

Harlan Miners Speak

The Way Their Voices Were Heard¹

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Introduction

In the summer of 2017, white nationalists marched with torches, protesting against the removal of Robert E. Lee's statue, chanting the Nazi slogan of "Blood and soil," in Charlottesville, VA. Southern nationalists' rallies had often been conducted by individual nationalist groups including the Ku Klux Klan and the Neo-Confederate League of the South, but this time among their flags were to be found the flags of the Traditionalist Worker Party, which, established in 2015 in Cincinnati, Ohio, one of the rust belt cities, has vocally advocated white supremacy and has been reported recently to have recruited members in the Appalachian coal mining area, the backbone of the rust belt. The too-simplistic and conventionally employed polarization between the racist South and the progressive nation, or the racist poor whites and the middle class often illustrated as "Cracker Barrel vs. Whole Foods," does not seem to rightly describe this action that exploded over General Lee's statue, given that white supremacist groups that did not originate in the South like the Traditionalist Worker Party accounted for a considerable part of the massive protest. Indeed, the former vice-president Joe Biden contextualized this Charlottesville incident in the history of the struggle for racial equality and civil rights in the United States and called it "a ferocious pushback from the oldest and darkest forces in America" and the fight with that force "a battle for the soul of this nation." At the same time, however, he invoked the

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Appalachian area of “the long-forgotten rural stretches of West Virginia and Kentucky” as well as the rust belt as threatened with being under the control of that “darkest force” that would “prey on the hopelessness and despair” there. Is Appalachia a peculiar region that is easily appropriated by the “darkest force,” an enemy within, or the other in America?

The Appalachian region is evoked often in a national crisis as the other, an aberration, a problem, and so on, and assumes part of so-called Southern exceptionalism that stresses the peculiarity of the Southern region in the United States because of its historical burden of the Civil War and racial injustice. And Appalachia often seems a most peculiar site, or even the exceptional of the exceptional. One very graphic example is former U.S. Army Reservist Lynndie England, who was accused of involvement in prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in 2005. Her name was always associated with her Appalachian background—her birth in Kentucky and growing up in a trailer park in West Virginia—as if that her poor, hillbilly background symbolized the bizarre and abusive nature of the incident. We can also include a recent association of J.D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) with the Trump Phenomenon.

If Appalachia is constructed, then when and how is it constructed? This exceptional region is apparently constructed in a mutually constitutive negotiation between the region and the nation, in the negotiation with the national context such as the war on poverty or the war on terrorism. This paper takes *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields* (1932) as an example to interrogate what is negotiated and constructed in what kind of crisis. The following section outlines the typical image of Appalachia by taking up some examples, before taking up Dos Passos’s writing about Harlan County to consider how his experience of Harlan Country influenced his writing and his eventual departure from the Popular

Front.

1. Negotiated Nature of Appalachian images

The nature of the idea of Appalachia, or the constructedness of Appalachia, has been discussed, especially since being triggered by Henry D. Shapiro's seminal work on the idea of Appalachia—*Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (1980). There are both negative and positive assumptions about the region deployed in the negotiation with the national context especially when it is in a crisis from the late 19th century onwards. The basic assumption is, according to Anthony Harkins, that the area is a peculiar, exceptional region inhabited by people with a culture that provides, on the one hand, images of the pioneer spirit, individualism and a strong sense of self, strong family and kin networks, closeness to nature, and a traditional religious sense; and on the other hand, social and economic backwardness, primitiveness, savageness, inbreeding, domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, and religious fundamentalism (5-7). Positive assumptions are reversed into negative ones depending on the context.

During the boom of the 1920s, when the underdevelopment of the South was often criticized as “benighted,” the Appalachian region was targeted, and the poor white, or white trash, were called primitive, often criminal, unscientific, sexually promiscuous, and so on (Tindall 281-94; Harkins 47-70). In the 1930s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt designated the South as “the nation’s No.1 economic problem—the nation’s problem, not merely the South’s, number one problem” of the United States in his “Message to the Conference on Economic Conditions of the South.” Those negative images rendered Appalachia as the other in contrast to the modernized nation.

