INTERRUPTING THE MONOLOGUE: FOLKLORE, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND CRITICAL REGIONALISM

By Mary Hufford

Dialogue takes place between the centrifugal forces of subjectivity, which are chaotic and particular, and the centripetal forces of system, which are rule-driven and abstract.

-Mikhail Bakhtin

Nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside of them.

-Theodor Adorno

"Appalachia as a Global Region" poses an important set of challenges and opportunities for the field of folklore, a field historically implicated in the nation-region problematic that Reid and Taylor parse here. Perhaps more than any other region in the United States, Appalachia spatializes folklore as the other to modernity. In his introduction to Buying the Wind: American Regional Folklore, Richard Dorson goes so far as to describe Appalachia as "folklore's natural habitat" (1964, 103). In the early decades of the twentieth century, folklore collectors discovered in abundance the lingering forms of antique balladry, marchen, and preindustrial technologies-recontextualized, in the romantic species of culturalism, as thresholds to a shared American past rooted in Anglo-Saxon tradition. Believing that industry and modern technologies, like the radio, contaminated the true Appalachian folk culture, romantic nationalist collectors, like Maud Karpeles and Cecil Sharp, avoided the coalfields of southern West Virginia, where, a generation later, George Korson would recover a latent critical perspective on

modernization in the songs and ballads of the bituminous coal miners, which reflects upon, among other things, the role of mechanization and labor unions in regional class struggles (1943). Inviting coal miners to perform at state and national folk festivals was, for Korson, one way of creating an unprecedented public space for these voices. But, committing public folklore—whether under the banner of romantic nationalism or cultural relativism—was, and remains, a fraught enterprise, as Reid and Taylor's critique of culturalism reminds us. I want to suggest that the concepts of critical regionalism and civic professionalism may help to resolve the tensions surrounding public folklore that continue to plague our field, and that, conversely, folklore's commitment to fieldwork as the retrieval of the particularities of emergent genres and performances has much to contribute to an emerging crossdisciplinary discourse on critical regionalism.

Reid and Taylor's essay illustrates ways in which regionalization is a symbolic operation of the media—through advertisements, political campaigns, and the news. Such operations sustain "Appalachia" as a bourgeois social imaginary (Batteau 1990; Stewart 1996), viewed from vigorously defended perspectives on the region from outside, or above. Folklorists have generally studied genres that could be said to regionalize from within, or below. Here it is worth recalling folklorist Suzi Jones' essay on how speakers regionalize folklore and themselves through the performance of local knowledge in myth, legend, anecdote, place names, ritual, material construction, and so forth (1976). Genres, as Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes, are distinguished by different conceptions of the relationship between time and space, and by the conceptions that each genre communicates about its addressee (1981). Monologic genres assume a silent addressee, sustaining a single consciousness and a fixed, irreversible perspective. Saturated with what Bakhtin calls "addressivity" (1986, 95), dialogic genres multiply consciousness through quotation, double voicing, parody, and carnivalization of official genres. Bearing in mind Adorno's injunction to think simultaneously from the inside and outside and Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and its carnivalizing effects, I want to explore the dialogue in which folklore participates, particularly public folklore, often explicitly linked with the political project of "amplifying voices in a democratic polity" (Gross-Bressler 1995, 14).

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studies, Cheryl Herr examines a transnational agrarian imaginary anchored in Ireland and Iowa, conjured through film, architecture, literary genres, and other "aesthetic productions." Herr argues that Ireland and Iowa, which have been "twinned" through global, economic, and political restructuration over the past century and a

economic, and political restructuration over the past century and a half, function analogously within a global framework administered by international financial institutions (1996, 3 - 12). To what extent

do aesthetic productions foster awareness of narratives that could link localities within alternative global frameworks? What does a

critically regional, civically professional ethnography contribute to any dialogue staged between localities and the mounting pressures

from something "larger-than-local" (Shuman 1993, 345)?

