlet about the Ingrams. The Communists and the NAACP were again, as with Scottsboro, fighting over the right to defend a client. This time, the NAACP won, and while the judge commuted the death sentences to life imprisonment, he denied a retrial.

West became involved when he was asked, as the only white who might dare to do so, to speak at a rally in support of the Ingrams’ defense. He speculated that this was the act that finally led Weltner to ask him to leave Oglethorpe. However, other than having occurred at “a public meeting in Macon,” it is unclear when, to whom, or for whom, West spoke (Dunbar 229). Knowing would be an important clue as to West’s allegiances—did he, for instance, speak for the Georgia Citizen’s Defense Committee at the behest of Reverend Borders? Or did he speak at a Wallace-for-President rally at the behest of the Communists? Regardless, I believe West spoke as a populist, a Progressive, and a Communist—which were, for him, not exclusive categories. Regardless, West lost his professorship that summer, which was a time of purges: faculty lost also jobs in Florida, Indiana, Illinois, and New Hampshire. But on May 8, the progressives held their state convention in Macon, with West serving as Executive Vice Chairman. That July, when crosses were burned in the front yard of Larkin Marshall, the Progressive’s black U.S. senate nominee from Macon, The Atlanta Daily World (the only daily African-American paper in the country), decried the act but did so only after stating its disagreement with the Progressives and questioning “the wisdom of a Marshall’s candidacy” (“Let the People”). Later, the same paper would later call West “Oglethorpe’s pet poet,” and it refused to publish more

49 Davis had become an openly Communist member of the New York City Council in 1945. In his intro to the case he wrote, “The Ingram case presents the immediate danger of extension of the special pro-fascist persecution of Negro people in the South, and threatens intensification of the exploitation of the poverty-stricken white masses” (3). Davis turns the case into a rallying point for Wallace: “The answer to the Ingram cases lies in the mainstream of the people’s resistance to war and fascism which is taking shape around the Wallace-for-President and third party movements” (4). Davis, who had risen high in CP ranks, would loose his NY City Council seat in 1949 when a new system of representation was implemented (Martin, The Angelo 213). He was imprisoned under the Smith Act in 1950 along with ten other Communist leaders. Freed in 1955, he died in 1964, and only a year later did the authorities release the memoir he had written of his life while in prison (214).
than minimal materials about the progressives. Although violent support of segregation and Jim Crow was a daily experience for blacks in Georgia, the majority of the African-American reform elite in Atlanta, who had recently made such great gains, chose not to back the progressives’ radical politics of full racial equality.\(^{50}\)

That June a few weeks before Paul Robeson visited Atlanta to support the Wallace campaign, McGill, the Constitution’s editor, unleashed another barrage, calling Robeson a “trouble maker and trouble hunter” (“Anger”).\(^{51}\) The next week, McGill went after West as the person in “executive charge” of the Georgia Wallace committee (“Don West and the Wallace Campaign”). Explaining West’s refusal to answer queries about his connections with the Communist Party, McGill cites the appearance of West’s name in the HUAC report on the Southern Conference and in the Daily Worker and in Party records. The following week on June twentieth, the day before the height of summer, Robeson appeared at Wheat Street Baptist Church and spoke to an interracial crowd some 1,500 strong. McGill declared that the event was really “an anti-Ralph McGill evening” and reasserted Don West’s connections to the Communists (“Anger”). As McGill’s biographer speculates, he attacked local leftists, whom he called “pinkos,” because the Constitution was struggling for market share against The Atlanta Journal, and McGill thought that local red-baiting him allowed him to continue to support a slow version of desegregation, which many saw as a Communist conspiracy (Clowse 150).

As the Progressive’s national convention in July approached, McGill—having identified West as the most vulnerable member of the Progressive Party in Georgia—attacked West’s strongest and most vulnerable point: his forthright poetry. In a late-June column, McGill explains that West published a poem called “Listen, I am a Communist” in the Daily Worker March 13, 1934:

```
“Do you, toilers of the South,
    Know me?”
    I am speaking.
    I, the poet,
    Don West,
```

---

\(^{50}\) This situation came somewhat as a surprise. In the past, even the conservative editor of The Daily World had supported progressive whites. See “Appendix T: The Atlanta Daily World and Progressive Whites in Atlanta”

\(^{51}\) Similar tensions between liberals and progressive radicals in Atlanta where reflected throughout the nation. For the reaction of African Americans to Robeson’s role with the Progressives, see “Appendix U: Paul Robeson and the National African-American Reaction to Wallace.”
Communist,
Bolshevik,
Red -------. (qtd. in “Don West Signs”)

In this and later columns, McGill lists West’s connections to regional Communists.

More direct attacks than McGill’s happened nationally. Two days before the Progressive convention, eleven American Communist Party leaders were arrested for political affiliations. However, the Progressive’s convention in Philadelphia was a remarkable success, buoyed no doubt by the Dixiecrats walk out of the Democratic convention—they would found the Dixiecrat party and run South Carolina’s Governor Strom Thurmond for President. Newspapers described the Progressive convention both as “a display of almost fanatical enthusiasm” (Hagerty) and “the best disciplined” (Stokes) of the three conventions. If Wallace’s vision in his acceptance speech were caught in a single phrase, it would be this one: “I am committed to the policy of placing human rights above property rights” (Wallace, “Text”). And somewhere in the crowd 33,000 people who heard that speech, somewhere in “the madcap throng packing about Henry Wallace’s automobile,” somewhere West and Georgia’s seven other delegates watched on.

McGill continued attacking West through the summer. Then two days after Wallace’s October speech to a gathering of radical Ministers in Dalton, a Georgia mountain town, McGill— noting that West had “presided over the appearance of the Mahatma at Dalton” (“All Right”)—reprinted West’s poem “Listen, I am a Communist” in its entirety. A revised version of the poem is the centerpiece of the first section of Clods of Southern Earth and prefaces the

52 Although West had left Atlanta to put together the youth camp on his farm, he continued to lead the Wallace’s campaign, and McGill continued his pursuit as well. First, McGill wrote about Homer Chase, the Communists, and Wallace, taking care to explain that the “‘idealism’” and “‘purity’” of those “little Communists-Fascists” could lead “to homosexual association” and bestiality (“Out of Envy”). McGill then speculated on the West’s psychology: “a native Georgian who was a poor boy,” West did not have the “courage to work out of it” but resorted, instead, to becoming a Communist, just as the leader of the Columbians was a “poor boy from Montgomery.” Melding together the distaste for fascism, the fear of Communism, and the growing distaste for extreme racism, McGill correlates the extremes: “Homer Chase and Don West are perfect Ku Klux Klan mentality. The commies just happened to get the first.”

Reflecting McGill’s bile, on September 26, five Wallace-campaign workers in Augusta were drug from their headquarters, taken ten miles out of town, “mauled,” and released with a warning to “stay out of Augusta” (“Five Wallace Aides”). Inspired, McGill’s verbal melee continued in light of Wallace’s slated visit to speak to the Conference of Ministers of the Church of God. On October 16, McGill published a column sharing HUAC’s classification of the People’s Institute of Applied Religion as Communist (“It is Now”). Countering West’s students from the last decade who had ardently come to his defense and called McGill’s editorials “red-baiting,” McGill rehashed West’s record and condemned his continued connection with fellow travelers: “He seems to appear more and more in the typical Communist pattern of using religion and infiltration into the classroom as means to an end.” McGill was an astute observer of education and religions role in hegemony.
quatrain of “What Shall a Poet Sing?” where anger and melancholy condense as the poet meditates upon the swaying body of a lynched man. Called “Listen, I’m An Agitator,” the poem was revised for its publication in Toil and Hunger (1941), a revision that remains essentially the same in Clods of Southern Earth (24-27). Wound in tight, wavering lines, the poem modulates through proclamations of anger and resistance which are emphasized by the narrator’s testimony to the suffering that poverty inflicted on his toiling grandfather and father. The poem begins with an important shift and claims that the narrator’s agitation caused others to equate his actions with communism:

Listen . . . !
I’m an agitator —
   They call me “Red,”
The color of Blood,
   And — “Bolshevik!”
But do you of the toiling South
   Know me? (1-7)

To introduce himself, the narrator addresses a particular “you of the toiling South”—“croppers, factory hands—/ Negroes,/ Poor whites, and you youth” (10-12)—to whose understanding West appeals. In order to demonstrate his love of “peace,” “quiet places,” and anger, the narrator calls on his grandfather: “His blood burns in my veins/ and cries out justice!” and the South “responds/ with deep sobs of misery” (24, 30, 41-2, 43-4). To prove that he is “no foreigner,” the narrator announces that he was raised on the land where “my Daddy’s sweat/ Salted down the red clay” (47, 66-7). He also cries out over the death of his father who was “Overworked, underfed —/ with pellagra,” mention of which allows recognition of the plights that faced the southern lower class: “Rickets/ Hookworm/ Bloody-flux/ Starvation” (60-3). From that point, the narrator urgently reaffirms:

And I’m an Agitator!

And that means I want bread
   And homes
   And clothes
And beauty
For all the hollow-eyed babies. (71-6)
And to overcome the suffering of “mothers/ who scrub, and hoe, or weave/ In a factory,” the narrator avows a love for the basics of life even greater than his love for “Peace and quiet” or “the gentle murmur of/ The Chattahoochee” (79-81, 85, 86-87). Against the sway of anger, grief, and love, the poem closes with the earned plea to the reader from this “poet/ in overalls,” this “working man,” this “Mountaineer,” this “Agitator”: “Listen!” (91-4, 90).

To West’s great satisfaction, 5,000 “poor, white mountain people” did listen to Wallace’s speech in Dalton (West qtd. in Wigginton 197). And speak Wallace did—of Mammon, monopolies, and Wall Street; of cross-racial brotherhood between CIO workers and farmers; of “bringing the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth” (Wallace, “Text of Speech” 2). With a call to rid the South of Jim Crow and poll taxes in order to end its “colonial position,” he recognized the labor of revitalizing the Southern farmer as “Christianity in action” (1-3): “Ours is the old, old fight against the Golden Calf, against those who bend the knee to Baal, against the worshippers of Mammon, against the hate-mongers, the war-makers, those who divide men, Christian from Jew, American from Russian” (4). This speech was a great realization of both West’s moral vision and McGill’s nightmare, yet Wallace’s rally did little good.

Only 1,636 votes were cast for Wallace in Georgia (“The Vote”).53 The presidential vote was also a complete loss. Winning 925,226 votes, Thurmond took Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina; Wallace won 1,094,877 votes and captured no state (Schmidt 334). West’s efforts to coordinate the working class and intellectual cross-racial campaign had failed.