The image of the poverty and aberration of Appalachia

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persisted in Michael Harrington's 1962 book *The Other America*, and in Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, in which images of poor Appalachian communities produced by, for example, a CBS film "Christmas in Appalachia," marked a sharp contrast with the prosperity enjoyed by the "affluent society." In *The Other America*, Harrington claims that the beauty of the mountain is what masks its "ugliness". His Appalachia is "another country and shares the stereotypical depiction of the Appalachian people":

It is not just the physical beauty that blinds the city man to the reality of these hills. The people are mountain folk. They are of *old American stock*, many of them Anglo-Saxon, and old traditions still survive among them. Seeing in them a romantic image of mountain life as *independent, self-reliant, and athletic*, a tourist could pass through these valleys and observe only quaintness. (40-41; emphasis added)

But this "old American stock" suddenly reveals an ailment that does not accommodate the "independent, self-reliant, and athletic," or the ideal Americanness:

It seems likely that the Appalachia will continue going down, that its lovely mountains and hills will house *a culture of poverty and despair, and that it will become a reservation for the old, the apathetic, and the misfits.*

For the city traveler driving through the mountains, the beauty will persist. So too probably will the myth about the sturdy, happy, and uncomplicated mountain folk. *But behind all this charm, nestled on the steep hills and in the plunging valleys, lies an incredible social ugliness.* (43; emphasis added)

The same primitive, perverse image of mountain people as if residents of another country persists in James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1970). This 1970 novel is notorious for its stereotypical depiction of Appalachian mountain people as primitive, savage and sexually perverted. In the 1972 movie adaptation, the male rapist added the infamous line "Squeal like a pig" to enhance the brutality of the mountain men. The mountain area in *Deliverance* is like a grotesque echo of Michael Harrington's Appalachia. In *Deliverance*, the four men find themselves suddenly "in the red-neck South" where "the whole thing's different." (38, 40) They share the stereotypical image of Appalachia where "there's lots of music Everybody plays something: the guitar, the banjo" (45). But they are "ignorant and full of superstition and bloodshed and murder and liquor and hookworm and ghosts and early deaths" (49). And two men from this culture assault the urban men. In the novel urban heroes' masculinity is threatened by economic globalization and female empowerment in the postwar South, and their eradication of filthy, male rapists of the mountains signifies the final recovery of their masculine sense of self. Although the culture of poverty and the stereotypical image of savageness in *Deliverance* create a figure of male rapists, this figure is a displacement of urban men's, especially the narrator Ed's, economic and gender instability in the context of the post-war South.

In recent cases, Federal Marshal Raylan Givens in Elmore Leonard's stories (dramatized in the TV series *Justified*) proudly declares that he worked as a miner in Harlan County, Kentucky. Also Mitchell Y. McDeere in John Grisham's *The Firm* (1991) is from a mining area of Kentucky. In both cases, the hardships they experienced in the coal mining areas helped them form their tough and ambitious character. This juxtaposition of "the negative and positive modes" (Duke 2) is also detected in J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*.

As representation of its backwardness, the Appalachian area is

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often depicted as a “place where time stands still.” This image as in Jack Weller’s *Yesterday’s People* (1965) is even now prevailing. In John Grisham’s 2014 legal thriller *Gray Mountain*, which features law suits against an Appalachian coal company over the black lung disease of former coal miners, the heroine, an elite lawyer fired by a big law firm because of the Lehman Shock, images the Appalachian coal mining community she is heading for as “about three hundred miles away in distance and a century in time.” (32)

Appalachian representations oscillate, as it were, between the other and the self. The section written by Dos Passos in *Harlan Miners Speak* showcases this oscillation, or flipping of the negative and the positive.