Reid and Taylor's allusion to contradictory stereotypes invites us to take stock of emergent regionalisms or, in Watts and Peets' terms, "regional discursive formations" (1996, 265), that dialogue with official discourses of regionalization. The awareness that there are regionalisms opens a gap in which critical regionalism can take hold. Architectural theorists Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre suggest a typology of world historical regionalisms, including classical, gothic, romantic, picturesque, commercial, and so forth (1991). Drawing on Richard Bauman's definition of folklore (1992), we might distinguish two prevailing Appalachian regionalisms according to their orientations toward progress (and its cognates, modernization and development): a romantic regionalism that fears it, and a rational regionalism that loves it. These regionalisms, which stereotypically romanticize or rationalize Appalachia, are reproduced and institutionalized through a wide variety of media. Romanticized, Appalachia is filled with what modernity takes from us-community values, uncommodified nature and artistry, wholeness. Rationalized, Appalachia is populated with "yesterday's people" (Weller 1965), those left behind, forgotten, in dire need of what modernity has to offer: jobs, education, health care, economic development.

The mountains are riddled with the chronotopes of romantic and rational regionalisms. "Chronotope" is the term Bakhtin used to name "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981, 84). In the chronotope, "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). Linked through a narrative that ratifies progress are sites like "Chemical Alley" on the Kanawha River, Westvaco's pulp and paper mill at Rupert, West Virginia, and hundreds of square miles of "landform complexes" comprising flattened peaks, slurry ponds, valley fills, and waste disposal sites produced through strip mining in Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Repudiating these, the shining enclosures of heritage trails, craft emporia, frontier museums, and national parks, form chronotopes of romantic regionalism.

Reid and Taylor allude to a startling separation sustained in the media between the scenic beauty that is a tourist asset and the devastation of mountains and communities that is the outcome of strip mining for coal. These romantic and rational regionalisms uphold each other through a gentleman's handshake codified in official policies, such as the law that bans strip mining within view of a national park. This law enables whitewater rafters, for instance, to navigate past the ghosts of company towns lining the New River Gorge without being reminded that backstage on the Allegheny Plateau, Big John the Dragline is briskly dismantling the scenery, polluting the air and the water while leaving the viewshed intact.

Romantic and rational regionalisms merit our attention more for what they have in common than for their seeming contradictions. Both are monologic, constructed through genres that position their subjects (experts, "men of vision") forward along a timeline of progress, while an object ("yesterday's people") is positioned backward. Without dialogue we can't move beyond this politics of time (Reid 1972; Fabian 1986), nor can civic professionalism take hold without a departure from the monologic oeuvres of expertise. In Appalachia, this dialogue unfolds as a struggle between collective subjectivities, staged as much in the "non-aesthetic" discourses on soil, forests, air, and water as in explicitly cultural arenas. Such discourses are stuffed with monologues on culture and society, which collaborative ethnography is ideally suited for interrupting.

Following Cheryl Herr's (1996) argument that critical regionalism should pursue Adorno's negative dialectic, the task here is not to bring the romantic and the rational into dialogue, but to assert the nonidentity of this particular dualism, which forms what Allen Batteau calls "the twin ideological poles of Jacksonian expansionism" (Batteau 1990). Ethnography can be a mode of retrieving genres that cast romantic and rational regionalisms in a ludic and critical light, that form in the aggregate a carnivalesque regionalism.

Carnivalesque Regionalism in Rationalized Appalachia: "Rich Dirt" and Prime Farmland

Just as language does, culture offers to individuals a horizon of latent possibilities which are, nevertheless, inscribed in a flexible and invisible cage from where one can exert conditional liberty. This kind of liberty is expressed in . . . the speech practices operative in a given society at a given moment, in a given landscape, wherein the idioms of different classes, ethnicities, genders, generations, and locales compete for ascendancy.

---Mireya Folch-Serra

Rationalized Appalachia exhibits the starkest hallmarks of what Barbara Rose Johnston calls a "discourse of debasement" (1995, 116). Culturally debasing discourse, which affects what Stephen Foster calls "symbolic depopulation" (1988, 174 - 175) is one way of erasing collectivities that vie for the position of subject of a disputed commons. Mountaintop removal mining, for instance, is legitimized as a way of transforming mountains, which a lawyer for West Virginia Surface Mining and Reclamation Association dismissed as "worthless rocks and dirt" (Holroyd 1998, 4), into flat, "developable" land. Terms like "worthless" and "developable" assail perspectives that assign any other kind of value to the mountains. Masquerading as scientific assessment, this discourse is actually *culturally* debasing because it denies a point of view that confers value. It hides from view all but the "market perspective."