53 In a decision that October, none of the Georgia Progressives—other than Wallace and Taylor—were allowed to put their names on the Georgia ballot. At issue was Georgia’s “5 per cent law,” which stated that a new party had to submit a petition signed by 5% of registered voters. Although the Progressives had submitted one with 20,000 more signatures than necessary, Georgia’s Secretary of State had questioned its validity. This led to their dismissal by the courts that held the Progressives would “suffer no serious inconvenience by not having their name printed on the ballot for under Georgia’s law [voters] may write in the name of their choice” (qtd. “Georgia Ballot”).
Conclusion

Within weeks, the Southern Conference would officially draw to a close. That same day, W. E. B. Du Bois’s lengthy essay “The Negro Since 1900: A Progress Report” appeared in The New York Times. Du Bois dedicates the majority of the essay to taking stock of how the situation of Negroes in 1948 measured against 1900: life-expectancy had increased from 32 to 57 years; college enrollment had increased from 5,000 to 88,000; and in 1900 few African Americans voted outside of Northern cities, but in 1947 more than 2,500,000 blacks in the West and North voted, with 600,000 registered voters in twelve Southern states (24). The change in American attention to racial pluralism was readily shown through all three parties addressing Civil Rights in the 1948 elections. Perhaps Du Bois began by praising these advances because the majority of The New York Times’s readers were well-heeled whites. No doubt it is in consideration of that readership that, before Du Bois notes how much work remains to be done, he examines “the long record on the part of white Americans to help black folk.” Right next to the General Education Board, The Commission on Race Relations, the ACLU, the CIO’s Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination, and the Rosenwald Fund, Du Bois wrote that the Southern Conference for Human Welfare “took a strong stand on civil and political rights for Negroes” (54).

Of all those organizations, the SCHW was a remarkable for coordinating a far-flung networks of whites and blacks to confront racial discrimination and economic inequality in their extreme manifestations. Those foci gave common ground to a wide set of educators, activists, labor-organizers, mothers, preachers, lawyers, workers, academics, and artists with divergent concerns. Beginning his involvement with the SCHW in the second-half of its life, Don West perhaps more than any of the others saw his own identities and concerns reflected in the SCHW’s constituency and struggles. Clods of Southern Earth melded those identities and struggles into an inspiring whole. Following Lucy Mason’s impetus, West attempted to bring the

---

54 With Foreman’s energies turned to Wallace, James Dombrowski ceased publishing information about the Progressives in The Southern Patriot. He and Aubrey Williams labored to distance the Educational Fund from the SCHW. By November 12, 1948, Aubrey Williams would write to the Southern AFL leader, George Googe, that “We have completely severed all connections with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare” (qtd. Krueger 190). On November 20, 1948, at Thomas Jefferson’s home in Monticello, Virginia, the Fund brought together fifty people—mostly middle-class whites and blacks—“who adopted a declaration of independence for America’s Negroes” (Krueger 190). The Fund would go on to become a central player in mobilizing whites to help with desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s. The day after the Fund’s declaration, the SCHW was disbanded and laid to rest by its old core of activists: Myles Horton, Clark Foreman, Aubrey Williams, Virginia Durr, and James Dombrowski.
SCHW more directly into the lives of the people whose rights it fought for. Certainly, West’s own work in the 1940s as southern (and Appalachian) preacher, teacher, poet, professor, and political activist sought to rouse Georgians to awareness of their mutual circumstance.

From 1948 to 1953, West returned to the land, peddling vegetables, rather than poems, in Atlanta. In late 1948, the Klan burned down West’s family home, including all of his grandfather’s tools and his own library and manuscripts (Biggers 172). McGill continued to publish columns condemning West, but the poet stayed low and his wife secured a job teaching school in Florida in 1949 and kept the girls with her, only returning to Georgia in the summer (Byerly 321). Most of West’s customers were from the black community, but even then he was easily chastised if he took too public a role (324). West continued to publish poetry, with his next book, The Road is Rocky, coming out in 1951, but never again would West hold the wide prestige he had wielded from 1946 to 1948.

Unlike Rukeyser, who seemed indelibly inured in the literary field, West’s possessed few connections with literary publishers and magazines, nor would he have wanted them. He turned his attention back to what meant most to him: local struggle and education. After farming for five years, in 1954 West was invited to Dalton by Rev. Pratt to edit the church’s newspaper The Southerner which West—working to unionize local chenille mill workers—did until his Communist past caught up with him, forcing him to retire to his farm again (Dunbar 246-47). He continued to organize, teach, and write, and was called before Federal investigations about his past connections.

West left Georgia in 1955 for a teaching post with the Orthodox Rabbinical Training Institute and the University of Maryland in Baltimore. In 1964, he and Connie opened up the Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, West Virginia. West would teach writing again at Antioch Appalachia in Beckley, West Virginia, in the mid 1970s, and in 1982 West End Press—a committed leftist literary small press—would bring out In a Land of Plenty: a Don West Reader. West’s life and reputation (if not the details of his labors) are spoken about as legend among activists and scholars who study and fight for Appalachia. One story shared by Bob Henry Baber, who studied with West in the early 1970s at Antioch Appalachia, catches the essence of what West’s work continues to mean.

Having lived in California and being deeply involved in the beat poetry, Baber had returned to the mountains where his family had originated. Baber reflected, “Don was the
bedrock, you could read his stuff and you could feel this deep, resonant, awesome, heavy, preachy, political stuff coming up through it” (8). He went on, “[We] teased Don, we made a little fun of him when we were at Antioch Appalachia. . . . But it was a teasing done in the way that you would tease a grandfather that you really revered. . . . Don is writing that old time stuff, rhymed stuff, but Don is a force to be reckoned with and you can find his influence weaved through all [our] work” (25). For those poets, coming to self-awareness and discovering their voices in the mountains, West was the earth itself lifted forth. West served as a mentor to the Soup Bean Poets, many of whom would form the core of the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative (SAWC) in April of 1976. Those writers and activists from all over Appalachia came together at the Highlander Center to answer the following questions: What is an Appalachian writer? What should be the balance between politics and art? How does a writer break that catch-22 that says no one can be published until they have published? Is it time for a new direction in style and content in mountain literature? Is writing a form of cultural revolution?

Those same questions were initiated, ruminated, and answered by West, Still, Stuart, and Rukeyser. In 2004, members of SAWC keep answering those questions and inventing Appalachia with poems and stories of celebration and justice. Not as obvious is how American pluralism has been defined by its circumlocutions through the Appalachian mountains, from the Spanish-American War to the United State’s rise as a superpower. Actors as far-flung and diverse as Don West, Phillip Weltner, Charles Boni, Harold Guinzburg, James Still, Muriel Rukeyser, Pat Covici, Theodore Drieser, B. A. Botkin, Lewis Mumford, Alaine Locke, Horace Kallen, Josiah Royce, and Justice Harlan—to name but a few—formed a network of allies across ethnic, racial, religious, geographic, and class lines. This dispersed ensemble validated the variety of diverse cultures that continued under the ever-increasing pressure of standardization, and they revolutionized who could participate in America as a full citizen.

Copyright © Chris Green 2004
Appendix A: Kallen’s Critics and Discursive Heroes

Critics have pointed out that Kallen did not influence American opinion, constructed difference based on racial essentialism, and often did not nurture or respect cultural diversity. These critiques have been conducted by locating a central contradiction at the heart of cultural pluralism, a discourse that continues to be operative.

Philip Gleason’s “American Identity and Americanization” (1980) provides a potent summary and critique of Kallen’s pluralist philosophy upon which scholars such as Werner Sollors and Walter Benn Michaels have drawn. First, Gleason asserts that Kallen’s pluralism was based on his “racialist assumptions” (i.e., that identity is based in heredity), assumptions that remained undiscussed when pluralism gained currency in 1930s as “a tolerant alternative to the melting pot” (44). Kallen’s racialism was based on the frictionless perpetuation of ethnic nationality, which led him to downplay race. The slippage, Gleason concluded, between race, culture, and heredity in Kallen “still constitutes a major theoretical problem in the cultural pluralist interpretation of ethnicity and American identity” (45).

Taking Gleason’s observations as his starting point, Werner Sollors, in “A Critique of Pure Pluralism” (1986), which attacked literary valorization of multiculturalism, tells the story of how Kallen displayed “racist sentiments” (273) when he wrote a letter to his mentor Barrett Wendell about defending Alain Locke, who had been “depreciated” and excluded from activities at the Oxford by whites. In that letter, Kallen seeks Barrett’s advice about how to help but mentions, “As you know, I have neither respect nor liking for his race” (qtd. 270). This contradiction proves the central example from which Sollors claims that Kallen’s views were anti-assimilationist and that his vision of the purity of separation has “remained pervasive” in debates about pluralism (273). (See Louis Menand’s The Metaphysical Club [388-392] for a version that better captures the ambiguity of the situation.)

Finally, although most who write on the history of pluralism and multiculturalism return to Kallen, John Higham in Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (1972) claims Kallen’s article and allies did not carry the day: “At the time, his doctrine of cultural pluralism made little impression outside of Zionist circles. Indeed, the whole immigrant counter-offensive hardly dented the massive phalanx of American opinion” (304). One can understand Higham’s claim of Kallen’s immediate lack of influence, given the federal policies
instigated in 1924—limiting immigration, setting up the border patrol, etc.—along with backlash against Native Americans and African Americans by groups such as the KKK. Yet Kallen was but a single spokesman who clearly wrote in opposition to the larger society, so we might number him with Alain Locke and other activists as recognizing and helping to initiate what would become a wide spread cultural movement.

Such critiques as those listed result from attempts to locate an unsullied discursive hero or to identify someone whose weaknesses might be exploited in an argument. The work of identifying the weaknesses of a discourse is, of course, important, but such work often succumbs to faulty conclusions as the writers attempt to invalidate paradigms with which they disagree. Just as Sollors critiques cultural pluralism for upholding the vestige of purity, so he may be critiqued for seeking a pure discourse. While I do not seek to undertake a defense (for Kallen or any of other actors to be discussed such as Alain Locke, Howard Odum, or B. A. Botkin), I do seek to recognize their influence— influences which are mitigated by every actor’s ambiguity, by the evolution of their intellectual career, and by their role in a diffuse set of similarly ambiguous actors.

In Kallen’s case we might point out that his work was pragmatic in the sense that it was contingent upon social understanding of the moment and performed within the “limits set by nature and luck” (Kallen, “Democracy vs. the Melting Pot” 125), and he foretold that the results of his ideas would not be “fixed and inevitable” but should be used and changed. Moreover, just as those who resisted segregation often supported the absolute difference of race, so Kallen spoke in ways that he knew audiences would acknowledge. In his later work, Kallen clearly demonstrates that group identity is based on heredity but myriad, transient influences (see Cultural Pluralism). Although Kallen was a central figure who spoke against Americanization, he was only one member of an interconnected, yet dispersed, assembly of mutually influencing academics, publishers, teachers, activists, writers, and readers, as I hope this tale shows.
Appendix B:

Percy MacKaye’s The Gobbler of God: A Poem of the Southern Appalachians (1928)

The book is written in a sequence of ten interlocked folk tales, each of which melds narration in standard English with spoken colloquial language. The following example represents the first seven stanzas from “VI. ‘A Boogey of Blooms’” (p. 39-45).

AYAH, Marse Arbel!