2. Harlan Miners Speak

The coal mining industry that prospered during the First World War suffered from overproduction of coal and the economic condition of the area was further afflicted by the Great Depression. The industry consisted of big capital including the Rockefellers, Mellon, Morgan, and Ford, who tried to keep the industry going by cutting wages. In 1931 there was a violent shooting incident called the Battle of Evarts between striking workers and the coal mining companies. As more and more miners got fired for joining the strike, the living conditions of the miners’ families became dire. Taking the place of the United Mine Workers of America that were ineffective in supporting striking members, the National Miners Union (NMU), a Communist affiliated union, entered Kentucky to recruit members and also to provide relief aid such as soup kitchens. As the legal authority including the sheriff, the judge, and the prosecuting attorney were on the side of the coal mining companies, the NMU members were always under threat of getting charged with criminal syndicalism (Hevener 1-93; Hennen “Introduction”).

In November 1931, a delegation from the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, led by Theodore Dreiser and eleven other left-wing writers including Sherwood Anderson, Lester Cohen, Samuel Ornitz and John Dos Passos, visited Bell and Harlan counties to investigate “brutal poverty, oppression, and growing unrest” (ix). They conducted hearings for three days, then published a report titled *Harlan Miners Speak* in 1932. Dreiser’s visit helped to publicize the conditions of the area. According to the testimonies, children were suffering from malnutrition; what was earned was taken by the companies through the rent of the houses and expenses at the company stores; the Red Cross would not help strikers’ families; strikers’ houses were often raided or dynamited by the guards employed by the companies. Also the singer Aunt Molly Jackson was discovered, and the song “Which Side Are You On” written by Florence Reece earned national recognition.

The arrangement of the contents of the book *Harlan Miners Speak* is: the lyrics of Aunt Molly Jackson’s song; an introduction by Dreiser; essays by committee writers; testimony of miners of over 100 pages and testimony of the sheriff and the prosecuting attorney; Dos Passos’s report on their visit to the Straight Creek and Wallins Creek areas; Sherwood Anderson’s address before the meeting held by the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners in New York; and a record of the hearing in Washington.

The person who edited the book was Dos Passos. According to Donald Pizer, the last additional two chapters of Anderson’s address and hearing were included through a decision made by some other member (6). Although the miners’ testimony part features first-person accounts and thus constitutes the core part of *Harlan Miners Speak*, still the miners’ voice is not fully represented. The report as a whole is framed in concert with the National Miners Union that aimed at collective activism, or the party lines of the Communist Party. Indeed,

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the essay by Arnold Johnson aligns Harlan County with the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, Patterson strike, and Scottsboro boys accused of raping a white woman, in all of which the Party were engaged (59). Another writer, Charles Rumford Walker, clearly sets the opposition between the capital and the NMU (38-49). Also, as David Duke rightly points out, these first essays “stereotyped Appalachians and showed the extent to which they remained ‘the other’ from the writer’s perspective (32). Lester Cohen and Melvin P. Levy frame the diverse population as “old stock” and apply stereotyping words such as “isolation” and “primitive” to those “old stock” (18), and call them “feudists” and “moonshiners” that have “never seen a map” and “never read a book” (21). The questions asked of the people testifying fortify this framework by leading the miners and their wives, mainly local MNU activists, to talk about their plight, afflicted by the coal companies. One person after another reveals similar episodes of companies’ brutality and their miserable life. One man got fired after the day of his participation in a mass meeting. His house was raided repeatedly by men including a local deputy sheriff (106-7). Another man reveals how he and his brother were shot when he was working at the soup kitchen (112-13). The questions of the committee further expose the brutal fact that those miners were denied the protection of the law:

Q 25 You say you didn’t tell him [Sheriff Blair] what had happened?

A No. As far as I know, neither the Sheriff nor the Commonwealth’s Attorney made any attempt to investigate the shooting although the whole town was astir about it.

Q 26 Did he ever say anything to you about it?

A No, sir.

Q 27 Did anybody communicate with you?