As I have argued elsewhere, this annihilation of an alternative perspective and consciousness is ritually reiterated in land-use histories on file at West Virginia's Division of Environmental Protection. Typical claims from the files are statements like the following: "because of very steep slopes, this soil is used only for wood areas, as wildlife habitat, and for recreation;" or "the premining land-use is unmanaged forestland" (Hufford 2001, 31 - 32). Such statements, written anonymously, are certified by professionals in such fields as archeology, geology, and forestry, on whom the corporate state relies for defense of its point of view. "Worthless rocks and dirt" (aka "overburden") is a culturally effacing gesture, an assault on a collectivity whose shared identity derives in part from shared perspectives on mountain life and topography. In one conversation at the Sundial Tavern, a pub in the Coal River Valley, science writer and forest activist John Flynn gathered the effects of this discourse mimetically into a social transaction: "A.T. Massey came in here and said, 'You don't exist'" (26 October 1995).

Here Flynn exposes *scientism* as a flip side of culturalism: the wrenching of aspects of the world from their social contexts, and the fixing of identities under the guise of science. Consider the category of "prime farmland," a part of the commons around which a national subject forms. By law, the presence of prime farmland can render a site unsuitable for surface mining, but experts may determine the presence of prime farmland simply by consulting United States Soil Conservation Service Maps. Based on aerial photographs, these maps serve as the basis for classifying ninetynine percent of West Virginia as something other than prime farmland. Absence of prime farmland on the maps is taken as evidence of absence. What is filtered from view here is West Virginia's portion of the national commons of rich soils. Although, as a Soil Conservation Service official in Beckley acknowledged in a telephone conversation August 11, 1996, the mountain coves are full of loam that is as rich in organic matter as any on the alluvial plains; prime farmland in the United States has to conform to standards set by the flat topography of the Midwest (August 1996). Spatializing prime farmland in the Midwest, this federal policy serves as a de facto zoning ordinance, designating one area as a "throwaway region" (the domain of King Coal) reserving the alluvial soils downstream for the "supermarket to the world" (the domain of industrial agriculture).

Steep slopes and small scale comprise only the spatial part of a "localized dimensionality" that could be brought into dialogue with the abstract category of "prime farmland." Rich dirt only enters the public space of the commons through what Habermas called "the theatre of talk," which is where chronotopes are constructed. What are the chronotopes associated with rich dirt, and how are they constructed through ethnography? A sampling of claims about rich dirt in the heart of an area targeted for mountaintop removal mining grants a glimpse of a discourse that regionalizes from within, that conjures and inhabits a kind of space not accounted for in rationalized Appalachia.

"Places I've logged have been farmed back in the rich coves," said Bob Daniel, owner of Appalachian Hardwoods, during a taperecorded interview in 1996. "People would just dig a sled road back there, a narrow sled road, and plant corn because the soil was so rich. And just have a newground back there and they'd clear it up and tend it, even though it was far back and hard to get to, but the soil was so black. And you'll find all the coves, especially on the eastern slopes and northern hollows are just real, real rich soil" (1996).

Conversing with me about the seasonal round, a form of time attached to the cove topography, Dennis Dickens, an eighty-year-old man living on Peach Tree Creek, waved toward the mountain rising behind us. "I've got a few ramps planted up the holler here," he commented. "They just grow at an elevation of about, I'd say, 2,000 to 2,500 feet. Real rich soil" (1995).

One ginseng broker reads soil types from the 'seng people bring him, a method of regionalizing from below. "Now in this area we have dark, richer, loose soil, and the ginseng grows longer, like a carrot," said Randy Halstead, proprietor of Randy's Recycling. "But you get into some of the neighboring counties with clay soil, it's real bulby, because the ginseng can't push down into the dirt" (1995).

Sally Web, of Peach Tree Creek, described the common practice of enhancing gardens with soil from the coves. "We go under old logs that's rotted, and that's real good rich soil, isn't it, Davey? You know, the trees that dies, or lightning hits them and they fall. That's real good fertilizer" (1997).