In one hand he dangled a long, big-bellied gourd.
Bristling, the gobbler swiveled his neck to strike,
But Lou-Elly-Lou raised one arm with a quick cry:

“Marse Arble!—Honey Marse Arble him come!
Drap yo’ hissin’, ole Gobble.
You ‘members Marse Arble w’at him ride fur-yander ober de mount’ins,
An’ Ah straddles he nag neck, dar, w’en I hollers you’ ‘Swing Low!’”

The gobbler sleeked and bowed.
Dark Arvel stepped slowly nearer,
Still holding his glittering gaze on Lou-Elly-Lou, and swining his gourd.

“Luck chile, I tells you again: whar’s your shirty-tail?”

Lou-Elly-Lou jumped forward,
Grabbing the gourd from his hand and snuffing her nose at the neck hole.

“Drunk! You’s Drunk, Marse Arbel!
Dat raht smart co’n-likker.
Tote him in de cubbud, ole Gobble!”
Appendix C: The Ghost of Lincoln and Light in the Mountains

Mark Twain had but one concern about General Oliver Otis Howard’s request that he preside over the celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s 92nd Birthday Anniversary at Carnegie Hall to raise funds for Lincoln Memorial University at Cumberland Gap, Tennessee: Howard must not find anything offensive about Twain’s essay, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (Ensor 45). To be published in the *North American Review* in February 1901, the essay attacked President McKinley’s betrayal of American democratic values when the American army displaced Emilio Aguinaldo, president of the nascent Philippine Republic, and entered into protracted conflict with Filipino forces. “To a Person Sitting in Darkness” aligned American actions in the Philippines with other contemporary imperialist conflicts, including German retaliation in China during the Boxer Rebellion, the English persecution of the Boer War, and Russia’s invasion of Manchuria. All these assaults were conducted under the guise, as Twain puts it, of “conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness,” but the irony of the essay burns clear: the only ones in darkness are Americans who were ignorant of the realities of the conflicts (27). Twain’s problem was that Howard had campaigned hardily for McKinley in the 1900 election, the main issue of which became America’s imperialist stance toward foreign territories.1 In response, Twain joined the Anti-Imperialist League, whose other members included William Dean Howells (a vice president and Twain’s good friend), William Lloyd Garrison, and Ambrose Pierce (Zwick xxi). How then could Twain and Howard share the same purpose, especially as Howard had first asked McKinley as a speaker? (“Blue and Gray” 1) The answer was the ghost of Lincoln and education in America’s Southern mountains.

Although Twain’s essay climaxed with the proclamation that Lincoln’s emblem was “the Slave’s Broken Chains” and McKinley’s was “the Chains Repaired” (38), Howard insisted that Twain’s stance was not a problem and wrote to plead for his attendance “as your heart is patriotic” (qtd. in Ensor 45). So to a crowd of thousands in Carnegie Hall, Twain spoke with witty and eloquent passion about the healing of a nation, for both he and the main speaker, Henry Watterson—editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*—had fought for the Confederacy and now they joined with a general whose forces and president they had opposed. That those “old

1 Between 1899 and 1903, America formally annexed Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and acquired the Panama Canal.
wounds are healed” was given testimony by two confederates being asked to speak at Lincoln’s birthday, and Twain expounded, “we testify it by laying our honest homage at the feet of Abraham Lincoln and in forgetting that you of the North and we of the South were ever enemies, and remembering only that we are not indistinguishably fused together and namable only by one great name—American” (230). Twain’s passion was the Trojan Horse for his biting irony when he pointed out that men always, from the Crusades to the Civil War, fought for “convictions” and “that cause is holy, the blood spilled for it is sacred, the life that is laid down for it consecrated.” While he recognized the bravery and pride in such deeds, implicit in his talk was a condemnation of McKinley’s war, whose imperial endeavor bonded North and South.

Naming its main building Grant-Lee Hall, Lincoln Memorial University (LMU) was invigorated (both with financial support and students) through appeals to resolve just such sectionalism (Suppiger 14). Founded by a Congregationalist minister in 1897, LMU was built on imperial remains in two ways. First, an essay in Harper’s Weekly (1906), written to raise support for LMU, explains that “[t]he westward-sweeping progress of the empire” had left behind, isolated in the mountains, “the descendents of the pioneers—the very finest and fittest of Anglo-Saxon stock” (Allen 11). Thus, in light of America’s new international imperial project, the time had come to give an “uplifting hand” to the “patriotic and devoted white people of the Southern mountains” by providing those “deadly earnest” students access to a university where teachers could be trained to educate younger mountaineers in “remote mountain gulches” (11-12). Second, the literal grounds of the university were purchased after the collapse of international resource extraction from the southern mountains. In the late 1880s, the Harrogate Land Company, which combined investors from New York and “a well-financed British company called the ‘American Association, Ltd,’” bought 80,000 acres and began to build Harrogate, a residential reserve for the upper classes, and Middlesboro, an industrial city built in the Cumberland Gap in 1889 to facilitate the harvest of timber and minerals (Suppiger 8). But with the financial panic of 1893, the capital influx failed, leaving Middlesboro and Harrogate, in which twenty-million dollars had already been invested, ghost towns (8). The properties were auctioned off for a fraction of the investment.

One of the buyers was O. O. Howard’s business agent, who purchased the land for LMU: 580 acres and an abandoned 700-room sanatorium, the one which would be renamed Grant-Lee Hall (14). Howard had become aware of the situation after being invited in 1895 to lecture on
“Grant at Chattanooga,” a campaign in which Howard had served, at the Cumberland Gap and to
split the proceeds with the Harrow Academy (Carpenter, “Architects” 10). The academy had
been founded by Arthur A. Myers, a Congregationalist minister who had first come to Berea
from Michigan in the 1870s to build elementary schools. Myers soon traveled to far eastern
Kentucky and, under the sponsorship of the American Missionary Association in 1888, went to
the Cumberland Gap where he founded Harrow in 1890 (Suppiger 6; Carpenter, “Architects” 9).
The evening after the lecture, Myers and Howard talked late into the night and planned the
founding of LMU. Howard had many motivations for doing so. He and his lecture agent had
talked of building an educational institution in memory of Lincoln in the mountains. During a
meeting with Lincoln during the Civil War, in which they strategized about the necessity of
directing troops around the nearly impenetrable mountains, Lincoln had implored Howard to aid
“those mountain people who have been shut out of the world all these years” (Suppiger 6; Allen
11). In addition, Howard was also a staunch Congregationalist who, as head of the Freedmen’s
Bureau from its inception in 1865 to its expiration in 1874, founded Howard University with the
aid of Congregationalists living in Washington D. C. (Carpenter, Sword 169). In opposition to
Black Codes and outmaneuvering those who merely wished to provide a school dedicated to
minimal education (including key members of the Federal government), Howard allocated
significant funds from the Freedmen’s Bureau to Howard in order to establish professional
education in Law, Medicine, and the Sciences for Negroes in a school which was both racially
and sexually integrated (Logan 59-68; Carpenter 169-184).

Howard’s work is fascinating series of contradictions that seem to harness those of
America itself. As a General in the U.S. Army, Howard fought both for the expansion of the
nation and did more than perhaps any other to facilitate integration. In addition to founding
Howard for African-Americans and funding LMU for Appalachians, during his presidency of
Howard University, O. O. Howard was called upon by the army to negotiate peace with Cochise
and the Apaches in southern Arizona. Howard did so with great accord although Americans
critiqued him for leaving Cochise’s people with any military capacity. When Howard took the
presidency of the University from 1868 to 1983, he became embroiled in attacks upon his
character and use of resources, so he returned to the military, which led him to command the
campaign against the Nez Perce—indeed, Chief Joseph’s famous surrender words were delivered
to Howard: “Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he has told me before is in my heart.
I am tired of fighting . . . . I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I shall fight no more forever” (qtd. in Carpenter Sword 261). Moreover, Howard also was the army’s official author for The Story of the Spanish-American War and the Revolt in the Philippines (1899) and in 1899 his son was one of the first U.S. soldiers killed in the Philippine-American war (296), which makes Howard’s encouraging acceptance of Twain’s stance all that much more resilient. With the death of his son, Howard had poured himself into the support of LMU, and he continued to help raise funds for until his death in 1909.

As described by Howard, in 1906, LMU had 560 students from “the white people who live among the mountains of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia” and “have in their veins the very best blood of our great nation” (Howard “Lincoln” 771). Dedicated to educating those who “scarcely know the color of money,” each student paid minimally to attend LMU and worked, instead, for some 30 hours-per-week to build and upkeep the campus. The same week that Howard died in October 1909, an article appeared in Harper’s Weekly and ended with the promise, “What great things must be expected from Lincoln Memorial University, where every man and woman, boy and girl, is fighting to keep each foothold gained and to whom the books, lectures, classes, etc, are things as serious as life itself” (Allen 12). This then was the set of national contradictions, educational hopes, racial myths, and pure determination shaped James Still’s, Don West’s, and Jesse Stuart’s experience at LMU.
Appendix D: Don West’s Critique of Hindman

Three important events happened for Don West during his education at Vanderbilt’s School of Religion. First, West and his wife worked a year at Hindman Settlement School, and he did his thesis under Alva Taylor’s guidance on the social conditions of Knott County. Second, he traveled to Europe and studied how the Danish Folk Schools operated. These experiences, combined with his experience as a student in the Berry Schools in Georgia, which had expelled him for protesting the showing of Birth of a Nation, led him oppose the Settlement school approach:

As long as we continue to measure progress and worthiness by academic tests, we will have such results as Hindman and other rural schools sending their students away from the soil to seek white collar jobs. . . . Economically, we know that there is not any prosperous territory inviting the poor mountaineer to come down from the hills and drink of its riches. . . . Instead of practicing the Danish system of educating the people to return to their communities to enliven, enrich, and lift the whole community life, they have picked off the most promising and sent them away. (“Knott County Kentucky” 55-57)

Studies by Hindman claim that the overwhelming majority of their students who left the area to seek work or education returned. In his history of Hindman, Jess Stoddart relates,

By 1928, 124 students had graduated from the Settlement, nearly three-quarters of whom had gone on to college, normal school, or other institutions. Forty-five worked as mountain teachers. Five years later, May Stone [one of the school’s directors] conducted another survey of graduates, estimating that more than 80 percent had gone on for further schooling, and she counted seventy teachers among the graduates. At a still later date, in 1937, she said that 84 percent of the graduates had returned to the mountains and formed a solid corps of teachers, doctors, lawyers, business people, and community leaders. (94)

While it is impossible to verify these figures, they counter West’s claims. West’s critique was conducted just before he undertook the founding of Highlander Folk School, which sought to politically empower those whom it served. For details, see Chapter Four and “Appendix X: The Founding of Highlander Folk School.”
Appendix E: Venues of Publication

Below is a rundown of where Still published prior to the publication of Hounds in June 1937.

**National Weeklies/Monthlies**
- *Atlantic Monthly*: Feb 1936, July 1936
- *Esquire*: Oct 1936
- *Household Magazine*: March 1936, July 1936
- *The Nation*: Jan 1937
- *New Republic*: Sept 1936, March 1937
- *Saturday Review of Literature*: July 1935, Oct 1936

**Critical Quarterlies and High Profile Literary**
- *Frontier and Midland*: Spring 1936, Spring 1937
- *Poetry*: May 1937, Oct 1935
- *Virginia Quarterly Review*: July 1935
- *Yale Review*: Autumn 1936

**Little Magazines**
- *North Georgia Review*: Summer 1937

**Special Focus**
- *Mountain Life and Work*: Oct 1935, Jan 1936, April 1936, April 1937
- *Arcadian Life*: Feb. 1937

**Newspapers**
- *Lexington Herald*: May 1936
- *Lexington Leader*: Oct 1936
- *New York Herald-Tribune*: June 1936, July 1936
- *New York Times*: Feb 1936
Appendix F: Cultural Pluralism and American Education

In *Our Racial and National Minorities: Their History, Contributions, and Present Problems* (1937), Francis J. Brown and Joseph Slabey Roucek compiled a wide array of essays about cultural pluralism that were designed to inform educators at all levels. The goal was not only, as with earlier publications, to demonstrate the “impact of American culture upon these minority groups” but to show their influence upon America (xi). The editors’ hoped to distinguish how best to overcome the social problems that resulted from “racial and cultural differentiation” while preserving the resources of that difference. Near the end of the book, E. George Payne adroitly summarizes the version of cultural pluralism that progressive, white educators and cultural workers held around the country, from which the quote in the chapter was taken. Values were no longer seen as being passed on through heredity but were generated through dense historical experience: “these minority groups have been so completely conditioned by their heritages that the historic past could not be sacrificed even if they chose to forget their past experiences” (762). If they were forced to abandon their cultural “fundamentals,” people’s characters would be sundered, resulting in “cultural deterioration, the disintegration of family life, and maladjustments in our social life.” However, such fundamentals would take generations to outgrow and could not be transferred piecemeal. The solution was to aid “adjustment” by “preserving” the minorities’ “cultural traits of dignifying qualities and practices” and generate a feeling of pride in their original culture. The problem was the interconnection of the “dignifying” qualities and the debasing ones, which had to be repressed or extracted. The solution was to generate a “pride” in the “folkways, mores, customs, conventions, and social patterns” of the minority’s homeland. The contradiction, one carried out today in the practice of much multiculturalism, is that such “pride” took the form of abstract representation rather than enacting adaptations of diverse cultural practices within mainstream schools, communities, and governments. While aware of the difficulties, neither Payne nor any other author in *Our Racial and National Minorities* could propose an apt way to preserve the “dignifying qualities and practices” of a culture when its people had left their original social environment. The book examines a wide set of cultures but fails to consider regional white America.² Other essays

---

² The book begins with American Indian Tribal Groups, moves to “The American Negro” (by James Weldon Johnson), then covers “Old Immigration,” including the British, Irish, French, Dutch, Danish, etc., and the “new”
consider the impact of migration and standardizing technologies (both as forces of integration as well as means of preserving identity in the “ethnic press”) upon minority communities.
Appendix G: Literary Prestige and Weekly Political Magazines

In the 1920s and 1930s, the weekly political magazines held tremendous influence on the literary field, and they played a significant role in establishing Rukeyser’s reputation. Two lyrics from U. S. 1 appeared in The Nation; two poems appeared in The New Republic; and three long poems, including “Mediterranean,” appeared in New Masses. In Literary Opinion in America (1937), Morton Zabel cited the literary influence of New Republic and The Nation as being as significant as any little magazine to establishing America’s literary critical awakening (vii).

From a low of 25,000 in 1930, The New Republic ended with 30,000 subscriptions by the end of the 1930s (Seidman 109-10). From 1916 to 1921 The New Republic was the first magazine to publish Steven Vincent Benét, Louise Bogan, John Dos Passos, Robert Hillyer, and William Faulkner (Test 191-92). By the time Cowley became literary editor in late 1928, the magazine was an established force on both the literary left and the right: on the left, Sol Funaroff, editor of Dynamo, edited the Proletarian Poets mini-anthology (28 Nov. 1934: 75-77), including Muriel Rukeyser, Kenneth Fearing, and Edwin Rolfe; the following month, on the right, Robert Penn Warren edited a mini-anthology of Southern Poets (26 Dec. 1934: 184-186), including himself, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, and Kathryn Worth. Cowley established his close editorial relationship to Faulkner during this time, which he carried over into his role as an editor with Viking in the mid-1940s.

Under the influence of Granville Hicks and the literary editorship of Stanley Burnshaw (and later Horace Gregory) the New Masses held just as great an influence on the literary field, at least until 1938. With a circulation of 25,000 in 1935 (Wald 108) and its close collaboration with and influence upon the American Writers’ League, the magazine was a forum for manifesto and argument about the literature’s relationship to bringing about class- and revolutionary-consciousness. By 1937, its circulation had reached 60,000 (Kalaidjian 162), and as I will show, Rukeyser’s fate in the literary field was partially tied to her close association with the magazine.
Appendix H: Contemporary Scholars Appraisals of Rukeyser’s Audience

When evaluating “The Book of the Dead,” Robert Shumer, Michael Thurston, and Shoshana Wechsler espouse its readership in terms of Rukeyser’s hope for her poetry to activate a “multiplicity” of readers through expressing the “tension between the parts” of society in an “organic structure” (Rukeyser, The Life 211). Rukeyser continues, “Then the multiplicities sing, each in his own voice. Then we understand that there is not meaning but meanings; not liberty but liberties. And multiplicity is available to all.” Such a vision is certainly worth realizing, but rather than analyzing how the sequence situates the reader, critics have created an ideal ersatz audience based upon Rukeyser’s stated poetics. For instance, Michael Thurston deduces Rukeyser’s ideal audience based on the voices in her monologues—such as a black miner, a doctor, a bereaved mountain wife. He claims these “types” are “opening out to groups of people like them. . . . In doing so, [Rukeyser] speaks to various audiences by speaking as them, in language marked somehow as their own” (181-82). Other critics evaluate the poem in terms of Rukeyser’s poetics. Robert Shumer reiterates Rukeyser’s own statements and calls the reader “an active participant” and explains that Rukeyser wrote for a “fully human audience, an audience as responsive to imaginative leaps” (184). Strong readers of “The Book of the Dead” need such fluid responsiveness, but identifying necessary literacy characteristics is not the same as locating an audience. Shoshana Wechsler comes a step closer. She locates Rukeyser’s poetic method in “The Book of the Dead” as a response to awaken “the middle- and upper-class documentary audience” whose decade-long experience of spectacle in “self-serving or exploitative” documentaries had desensitized them to human plight (131). This audience remained outside of the events being narrated, but through her pragmatist poetics Rukeyser sought to bring her readers inside the experience and provoke a change in the audience’s attitude towards witness, awareness, and involvement. These critical points are well taken and direct us to examine Rukeyser’s poetics as guiding principles rather than as the end achievement of the poetry.
Appendix I: Horace Gregory in the 1930s

Describing his own work, Gregory wrote, “I do employ a deliberate technic, but its origins lie in emotional conviction” (21). The era’s most influential critic—Louis Untermeyer—described Gregory’s poetry as “a combination of ‘high seriousness’ and irony, and the ability to employ images straight from contemporary life” (“Introduction” 26). Although not a member of the Communist Party because he found group work difficult and dissuasive to his artistic ingenuity, Gregory had worked closely with the Communists since he came to New York in the mid-1920s and regularly published extended reviews of modernist poetry in the New Masses.

After seeking out the New Masses in search of other young writers, Gregory found himself a classic fellow traveler living four doors down from Lewis Mumford at Mumford’s collective Sunnyside housing reclamation project (The House 168, 177-80). As a group which includes Rukeyser, the term “fellow traveler” deserves definition, which has been best articulated by Alan Wald in Exiles from a Future Time (2003) where he explains the breadth of the Communist movement: “To regard Burnshaw [literary editor of the New Masses], and thousands like him, as not ‘Communist’ because of their failure to pay fifty cent dues, is to miss apprehending the rudimentary glue of this remarkable movement. The bond can be fathomed less fittingly as top-down Party discipline than as elective affinity stemming from common longings, dreads, and experiences” (112). Indeed, Gregory, while not a Communist, was an influential figure. Gregory served as the doorway through which Rukeyser progressed from literary editor of the Student Review to a poet and reviewer published in the New Masses.

In “One Writer’s Position,” an essay for the New Masses, Gregory explained that he understood Communist activity as “a final solution,” but he chose not to joint the Party so he could remain “objective”:

---

3 In a telling example of inter-discursive connection, Gregory’s professors from the University of Wisconsin had given him a letter of introduction to Horace Kallen who undertook to show Gregory around town. In the process, Gregory relates, “He begged me to emulate the ‘proletarian’ verse and ballads” (The House 142). While Gregory resisted that particular influence due to the poor nature of the poetry that Kallen shared, Gregory did go on to meet significant literary contacts at “the parties given by Kallen’s ‘young people,’” including William Rose Benét who quickly helped Gregory gain work as a freelance reviewer (143). Because Gregory had suffered a debilitating childhood illness and was working so hard to keep himself alive, he soon found himself close to death, but he was saved when Kallen discovered him languishing for lack of care in the poor ward of a New York hospital (157).

4 In 1934 and 1935, Rukeyser would review William Faulkner and Edith Sitwell. While her early reviews in Student Review seemed to value books based on their recreation of Communist world understandings, her reviews for the New Masses valued the writers more in terms of their literary merit.
I must make my own effort at being honest, I must follow my own compulsion to stay within the range of my beliefs, and to give, most of all, whatever statement I make in poetry a personal unity. I believe my value as a writer depends upon a gift of observation, and from where I stand, somewhere outside the circle of all groups, the Communist Party has proved to me again and again that it is the only group retaining a hope for the future that I find necessary for living through these times of terror and destruction. (20)

What is particularly remarkable about this statement is that it prefaced moves of the Communist Party, which had not yet begun overtly to cultivate relationships with non-Communist writers with the start of the Popular Front in April 1935. Gregory was so influential as to be voted a member of the executive committee of the League of American Writers in 1935 (along with such central figures as Joseph Freeman, Malcolm Crowley, and Kenneth Burke) (Wald 123; Crowley, The Dream 279).
Appendix J: Robert Josephy