Working with David Bailey and Cuba Wiley to create a map of Shumate's Branch, a hollow filled in the 1990s with sludge from the coal cleaning process, I asked, "Why was that called 'the Rich Bench'?"

"It wasn't nothing but black soil," he explained. "You'd find a stalk of ginseng there you could almost dig it with your hands, couldn't you, Cuba?"

"Yeah, Buddy."

"They called it 'The Rich Bench." (1996)

This talk, with its focus on the life-giving agency of "rich dirt," inserts soil into Carnival time, which is how, in Bakhtin's theory, folk culture manifests itself (1981, 206 - 224). Forming a critical and often ludic commentary on official discourses, Carnivalesque discourse prizes life force, inverts hierarchy, and multiplies consciousness. (Note, for instance, the introduction of second and third person perspectives in the conversation above: "You'd find," "couldn't you?," and "They called it"). Carnival time destabilizes identities fixed on official maps, opening up instead a landscape that is constantly becoming, teeming with elements that transgress their boundaries to become something else. In carnivalesque time, ordinary things become thresholds to a second world, always just a glance or an utterance away, wherein one may find, for instance, a stalk of ginseng so big it can be mistaken for a buckeye tree, a molly moocher (morel) so huge it requires twenty-five pounds of meal to coat it, a potato the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. "That's a fellow we worked with," said Elbert Pettry, of Peachtree Creek. "He used to get in with a big crowd down there and he'd tell that—and he said it was so big that he just left a pole axe laying beside of it. He couldn't get it out of the ground. He'd just chop off a mess of it" (1997). Whether organic or inorganic to start with, anything can outgrow an original purpose and take on the status of what Bakhtin calls "gay matter." Roof bolts from the mines can become tomato stakes, a stop sign can patch a wheelbarrow, a school bus can be refashioned into a pickup truck, a camper top shelters potatoes buried underground for the winter, an engine block takes on a second life as a strut for the foundation of a new cabin (itself built from the discarded chestnut timbers of a public house torn down by the land company). Tomato stakes, patch, truck, potato hill, and strut render

materially the principles of double-voicing and quotation abundantly registered in speech genres on Coal River.

The space of "newground" mentioned by Bob Daniel is an important chronotope in mountain time. Naming the land newly "grubbed" of trees in preparation for the planting of corn and beans, "newground" continued a practice some say hailed from the Cherokee and Shawnee Indians who summered in the mountains, hunting, gathering, and gardening. Signs of newground are signs of productivity. "We had that whole mountain cleared up in newground," said Mae Bongalis, speaking of Montcoal Mountain when it harbored a mining community for Raleigh-Wyoming Coal Company in the 1920s and 30s (1994). "In the spring, whenever you saw smoke up on the mountain," said Joseph Jarrell, of Horse Creek, "that was someone clearing up a newground" (1996).

But newground is not fixed in absolute space. Newground could be cultivated for a number of years and then "let go" for fallowing. "Years ago, before they had fertilizer," recalled Mabel Brown, of Drew's Creek, "They'd use one piece of ground for a while and they called it 'wearing out' and they'd go and clean up a new patch and start a newground. And it had all the stuff in the ground they needed to grow stuff. So now that we've got fertilizer, you just plant the same patch over and over and over and over" (1995). Newgrounds could cycle back to early forest several times between plantings. "Old Field," said Ben Burnside, reciting the names of the side hollows on the Buffalo Fork of Rock Creek. "Somebody must have had a newground in there" (1994). "Poplar flats," a common place name, can indicate a former newground, as do piles of rocks scattered throughout the woods. The fixed identity of "prime farmland" doesn't work for newground, for in the system of forest farming practiced until the 1950s, newground and forest actually flowed through the mountains in a continual interchange. Anchored in rich soil, chronotopes like newground, ramp patches, poplar flats, and homeplaces provide clues to how region could be seen, in Robert Cantwell's terms, as "an ecological limit of the ethnomimetic process" (1993, 111) that cycles rich soil around the mountains.

Soil talk anchors a number of chronotopes in "rich soil." In addition to newgrounds there are ramp patches, home places, mountain crossings, rock shelters, poplar flats, and old fields. Ramps, poplar, bass, molly moochers, apple orchards, ginseng, and

yucca anchor the times of community life; whether on private property or not, these are all signs of the chronotopes that follow rich soil as it moves around the mountains and that resist the fixed identities adhering to spaces reduced to coordinates on a map.

In the imaginary of rationalized Appalachia, the practices of gardening, hunting, and gathering are often capped by the limiting adjective "subsistence"—which characterizes the time of newground as one of economic stagnation. Such a time must inevitably give rise, in an official, punitive discourse, to a future in which polluting industries are the best bet for employment. "There's never going to be any major economic or community or industrial use for any of that property down there," said Roger Hall, assistant director of West Virginia's Division of Environmental Protection, "until there's an incentive for major companies to come to this state and relocate . . . If I were a computer facility, why would I want to locate a factory in Matewan, West Virginia? There's no infrastructure, there's no water supply, there's no airports. There will be an incentive more so for smokestack industry—those industries that generate some sort of pollutant" (1995).

"The New Edition:" A Foray into Soil and Stereotype

Reid and Taylor discuss political uses of the hillbilly stereotype and the related diversion of Appalachian studies into identity politics. As an image of a mountain collectivity, the hillbilly forms a chronotope of rationalized Appalachia, a site produced through an irreversible gaze from without. Animated from within, through double-voiced performances, the hillbilly image becomes a site for reversing the gaze. Thus, for instance, in Naoma, West Virginia, two men turn the hillbilly stereotype into a prison to inhabit and break out of. In a series of videotaped vignettes, Arnold Honaker rehabilitates the idiom of the documentary interview. Persuading friends and neighbors to don hillbilly hats, he interviews them as they engage in activities like hunting, gathering, making moonshine, and doing battle with a creature called "The Bradley Mountain Monster." Videotapes of these interviews elicited robust laughter among viewers on Coal River with whom I watched them. In one entitled "The New Edition," Ben Jarrell plays the part of a locally

"You got plenty of sugar watermelons?" asks Arnold.

"I believe I will. You know that dirt right there, where my house fell?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

"Well that corner post there leaned over and it pushed that dirt over, and there's nothin but black dirt come out from under that house when it fell. All you've got to do is just throw the seeds out there, they just come up everywhere."

"That would be good dirt, wouldn't it?"

"That's good dirt—just take a finger and stick that seed in there, and it'll come up. That dirt's rich."

"Probably all them boards rotting, wasn't it?"

"Old shoes and stuff."

"Inner tubes."

"Inner tubes, old pants, and stuff laying around. That's what makes your ground rich." (1998)¹

Bakhtin holds that chronotopes, which define genres, display different concepts of the relation between space and time (1981, 85). There are echoes in this masque of the numbskull tale, set in the time and space of rationalized Appalachia. The interviewer, who could be a folklorist or an anthropologist, or a roving correspondent for the media, is querying the hillbilly about his garden. The conversation about gardens begins as the kind of conversation one would overhear in any convenience store or post office on Route 3. Then, with the slightest prompting from the interviewer, it spirals off into a lie. Suddenly we are in a space, not of lack, but of excess, wherein the collapse of a house unleashes dirt so fertile that watermelons will grow there (also, we might note, with little prompting). How did this dirt get so rich? By dint of the waste products of civilization, inert, non-biodegradable materials combine with Appalachian dirt to produce rich ground, or what Bakhtin terms "gay matter."

In the abrupt shift from one genre to another, we become aware of two consciousnesses grappling: one convinced that these material products will lead to prosperity, the other fully aware that polyester pants, plastic shoe soles, and rubber tires—rank trash—do not enrich

the ground. In the carnivalesque time of the dialogue, shoes, inner tubes, and pants transgress their limits, growing qualitatively large as fertilizer and trampling into the dirt the ideals of progress and the human as completed, atomized being. The lie, that used-up consumer goods can enrich the soil, provokes laughter among viewers on Coal River. Carnivalized, the irrationality of the rational is exposed in a single utterance conveying two voices, one of which cannibalizes the other. What is devoured and vanquished here is the monologic, fixed perspective that confers fixed identities on the people, places, and elements of the world, and the ethical solipsism that safeguards this perspective.