Born in 1903, Josephy grew up in a town just outside of New York City. Like Rukeyser’s, his family was middle-class, Jewish, and business oriented, and they were also searching for mainstream respectability. Josephy shares, “The people on both sides of my family were Jews, but they had little interest in Jewish customs and few vestiges of Jewish culture . . . . They took for granted their gradual integration into mainstream Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, while still maintaining links to the Jewish community and label” (14). Although he was frustrated with his family’s attitude toward success, Josephy explains, “I have always retained a sense of my ethnic, if not my religious identity with Jews” (15). While it is impossible to locate the exact effects of his ethnicity on his work or politics, Josephy learned to run the full cycle of production from Alfred Knopf, for whom he came to work via his connections as a distant relative. Josephy felt that Knopf demonstrated a strong commitment to literature: “I found him full of idealism; he told me that the returns from publishing were not material but intellectual, almost spiritual” (33). Josephy began work with Knopf in 1920 and discovered a design aesthetic that he began to reform: Knopf “cared a great deal for how his books were made and had a deserved reputation for spending more than most publishers on style and materials, but I began to think that the books I was producing for him were too flamboyant. Often their style did not reflect their content” (36). In response Josephy developed a style that made his demanding, exact, and graceful typography invisible to notice. At the conclusion of his memoir, he writes, “I avoided attempts at self-expression, the injection of the designer’s ego which vulgarizes so much of contemporary typography and often obscures the clear expression of a writer’s meaning” (220). In 1925, Josephy undertook work as a freelancer, designing Viking’s first six books. Notably, all three of Viking’s editor-owners were Jewish as well, an ethnic identity that all valued and formed an essential connection. With that start, Josephy quickly branched out. He relates, “Another of my early clients, Covici·Friede, catered to this trade with naïve erotic works by obscure European writers. I must say that I enjoyed devising fancy topography and decoration to fit the rococo style of these authors” (55). He soon began columns for Publishers’ Weekly and Bookman, and began teaching a series of book design classes in 1932. As he continued his work, his skills grew ever more honed, and he designed high-quality inexpensive books for mass production in a style which transformed American typography.
Appendix K: Zaturenska and Rukeyser

In many ways, Gregory and Zaturenska served as Rukeyser’s parents, for when Rukeyser first met Gregory she was only nineteen and had recently left Vassar because of her father’s bankruptcy. With the publication of Theory of Flight (1935) and U. S. 1 (1938), Rukeyser, Gregory, and Zaturenska (who was also Jewish) were widely considered a set that shared in each others’ reputations, and the fate of one affected the fate of the other, a point of considerable influence upon the literary field’s reception of all three. Just as Rukeyser had dedicated her sequence “Night-Music” to Zaturenska, in turn Zaturenska had dedicated her Pulitzer Prize winning book Cold Morning Sky (1937) to Rukeyser. Rukeyser understood their lyric poetry to be quite similar, and she described Zaturenska’s form as having a “dark and intricate under-context” that was “lucid and musical, and obliquely lit by the application of formal symbols to complex emotion” (“The Classic” 81). Their mutual wrestling with their identity as women as radical poets gave them a strong bond.

Zaturenska’s letters to Rukeyser demonstrate her anxiety over the rifts in the literary world. For instance, Zaturenska wrote about Louise Bogan’s vendetta against them in her New Yorker reviews, which was inspired by Bogan’s expectations of receiving the Pulitzer that Zaturenska then won. But Zaturenska’s, Bogan’s, and Rukeyser’s mutual dislike also resulted from their competition to value women’s experience with their lyrics. Zaturenska also distrusted high profile publications, and she voiced her distrust of Rukeyser’s connections with Poetry. Zaturenska shared her vision of Willard Mass, whom she counted as “one of the vultures behind the battlefield” ([1938]), along with other members of “The League of American Vipers” (3 July 1939), her joke about the “The League of American Writers” whom she felt had turned upon Gregory. Zaturenska’s prediction proved true upon Mass’s review of U.S. 1. In her frustration at “clique-warfare,” Zaturenska felt that “the real poetry will come from those who steer clear of groups and formulas and see the truth for themselves” ([1938]). Against audiences, against critics, Zaturenska insisted, “For when one consults one’s own integrity, one is apt to be right. Otherwise one betrays the sources of one’s work, the springs of one’s temperament and natural inclinations—one’s way of seeing—and of feeling things—the very force that makes one

---

write at all” (3 July 1939). With such rejection of social participation, Zaturenska comes close to rearticulating Allen Tate’s own construction of authentic “tradition” as that writing which draws upon “those ways of feeling, those convictions of propriety, those ways of speaking, of which the writer himself is hardly aware, and from which he cannot escape” (158). Rukeyser’s seeming success at this very point, the difficult organic articulation of social responsibility within her system of “poetic belief,” generated Gregory’s admiration for her poetry.

---

6 See Chapter One, Part III, “The Vanderbilt Agrarians.”
Rukeyser was interested in bringing the tale of the worker’s plight to a wider audience through turning it into a movie. By April 1938, she had approached the British documentarian Paul Rotha about directing the film with Paul Robeson playing the lead role of George Robinson (Rotha 211). But when Rotha visited New York, he was attacked by Communist Party members as a “Trotskyite,” because he critiqued Russian film and talked to John Dos Passos who was by then a person non-grata with American Communists (209-10). Rukeyser wrote him to clear up the accusations, and Rotha sent back a letter that must have set an example for Rukeyser. In it, he shared his support of her film project but asked her to “snap out of this blinkered evaluation thing” (211). Rotha modeled a way for Rukeyser to work as an artist and not be limited by Communist association. Rukeyser went on to defend Rotha and “refuse the party card offered to her.” She also continued trying to find a home for the film, for which she had written a detailed script and plot. By 1940, Rukeyser was sending out the script to national film companies, but it remained unproduced. One commentator from Paramount Pictures noted, “Personally, I was extremely interested in reading the notes which suggest a really poetic way of treating the story for film. However, it’s a distinctly individual method and I’m afraid that any director or producer on the lot would want to do it his own way” (Mealand). Rukeyser would publish her “notes” (with revisions) in the short-lived magazine Film: A Quarterly of Discussion and Analysis (May 1940). Therefore, we know that Rukeyser saw the poem as speaking to a narrow audience, which she sought to broaden by bringing the story of Gauley Bridge to the screen.
Appendix M: The State of Scholarship on Don West

Clods of Southern Earth is a book whose history and value has only recently begun to be excavated and appraised. Scholars and activists in Appalachian Studies have long held West as an icon; however, due to his association with the far left, scholarship on West has just begun. Only two articles, both recently appearing in The Journal of Appalachian Studies, have been written on Clods of Southern Earth. Jeff Biggers, a national journalist who was mentored by West in the 1970s, authored “The Fugitive of Southern Appalachian Literature: Reconsidering the Poetry of Don West” (1999). My own article, “Working Truth Inside and Out: Don West, Muriel Rukeyser, Poetry, and the Popular Front in Appalachia, 1932-1948” was published in 2002. Other published academic work on West is minimal. West’s poetry is mentioned by Cary Nelson in Repression and Recovery (1989) and James Smethurst in The New Red Negro (1999), each of which focuses on the connection between leftist politics and literature. In Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left (U of North Carolina P, 2002), Alan Wald dedicates seven pages to a biographical sketch of West. The only full article on West outside Appalachian Studies is Rachel Rubin’s “Voice of the Cracker: Don West Re-Invents the Appalachian” which appears in Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States (eds. James Smethurst and Bill Mullens, U of North Carolina P, 2003). David C. Duke has a chapter called “Two Appalachians: Don West and Denise Gardinia” in his book Writers and Miners: Activists and Imagery in America (UP of Kentucky, 2002), which quickly overviews West’s connection with mining activism. In 1994 Victoria Morris Byerly completed a dissertation that traced West’s connection with the Communist Party (with one chapter addressing his poetry in general) called What Shall a Poet Sing? The Living Struggle of the Southern Poet and Revolutionary Don West. A Don West Reader, edited by Jeff Biggers and George Brosi, was just released from the University of Illinois Press (2004), which includes the most definitive biographical essay on West yet produced. Jim Lorence has also signed a contract with Illinois UP for a biography on West, due out in 2006.

[back to chapter]
Appendix N: The Founding of Highlander Folk School

After returning from his tour of Denmark and Europe in 1932, West became the pastor of a small Congregational Church near Crossville, Tennessee, and he began to search for a spot to create a folk school in the spirit of what he had encountered in Denmark, which he originally read about in Olive Dame Campbell’s *The Danish Folk School: Its Influence in the Life of Denmark and the North* (Duke 49-50). In 1932, West soon established the Highlander Folk School with Myles Horton in Monteagle, Tennessee. Both young men were preachers who sought to enact a social gospel—the idea that bringing about political, social, and economic equality and justice was the foremost concern of Christianity. Just as West had studied with Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt University, Horton had studied with Rheinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary and had also traveled to Denmark to study the folk schools. West recounted that those schools’ curriculum was “largely built on the cultural heritage of the Danish people—the myth and stories and the folklore and history” (Wigginton 77). Highlander Folk School was West and Horton’s version for Appalachia. Through it, they promoted social change by bringing together parts of a population who had stood at odds—such as white and black farmers or farmers and factory workers—but had common interests to talk about, discover, and solve their own problems (Dunbar 42). In short, their pragmatic pedagogy was directed toward solving real-world problems through hands-on, unhierarchical, adaptive, and reflective dialogue and action.

Before establishing Highlander, while West was still completing his degree at Vanderbilt, Taylor had led West and others to aid in a mining strike in Wilder, Tennessee. After three previous pay cuts, the miner’s contract had expired in June, 1932, and the company cut wages again and began firing union members (Duke 48). West relates, “There was a long drawn out struggle about the right to organize, and there was much violence. But as students at Vanderbilt, Dr. Alva Taylor’s class through the week would see if we could collect some food or maybe a little money—anything we could get to help the strikers. Then on the weekends, we would go out and take it to them” (Wigginton 71). Taylor’s commitment can be seen in his calm negotiation of aid to the impoverished families. He activated the Church Emergency Relief Committee, which had the support of prominent religious figures such as W. Russell Bowie and Rheinhold Niebuhr, along with cross-denominational representation from New York to
Savannah to St. Louis (Harbison 236). Similarly, his students such as Howard Kester, working with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, formed the Wilder National Relief Committee (Duke 48). During this mutual work, West and Horton met and formed Highlander, and it was over proper response to Wilder that they would fall out.

Taylor’s interpersonal skill convinced his radical students and other visitors, such as the Socialist Norman Thompson, to set their differences aside and give aid on a non-partisan basis (Harbison 238). In a letter to a friend, Taylor shared, “radical socialists on one side and a reactionary dyed-in-wool, laissez fare [sic] social worker to the other, I stuck to the middle of the road, kept them working and today have not warmer personal friends” (qtd. 238). Yet in late April 1933, the strike’s leader, Barney Graham was gunned down. Although Horton had received a tip about the assassination several days before hand, after meeting with Taylor and Kester, Graham was riddled with ten bullets, four of which struck him from behind. West attended the funeral and helped regroup the miners (Duke 48), but he and Horton had different ideas of what was to be done.