Civic Professionalism in the Time of Carnival

As the dialogical Other of official culture, Carnival must always be present; it contaminates the supposedly monological utterances of the powerful. Carnival may be a weakened force, but its currents still run through popular culture. In this sense, we should be looking for elements of everyday life which can become "Carnivalised," just as novelness refers to Carnivalised literature: open to the play of dialogue, resisting the "last word."

—Julian Holloway and James Kneale

The commons, ostensibly the object of preservation in environmental policy, cannot be accounted for in the monologic discourse of environmental review. As Folch-Serra points out, "in the human sciences, monologization destroys the essence of the object under investigation" (1990, 258). As a social phenomenon, the commons is always produced and perceived in more than one perspective (1990). Monologization destroys the social aspects of soil, forest, water, air, and other "resources" by eliminating all but one perspective. An essential step, then, would be for professionals to engage in a dialogical mode of reckoning commons, a mode in which the field-based sciences and humanities already operate (to varying degrees). Fieldwork can be either a mode of sifting out and stockpiling "information," or it can be a mode of engendering

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commons and taking stock of the substantive goods in which commons are grounded.

Of special interest in "The New Edition," is the role of the interviewer, who becomes a catalyst for accessing the second world of carnival, summoning it forth through his questions. He is not collecting tall tales, but intentionally co-producing an alternative time and space, probing in a sense, "all that can happen when one inquires about past and present events in a given region over a determined landscape" (Folch-Serra 1990, 263). The videotapes, which poke fun at the tape-recorded interview, contain some fodder for imagining the contours of carnivalized ethnography—a process of multiplying voice through quotation, for "working out in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half play-acted form a new mode of interrelationship between individuals counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (261).

Carnival, stemming from *carne levare*—the roasting or taking up of meat—reasserts flesh, the body, into a world based on abstracts. Like Merleau-Ponty's artist, ethnographers lend their bodies to the world (Neustadt 1994, 194), as much through conversation as through writing. Ethnographers seeking to understand places "from within" generate at the same time, a new vantage point from which our interlocutors can imagine the same places. In 1995, Randy Sprouse, an unemployed coal miner who became the first director of Coal River Mountain Watch, took John Flynn and me on a dirt road tour of mountaintop removal sites. Afterwards Sprouse commented, "I knew mountaintop removal was horrible, but I didn't realize how bad it was until I thought about what it looked like to you."

One of the most compelling ways in which conversationalists lend their bodies to the world is through quotation, whereby one turns one's own voice into a channel for the voices of others.² Voice in turn amplifies perspective—voice is the taking up of perspective on things, from the inside (subjective) or the outside (objective) (Young 1997, 138 - 140). Carnival time overcomes, as Folch-Serra points out, "ethical solipsism, the belief in sheer individualism. One can never find complete fullness in oneself alone" (1990, 265). Quotation, which places contending consciousnesses in dialogue, is a primary means of completing identity, of "thinking an outside"

(Herr 1996, 19). Producing texts in which other texts speak, ethnography is one means available for incarnating the dialogue.

Professional expertise is a major catalyst in the alchemy that transforms newground into overburden. Scientists, engineers, archeologists, and occasionally historians and folklorists are called upon to certify the suitability of land for mining. Coming to terms with the consequences of allowing our evaluations to be narrowly circumscribed would be a move toward a more civic professionalism in the regulatory world. But there is also a great need for a dialogically generated baseline profile of the geographic commons, which the academy could easily produce in tandem with training programs. Imagine including on an environmental impact statement, a map, depicting the sitings of "rich dirt," or using the occasion of the environmental impact statement to profile the chronotopes associated with rich dirt. How would one map such chronotopes, making space not only "graphically visible, but narratively visible" (1990, 258)? However we manage it, an urgent task for civic professionalism is to reassert the commons that is being monologized away by the technocratic arm of the corporate state.

Notes

- 1. This is an undated video recording, made sometime in April, 1998, in the author's collection. Names used here are pseudonyms.
- 2. Interestingly, colonial flatlanders called their fellow citizens living in what is now West Virginia "cohees," after the frequency of the term "quoth he" in their talk. (See Milnes and Williams, forthcoming).

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