In his youth and fury, West desired action, while Horton wanted to follow a more careful path of resolution: West felt Horton to be an authoritarian, while Horton found West to be an individualist (Glen 19). West left Highlander, but his radical political fire lit. David Duke, who writes of West’s work with miners, relates, “what [West] saw at Wilder only clarified what he had known for most of his life—that there was a tremendous gulf between the have and the have nots, the oppressed and the oppressors” (49). West had witnessed the violent conflict and exploitation of class warfare, and not even Highlander’s radical approach to politicizing the folk would prove radical enough. Within the next two years, West would become a member of the Communist Party and help lead the defense of Angelo Herndon in Atlanta.
By 1912 when he published his first book *The Work of Christian Missions*, Taylor had begun to practice a “Christian sociology” and an “educational evangelicalism” (Harbison 110). He went on to work with the Interchurch World Movement (IWM) and in 1919 became involved in their investigation of a strike and the fight for unionization in the plants of the United States Steel Cooperation (138, 143-44). Taylor, who interviewed innumerable strikers, was central in drafting the IWM’s final report. That report supported the union’s struggles and implored churches to become relentless advocates of “justice, righteousness, and humanity” (qtd. 152). While the strikes failed and the IWM folded in 1923, Taylor witnessed the impact when Harding cut back the work week for steel workers (163). The event galvanized Taylor’s commitment to opposing exploitation.

He went on to direct the Disciples of Christ’s Board of Temperance and Social Welfare (1921-1928), which was headquartered in Indianapolis, the city where the Klan flourished in the 1920s. Taylor opposed them at every step (206-08). He then worked closely with the Religion and Labor Foundation and published (and edited) *Social Trends* (1928-1932), a journal of Christian sociology on current social problems. From 1929 to 1936, Taylor taught Social Ethics for the School of Religion at Vanderbilt University, where West was his student.\(^7\) While there, he fought for the League of Nations Association and gave one hundred “talks for peace” in 1935 (330). Modeling for West just how professorships were conducted, Taylor focused on rural and interracial education. He also demonstrated how professorships were to be lost when the academy became threatened by a professor’s community action.\(^8\)

After being dismissed from his job, Taylor became directly involved in the mountains when he helped to organize the Save the Children Fund, which focused on mountain schools (1938-1944), and administered the Cumberland Homesteads (1939-1940). Taylor first publicly praised the SCHW in an article he wrote in 1940 (Harbison 400). Perhaps because he had so many common associates in its ranks who knew the integrity of his work, the SCHW’s board

---

\(^7\) As pointed out by Jeff Biggers in his article “The Fugitive of Southern Appalachian Literature: Reconsidering the Poetry of Don West,” West attended Vanderbilt where the Fugitives had just completed their literary sojourn and from whence key Agrarians were then carrying out their cultural work.

\(^8\) Recent graduates of Vanderbilt School of Religion point out that the school is understood to be the “wicked step-child” of the university because of the radical stance promoted by those professors for whom Taylor had acted as a mentor.
offered him the position of executive secretary, which Taylor called “the biggest thing of that kind in the South” (qtd. 401). Taylor believed the post “would mean a lot of work with very small pay and while I should like immensely to do it because of the worth of the cause, I fear some difficulties over work being on call for arbitration” (qtd. 401). When the SCHW moved its headquarters to Nashville, Taylor became its secretary-treasure but ceded the position of executive secretary to Jim Dombowski, who came from the Highlander Folkschool, which West had cofounded in 1932 with Myles Horton (402).⁹ Instead, Taylor took a half-time position as Executive Secretary for the Council of Southern Mountain Workers and editor of their *Mountain Life and Work* (1941-1944). As predicted with West’s own conflicts with the magazine in the 1930s, Taylor’s radical stance came into conflict with the magazine as well.

---

⁹ After the SCHW folded in 1948, Dombrowski continued as the President of the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF). Taylor continued to aid the SCEF until he died in 1957.
The initiative of CIO members helped catalyze the creation of the SCHW, which in turn supported the CIO’s labor organization. In 1951, three years after the SCHW had disbanded (although its educational arm, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, continued to play a major role in school desegregation), Clark Forman, President of the SCHW, wrote “A Decade of Hope,” a synopsis of SCHW’s history for Phylon (an important journal of contemporary African-American politics and culture published by Atlanta University). The SCHW was first conceived by Joseph Gelders. Gelders had given up his job as head of the Physics Laboratory at the University of Alabama to help workers organize and fight for civil rights, and he was severely beaten by “company thugs” for his efforts (138). As a result, he took up a campaign of exposing such purposeful acts of violence. He met with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1938 and proposed the idea for the SCHW. Roosevelt assured Gelders he would have her and the President’s cooperation. Upon Gelders’s return to Alabama, he was joined in his project by William Mitch, Alabama director for the CIO and President of District 20 of the United Mine Workers. In their plans, which aimed to focus on civil rights as a way of promoting unionization, they expanded considerations to the economic state of the South in general when President Roosevelt evoked national attention with his statement in the Report on the Economic Conditions of the South: “the South presents right now the nation’s No. 1 economic problem” (National Emergency 1).

After contracting polio, from 1924 Roosevelt began spending several months a year in Warm Springs in western Georgia to treat his ailment. While there, Roosevelt witnessed the workings of the South, so he was open to Edwin R. Embree, the President of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, who approached him soon after his election in 1932 about setting up a position in his administration to assure that Negroes were treated fairly under the New Deal (139). Franklin heeded the advice and set up the position under Harold Ikes, the Secretary of the Interior. In 1933, Clark Foreman was appointed as Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior on the Economic Status of Negroes.

Grandson of the first editor of The Atlanta Constitution, Foreman was an Atlanta native who was born in 1903 and graduated from the University of Georgia in 1921. While at the University of Georgia, Foreman relates, "I witnessed a lynching, which naturally set me to questioning the practice of democracy in the South" (“Foreman”). He spent a year at Harvard
and another at the London School of Economics (a path from which his father tried to dissuade him). While in London, he met H. G. Wells, whose book about history his mother had given him, and read G. H. Oldham’s Christianity and the Race Problem, from which he learned about the Commission on Interracial Co-operation in Atlanta. Returning to Georgia in 1925, Foreman became state secretary for the CIC in Georgia, where he worked until 1927. While finishing his PhD (1932) in political science at Columbia University, which focused on race relations and environmental influences in Negro education, Foreman served as director of studies for the Julius Rosenwald Foundation in Nashville, Tennessee (1929-1933). Thus he came with high recommendation to the Department of the Interior.

On March 23, 1938, Roosevelt made a speech in Gainesville, Georgia, wherein he “attacked the feudal economic system of the South and said, ‘When you come down to it, there is little difference between the feudal and the Fascist system. If you believe in the one, you lean to the other’” (Foreman, “A Decade” 140). While meeting with Roosevelt soon thereafter about how a senator from Georgia might be defeated in the next election, Foreman suggested the idea of publishing a pamphlet on the economic conditions of the South. Roosevelt authorized the project, and Foreman assembled a group of Southern economic experts (including union organizers) to work with the National Emergency Council to prepare the document. This piece was presented in July 4, 1938, to another group of leading Southern intellectuals who had convened in Washington D. C. at a Conference on the Economic Conditions in the South. Under the chairmanship of Dr. Frank P. Graham, President of the University of North Carolina, the Conference modified the report and agreed to stand by it as an advisory committee.

The Report on the Economic Conditions of the South was released in August 1938 and Roosevelt recommended it in campaign support speeches. The slim, sixty-four-page pamphlet, coordinated by Foreman, brought together the expertise of leading Southern academics, New Deal administrators, union officials, and social activists. It outlined problems with soil, water, income, education, health, housing, labor, women and children, land ownership, credit, natural resources, industry, and purchasing power. In many ways, these points condensed Odum’s 664-page tome, Southern Regions of the United States (1936), to pocket size. This effort to acknowledge the issues announced that the time had come to formalize connections between an

---

10 Established in 1917, the Julius Rosenwald Fund also proved a central means of distributing resources and assembling networks of actors around issues of Negro and Southern welfare. For detailed information see footnote 33 at the end of section VII.
array of people who had been informal associates sitting together on a various organizations’ committees and boards. Noteworthy names important to the SCHW and West include: Barry Bingham of the Louisville Courier Journal; Frank Graham, president of the University of North Carolina; Miss Lucy Randolph Mason, CIO representative, Atlanta, Georgia; and H. L. Mitchell, secretary-treasurer, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Memphis, Tennessee.

In coordination with Gelders and Mitch, the first meeting of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare was called to Birmingham in 1938 to answer the economic concerns raised in the Report. But the focus on economic problems was only the code by which civil rights was addressed (Foreman, “A Decade” 140). The conference called together 1,200 religious, labor, educational, and farm activists from all over the south. Foreman points out that bankers, editors, business men, congressmen, and senators came as well, and that many on the business side would soon leave (141). Although arrangements had been made with the authorities to allow the participants to sit where they chose, as the highest-profile bi-racial gathering ever organized in the South, the Birmingham police surrounded and threatened to storm the convention until its participants segregated. Only Eleanor Roosevelt, the event’s main speaker, dared to keep her chair in the center of the aisle between whites and blacks. “By doing so,” Foreman relates, “she symbolized the determined opposition of the Conference to the practice of segregation” (141). Thus the Southern Conference elected Graham, the President of the University of North Carolina as its President, and focused on mustering progressive mainstream forces against the human indignities practiced daily in the South, such as poll taxes, which were then practiced by eleven Southern states.
Appendix Q: The Julius Rosenwald Fund

From his working-class beginnings as the son of German Jews in Springfield Illinois, by 1889 Julius Rosenwald owned one-fourth of the Sears, Roebuck and Company, becoming its president in 1910 and chairman of the board in 1925. In light of earlier discussion of Royce’s, Kallen’s, and the regionalists’ fight against the levelling force of the mass production of goods, it is a paradox that the President of Sears, a company which made its money from catalogue distribution of mass-produced goods, founded a Fund to promote progressive intellectuals and blacks in the South, including a fellowship which Don West received for his own graduate Education in 1945.

The story of the Fund began when Rosenwald read the biography of William Baldwin, the first chair of the General Education Board (Embree 112), which was founded by Rockefeller to promote Negro education. After reading Booker T. Washington’s Up From Slavery, Rosenwald met with Washington when he visited Chicago in 1911, “and subsequent visits to the South stirred him so deeply that he thereafter made the cause of Negroes his chief philanthropy” (25).

The Rosenwald Fund began by awarding funds to rebuild African-American schoolhouses but soon realized that there was an entire series of interlinked problems that needed to be solved. They addressed those interlinked concerns in the following order: education of black teachers; building high-schools, normal schools and colleges; support to build and stock libraries; fellowships to African Americans and, later, white southerners to promote their talents—both professional and creative; medical care; and, finally, promotion of race relations (35).

A brief list of high-level administrators is illuminating: Clark Forman was Director for Studies (1928-35); Will W. Alexander of the CIC served from 1930 to 1948; Eleanor Roosevelt served 1940-48, and Howard Odum 1937-43; and Alexander was VP from 1940 to 1948 and co-Director for Race Relations from 1942 to 1948 with Charles S. Johnson (p. 43-48), who became president of Fisk. Of this list, Roosevelt, Johnson, and Foreman were all key players in the SCHW.

By 1949, the Rosenwald Fund had not only awarded $668,175 to Fisk University to build their library and another $288,979 to Howard but had also supplied $5,362,361 for Negro school
building programs, $1,655,911 in fellowships ($1,060,184 for Grants for Negroes; $386,455 for white Southerners), as well as $1,701,928 for Negro Health and $1,315,390 for general medical services (262, 273). Moreover, to promote race relations, the Fund gave the CIC $144,825 (between 1928-1945), the SRC $167,699 (between 1944-1949) and the SCHW $7,500 (between 1945-1946).
Appendix R: Philip Weltner

The son of German immigrants who ventured to South Carolina as Lutheran missionaries to better social conditions, Weltner had moved to Atlanta in 1910 after completing his law degree at Columbia University (Wanamaker 16-17). From that time on, he fought to better social conditions, reforming the prison system, becoming the first Adult Probation officer in the South, and acting as the first secretary of the newly formed Georgia Board of Public Welfare (17-19). With the Depression, he became Regent of the newly formed University system and enacted major fiscal renovations, restructuring and modernizing Georgia’s system of higher education (Weltner, Recollections 47-48). While visiting North Georgia College at Dahlonega as Regent, Weltner witnessed a bedraggled mountain family shuffling down the highway. Looking at that scene, he asked, “What is the campus of the University System; are not its boundaries co-extensive with the geographical boundaries of the State of Georgia; in short does not the System exist for those people too? Our colleges and university had been too insular, their arms too short of reach” (49). Thereafter, Weltner set to putting the various University extension systems into “direct service to the poor” until conflict with Governor Talmadge forced his resignation in 1934. Talmadge had “a vendetta against the New Deal” and sought to preserve a system of obligation and graft, which represented the traditional social order (Weltner, Recollections 52; Patton, “The Governorship” 605-06). No doubt Don West’s childhood, work with rural education, and role as a poet struck a strong chord with Weltner. If this were not enough to nurture his sympathies, Weltner’s administrative, pedagogical, and social policies at Oglethorpe reflected his dedication to public welfare and civic participation.
Appendix S: Mobilizing the Black Vote and Revered Holmes

Once Arnall had abolished the poll tax, only 3,000 black voters had registered in Atlanta, even after a campaign led by the NAAPC and the Atlanta Daily World (Silver and Moeser 56). In early 1946, when Robert Ramspeck, one of the charter members of the Klan in 1915, died, his congressional seat opened, and Helen Douglas Mankin won it by meeting with black voters (in private meetings at night out of fear of the reaction of whites). The drive to put her in office led to an increase of 6,896 black voters. And after mayor Hartsfield’s challenge to raise a minimum of 10,000 votes, the All-Citizens-Registration Committee’s citizenship schools mobilized 17,241 blacks to register in just 51 days. Of those voters, only 34 were purged from the roles before the 1946 election (Bernd 503). Ministers became central figures in the voter drive. Although they had been careful not to upset the patronage of white figures and businessmen who donated to their churches, the opportunity to gain direct influence changed their note.

One central figure was Rev. William Holmes Border, who presided over Wheat Street Baptist Church, the largest black church in Atlanta, and who would be a key figure in the 1948 presidential election in Atlanta. But in 1938, he declined the opportunity to lead Atlanta’s NAACP chapter, because Wheat Street was undertaking an expansion program and Borders was funding the project by accepting aid from the Southern Bell Telephone company. However, by 1946 Borders had become one of the most vocal pastors in the city: “The preachers would announce, the preachers would encourage, the preachers would tell the masses how much good it would do their children. The preachers marched, the preachers would go to City Hall, the preachers would attend the Board of Education meetings. The preachers were physically and bodily evident wherever the problem was most acute” (Kuhn and Joye 252). Speaking of the drive to register voters in 1946, Borders said, “It was done by committees, by people talking, by preachers encouraging, by knocking on doors, even after dark. I personally hauled Negroes to the courthouse in busses that we purchased for the use of the church nursery” (337). Speaking of the eventual better schools and desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s, “All the stuff that [Martin Luther] King did had a lot of this as the foundation before he moved. See, we had build a foundation for him to stand on” (374). As we will see, an even narrower a balance beam was being negotiated by educational leaders such as Rufus E. Clement, president of Atlanta
University, who served on myriad committees, including the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Regional Council.

As touched on earlier, William Holmes Borders represents another important facet to the Negro reform elite. Moreover, he and West shared a common source for their social radicalization: the social gospel. Born in Macon, Borders was the seventh of ten children who grew up in rural Bibb county where he said, "The crude, simple, sweet people there taught me everything I know" (qtd. in Harvey). His father and grandfather being ministers as well, Borders was called to the ministry at the age of twelve and entered Morehouse College in 1925 on probation because he had no high-school transcript (Harvey). Graduating from Morehouse College with Honors, he took his divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary, Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois, in 1932 where he had studied with Dr. Rall, a leading spokesman for the social gospel (English 21). After Dr. Rall—a white man—invited Borders into his home to participate in informal discussions with other students, Borders found himself becoming Rall’s “protégé” (21-2). Borders expanded his own evangelical literalism to embrace the social gospel’s vision of improving people’s conditions by changing their environment (21). In 1937, after taking his Masters at Northwestern, Borders returned to Atlanta when he took a position at Morehouse to teach religion and philosophy (Harvey). He soon took over Wheat Street Baptist whose congregation exploded from 700 to 3,000, and Borders found himself becoming a spokesman for civil rights.

In order to better the world, Borders believed all people’s capacity for humanity had to be nurtured. Wheat Street began interpreting its services for the Deaf, conducting worship services in jail, and hosting Alcoholic Anonymous (English 54-55, 61). During his weekly radio address in 1941, Borders took an unexpected turn for a Southern African-American minister and forthrightly declared his opposition to segregation: “I cast my vote with those who feel they can dig in, grapple with the problem [of segregation], knowing the future is mortgaged to God, democracy and Christianity” (qtd. in English 57). In January 1943, he became nationally known when he broadcast for his poem “I am Somebody,” which has become a piece of anonymous wisdom throughout African-American culture and served as one of Jesse Jackson’s calling points (Harvey). During World War II, Borders set up an employment agency at Wheat Street, and he became the main spokesperson seeking justice for four African Americans (a man, a boy, and two girls) who were lynched in a small town outside of Atlanta (English 60, 63). He helped lead
the 1946 voting drive (see Appendix F) and also lent his support for hiring of the first black police officers in Atlanta, eight of whom stepped on the streets to waving crowds in early 1948.\footnote{Illustrating the rate of world-change, as Atlanta blacks were lobbying for Negro police, McGill wrote an column meditating upon the potential founding of a Jewish in Palestine (“Palestine and the Jew” 23 Nov 1947). Here we see that the fight over securing a homeland was domestic as well as international.} With the growth of Wheat Street, his role in the black community, and his vision of the Social Gospel, Borders was a force who saw fit to lend his stage to the Progressives. But Borders represented the most radical approach in the Atlanta’s black reform elite toward revision of American pluralism.
Appendix T: The Atlanta Daily World and Progressive Whites in Atlanta

Just as The Atlanta Daily World published favorable stories and editorial on Wallace until the 1948 presidential election, they supported white Georgia progressives. On November 20, 1946, the Daily World published a front page story that reviewed Arnall’s acclaim. However, the Arnall story was small and appeared only after the paper had published another front-page story on November 11 about the upcoming conference that detailed the participation of Claude Pepper, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Lillian Smith (who chaired a session called “The Arts in Political Action”)—Arnall is mentioned only at the tail end of the article. The black population in Atlanta, while gaining political power from the changes Arnall had brought to the state, was more interested in politicians and figures who directly supported African-American causes.

The Daily World was an important force in Georgia politics, and its influence shaped and reflected the attitudes of African Americans in Atlanta, whose involvements would directly influence West’s work. Founded as a weekly in 1928 by William Alexander Scott, the paper filled an essential need, so by 1930 it was published twice-a-week, in 1931 thrice-weekly, and in 1932 became a daily (Atlanta 102). As of 1942, it remained the only African-American daily in the country, and in 1948 it had a circulation of 28,000 subscribers with editions in eleven cities (Hughes and Alston 20). By 1942, Scott had formed a newspaper syndicate that controlled 34 papers in Eastern cities (Atlanta 102). In short, Scott was an entrepreneur who saw himself as providing jobs, and as with many other of the black reform elite in Atlanta, Scott was mindful of keeping the business support of whites (Horsbury 129-130). Scott went to far as to call himself “a natural born conservative” (qtd. 130) and during the depression promoted jobs and business opportunities over relief (131). Thus, the newspaper highlighted progressive political news in response to the African-American community’s increased political involvement.

In 1946, The Daily World published many articles giving voice and support to progressive whites, from whom it would distance itself during the Progressive presidential campaign in 1948. Gauging its reaction to progressive whites is key to understanding the potential and difficulties those whites had in communicating with African-Americans. Once source of the paper’s enthusiasm over the SCHW’s 1946 New Orleans conference was its familiarity with Clark Foreman. Foreman, president of the SCHW, is cited as an authority who
spoke against organized white violence in a front-page story: “Mob Violence Is Forerunner of Fascism, Foreman Declares” (20 Aug. 1946). The paper would go on to announce the speeches that Foreman was giving in the city and carefully report on them. “You must fight for yourselves as citizens” began a November 1946 story about Foreman’s talk to a Forum at Morehouse College (“Must Fight”). On November 11, William A. Folwkes, the Atlanta Daily World’s most progressive columnist, provided a detailed analysis of Foreman’s talk, which Folwkes summarized as demonstrating that “it was impossible for a Southern white child to grow up sane and rational about the Negro race” (“They Need”). Admitting that he had always been puzzled by “how utterly ignorant 98 percent of the white population is about better living conditions and progress among Negroes,” Folwkes ends with resounding support for the SCHW. He quotes Foreman: “the South is not the economic problem number one of the nation because of natural resources or because of inferior conditions, but because the people of the South have never been allowed to come together and work out their problems.” Falwkes ends by agreeing that “conditions will improve when the white man loses his zest for ignorance about the Negro, their aspirations, their human nature.”

That November The Atlanta Daily World published a photo of Wallace (one of few photos of a white to appear in the paper), announcing that he had become editor of The New Republic (“Wallace Takes”). The paper had supported Wallace’s political stance on race as well. That same issue that published Wallace’s photo also had a front-page story reporting on a speech by Lillian Smith, which was attended by 800 people at Providence Baptist Church, who spoke against the Talmadge’s bid for reelection. Citing her as the author of Strange Fruit, which gave “prophetic warning against the apostles of hate, injustice, and segregation,” the article quotes large excerpts of her speech that promoted communication and understanding between the races (Hodges). Talmadge, she jabbed, “makes it seem fun to hate.” But she went on to say that if blacks wanted to communicate with whites, they “should discard the word ‘social equality’” because whites were trained from childhood to accept segregation. Over the next year the Atlanta Daily World’s animated support of Foreman, Wallace, and Smith would change to disagreement and then opposition as they and the SCHW entered into full support of Wallace’s Progressive Party, whose civil rights policies threatened to destabilize the recent advances.
Appendix U: Paul Robeson and the African-American Reaction to Wallace

As a result of Robeson’s support of Wallace, a split occurred in the Council on African Affairs, a small organization of African-American intellectuals who were powerful advocates for global freedom and equality. The conflict between Paul Robeson, chairman of the board, and Dr. Max Yergan, executive director, exemplified the split not only in the organization but in all leftish coalitions in post-WWII America. The argument came down to attitudes over the popular front—i.e., working in coalitions with the Communists. When the U.S. Attorney General included the Council on a list of subversive organizations, Yergan wanted the Council to submit a statement that it was “neither Fascist, Communist, nor subversive”; moreover, Yergan had recently dismissed one the editor, an avowed communist, of the Council’s paper (McKenzie, “Differences”). Robeson threatened his resignation if the Council voted to issue Yergan’s statement, which Robeson felt to be a “subscription of ‘American imperialism.’” Yergan’s suggestion was tabled after a prolonged debate and was sent to a policy committee chaired by Du Bois, who resigned in protest (Duberman 331). Yergan called further meetings: in the first, on March 25, he was again defeated; in the second, on April 21, he purposefully misdirected select delegates but was discovered and again failed to win. The executive board suspended Yergan in late May, and after the two camps tried to out maneuver each other through the summer, the Council unanimously discharged him in September (332-3). However, the damage was done and six board members formally resigned, while Mary McLeod Bethune just stopped attending meetings (333). Debate about African-American participation with the Progressives was similarly tinged throughout the country.

The range of opinion and analysis of African Americans’ nationally is well represented by political columnists writing for The Pittsburgh Courier, a paper notably more to the left than The Daily World. The Courier was also running daily front-page, nearly-lurid stories on Rosa Lee Ingram’s trial and life, all of which were accompanied by dramatic photographs. In her “Pursuit of Democracy” column, Majorie McKenzie hailed the 16,000 person audience at a Wallace event in Harlem that February as a way to “punish Democrat and Republicans for their neglect” (“Wallace Candidacy”). Horace R. Cayton shared that even in the midst of Wisconsin winter, “Wallace meetings take on the aspect of a revival” and so create a “fly in Truman’s ointment,” thereby causing Truman to beef up his Civil Rights program (“Using Wallace”).

337
Commenting on Wallace’s Southern tour in February, J. A. Rogers put it squarely: “Negroes are looking for a deliverer. Wallace seems to be it.” Similarly, Benjamin E. Mays, proclaimed that “we need a man in the national race who holds views such as Wallace holds.” But he then countered, “In the South generally, and in Georgia specifically, it seems to me that it would be folly for Negroes to vote anything but a Democratic ticket.” As the accusations of Communist conspiracy within the Progressives increased in May, McKenzie granted her endorsement and admiration through a type of concession: because Wallace met the red-baiting charges “head on,” those who stood by him had two things in common—a lack of fear and a lack of anything to loose (“Daily Press Failed”). As the July conventions of the three parties (Democrats, Republicans, and Progressives) approached, Cayton identified the frustrations of blacks working with the Democrats and predicted “a tremendous protest vote among the Negroes for Wallace” (“Two-Part”). While speaking truths about pluralism that many African Americans essentially agreed with, Wallace functioned a tool to bring the Republicans and Democrats into greater sympathy with civil rights.
### References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archives</th>
<th>Abbreviation in Cite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFL-CIO Region 8 Records, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State U.</td>
<td>AFL-CIO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean Cadle Papers, 1919-1986, 1M87M46, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kentucky</td>
<td>Cadle Papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don West Personality File, Atlanta History Center Archives.</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlander Research and Education Center, Archives, Wisconsin Historical Society.</td>
<td>Highlander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Still Papers, 1915-1997, m87M12, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kentucky</td>
<td>JS Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Still Manuscripts and Correspondence, 61st02, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Camden-Carroll Library, Morehead State University</td>
<td>JS Morehead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. H. Ross Papers (1930-1987), Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library. Georgia State U.</td>
<td>Ross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oglethorpe University Archives, Weltner Library, Oglethorpe University, Atlanta, Georgia.</td>
<td>Oglethorpe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers of Muriel Rukeyser. Library of Congress.</td>
<td>Rukeyser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rufus E. Clement Records, 1933-1969, Atlanta University Presidential Records, 1856-1984, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.</td>
<td>Clement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Conference for Human Welfare, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.</td>
<td>SCHW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When possible, the location of the particular box and folder in which materials are located is listed as follows: 8.2, with 8 being the box and 2 being the folder. Rukeyser’s papers are collected in two parts, with boxes and labeled folders. The part and particular box are listed as follows: II:14, with II being the part and 14 being the box. The title of the folder follows.


Berea College v. Com. of Kentucky.  211 U.S. 45. 45-70. Supreme Ct. of the US.  9 Nov. 1908.


---.  Letters to James Still.  JS Morehead 14.15.


---. “Reviews of James Still Works, Hounds on the Mountain.” From manuscript of “Man on Troublesome.” 208-211. Cadle Papers 8.2.


Oglethorpe, Faculty File: West, Donald L.


Clement, Rufus E. Letter to Clark Foreman. 29 Dec. 1947. SCHW 2.3.


---. Publisher’s Introduction. Logan ix-xxiii.


Dantzler, L. L. Letter to James Still. 9 April 1937. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1930s.”


Davie, Maurice R. “Folkways.” Seligman and Johnson.


Edman, Irwin. Letter to James Still. 28 March 1940. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1940s.”


---. Letter to James Still. 2 Oct. 1938. JS Morehead 5.11.


---. Letter to Mary McLeod Bethune. 22 April 1946. SCHW 2.3.


---. Letters to James Still. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1930s.”

---. Letters to James Still. JS Morehead 6.8.


---. “‘My Harvard Accent and ‘Indifference’’: Notes toward the Biography of B. A. Botkin.”


“Historical Roster of the Governors of Georgia.” Archives. Georgia Secretary of State. 27 Sept.


Hite, Alex. “Poetry Books are Written by Georgians.” Review of Clods of Southern Earth.


Hodges, V. W. “‘Talmadge Can Do No More Than People Let Him’, Miss Smith Says.” The

Atlanta Daily World 19 Nov. 1946: 1, 6.

Hoffman, Frederick J., Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich. The Little Magazine: A History and


Evening Transcript 17 July 1937: 2.

Holmes, Robert A. “The University and Politics in Atlanta: A Case Study of the Atlanta


Huebsch, B. W.  “Footnotes to a Publisher’s Life.”  *Colophone* 3.2 (1937): 406-426.


---. “‘Americanization’ and the Cultural Prospect.” 126-232. *Culture and Democracy*.


---. “Postscript—Culture and the Ku Klux Klan.” Culture and Democracy. 9-43.


---. Letters to James Still. JS Morehead 11.7.


---. “Race Contacts and Inter-racial Relations: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Race.”


---. “Henry Wallace Comes to Town.” The Stormy Petrel 7 Nov. 1947: 2.


---. “Don West Signs Himself Communist.” The Atlanta Constitution 27 June 1948: 2D.


Mitchell, George S. Letter to Don West 29 April 1944. AFL-CIO 1881.12.


“More Negroes Qualified as Voters’ Roster Hits Peak.” *The Atlanta Constitution* 20 July 1948: 3.


Mount, Dorothy D. Letter to James Still. 17 May 1937. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1930s.”


“Negro Set at Russell Opponent.” *The Atlanta Constitution* 9 May 1948: 2A.


Olson, Ted. “‘This Mighty River of Earth’: Reclaiming James Still’s Appalachian Masterpiece.” *The Journal of Appalachian Studies* 1.1 1995: 87-98.


Patterson, Fredrick D. “The Negro Wants Full Participation in the American Democracy.” In Logan. 259-80.


Photo from the Ross Photo Album. [1946]. Ross 82.1.


“Poet Don West Here on Visit, Will Join Oglethorpe Faculty.” The Atlanta Constitution 30 Aug. 1946: 5.


“Pro-Wallace Pastor Here Quits Post.” The Atlanta Constitution 7 May 1948: 3.


Roberts, Elizabeth Madox. Letters to James Still. JS Morehead 10.22.


“Royalties and Receipts from Viking Press.” JS Morehead 10.23.


---. “From Scottsboro to Decatur.” Student Review April 1933: 12-15.


Smith, Al.  “CIO Ducks Race Issue in Drive into South.”  18 May 1946: n.p. SCHW 2.3.


---. “I sometimes tell people I was born in a cotton patch.” Foxfire Fall 1988: 132-149.


376


---. Letters to Muriel Rukeyser. Rukeyser II:3 “Untermeyer File.”


“Wallace Group Plans Rally at Dalton.” The Atlanta Constitution 23 May 1948: 3B.


“Wallace Lashes Back at Hecklers.” The Atlanta Constitution 4 May 1948: 5.


Weeks, Edward. Letters to James Still. JS Morehead 2.18.


---. “The Liberal Arts.” Address to the Emory Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa. 5 Dec. [1947].


---. “The purposes we are here to serve.” To the Faculty. 26 March 1948. Oglethorpe 2003.276.

---. The Oglethorpe Book: A Bulletin of Oglethorpe University. 1st ed. Oglethorpe U, GA:

Oglethorpe U, 1944.

---. [“Oglethorpe University:.”] To the Faculty. [c. 1948]. Oglethorpe 2003.276.


---. Letter to Claude Williams. 11 Feb. 194[7]. Williams 15.21.¹


¹ The date on this letter is actually reads “Feb. 11 1946”; however, it bears a stamp that reads “DON WEST/ English and Sacred Literature/ OGLETHORPE UNIVERSITY, GA” and addresses events specific to January and February 1947. West’s clearly mistyped his date.
---. Letters to George Mitchel. AFL-CIO 1881.12.

---. Letters to Langston Hughes. Hughes.


---. Letter to James Still. 9 Aug. 1937. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1930s.”

---. Letter to James Still. 7 March 1931. JS Morehead 7.7.

---. Letters to James Still. JS Morehead 15.4.


Williams, Claude. “Don West Sings.” Williams Box 6.

---. Letter to President, Oglethorpe University. 1 Oct. 1946. Williams Box 6.


Worth, Kathryn. Letter to James Still. 8 March 1938. JS Kentucky, Box “Correspondence,” File “1930s.”


Vita for Christopher A. Green

Date and Place of Birth: September 6, 1968, Lexington, Kentucky

Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MS Ed</td>
<td>Indiana University, Bloomington, IN</td>
<td>Bloomington, IN</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>May 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFA</td>
<td>Indiana University, Bloomington, IN</td>
<td>Bloomington, IN</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>May 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Appalachian State University, Boone, NC</td>
<td>Boone, NC</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>July 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY</td>
<td>Lexington, KY</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>May 1991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scholarly Awards and Honors

Visiting Distinguished Faculty Award, U of Kentucky, Graduate School, Spring 2004.
Women’s Studies Cross-Campus Writing Award, Appalachian State University. 1993.

Teaching Awards and Honors

Excellent Writing Program Instructor, Department of English, University of Kentucky.
Fall 2002 and Fall 2001.
Creative Writing Awards and Honors
   Al Smith Professional Artist Assistance Award, Kentucky Arts Council. 2001.

Professional Publications