- A Not any official. . . .
- Q 28 And made no taunting remarks?
- A No, sir. . . .
- Q 29 Did you find anything definite from that time to this to show that this Sheriff did anything about this?
- A Nothing definite except rumors and reports and warnings. (125-27)

The questions at once document their story and at the same time work as a guiding logic to situate their experience in the framework that the essays of the committee members form. These essays as a caption to the testimony part, together with the controlled nature of the miners' first-person testimony, produce an effect of authenticity and collectivity. The experience of coal miners is in this sense appropriated as an epitome of the predicament of exploited laborers by leftist writers who, though anxious to protect workers, yet framed and thus circumscribed them within the stereotype of impoverished Appalachian people.

3. Dos Passos and Harlan

John Dos Passos's experience of Harlan is probably one of the keys to understanding his works. Practically the editor of the *Harlan Miners Speak*, his own section, Chapter XI, shows a subtle dissonance that does not necessarily fit into the collectivity that his own framing constructs. He repeatedly mentions the Harlan experience in his works, and the transformation of the rendition of this experience, it seems, retains traces of the trajectory of his departure from the Popular Front politics. This section is an attempt to trace this process by comparing his three works: the Chapter XI, an article written shortly after, titled "Harlan: Working under the Gun," and the "Camera Eye (51)" that appears at the closing part of the *Big Money*, the last volume of the

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U.S.A. trilogy published in 1936.

In Chapter XI, Dos Passos depicts the committee's excursion into the Straight Creek area of Bell County and the meeting held in a Baptist church, to stage another set of testimonies. In the following passage, his depiction certainly shares with other writers the stereotypical representation of Appalachia as another country, a "place where time stands still":

The hollow was completely black. To get to the Glendon Baptist Church. . . we had to cross a high swinging bridge above the creek-bed. . . . The low frame hall was packed with miners and their wives; all the faces were *out of early American history. Stepping into the hall was going back a hundred years. . . .* These were the gaunt faces, the slow elaborations of talk and courtesy, of the *frontiersmen who voted for Jefferson and Jackson*, and 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 that church, listening to these mountaineers with their old time phrases, getting up on their feet and explaining why the time to fight for freedom had come again. (288; emphasis added)²

Here he employs the image of a white community and its backwardness ignoring the contemporary racial and ethnic diversity of that area (Lewis, 21-43), but at the same time he recurses to that energy of a revolution of one and a half centuries ago: a revolution of freedom, as the title of this chapter indicates, and not the Marxist revolution that the editing policy tries to inspire. The speeches of the County people recorded there are clearly in accordance with the party line. In the "Mistress Gates" speech that immediately follows, for instance, Gates appeals saying "We are going to stand right along with them [NMU]

and fight. We are thankful to the National Miners Union for this” (292). And ironically enough, as John W. Hevener points out, the speeches and interviews shown in this chapter are those made by NMU members (65). Although Dos Passos writes passionately in the introductory part “it wrings your heart the way the scantily furnished rooms have been tidied up for the visitors” (278) in his depiction of the poor housing of the Straight Creek, that housing is, again according to Hevener, dwellings of a mine already out of operation and the residents were NMU members illegally occupying them (Hevener 65). Ironically, his essay part actually “frames-up” the ideologically loaded speeches and interviews of the NMU members as if those of “mountaineers,” and at the same time his own essay part itself betrays this when he displaces the meaning of the revolution by reappropriating the meaning of the old American stock. While Melvin P. Levi in his essay appearing in the same book uses the term to associate the old-stock mountain people with primitiveness and savageness, Dos Passos flips it. As a practical editor of the book, he arranges essays by writers in order to induce readers to a certain reading path, and yet in the very last chapter, he himself evades the NMU program in a very subtle fashion, implicitly casting doubt about the authenticity of the testimony.³

In the *New Republic* article “Harlan: Working under the Gun” published in December 1931, Dos Passos presents a brief, concise, and highly stylized report without a vehement expression like “it wrings your heart.” He places at the beginning of each section one stanza of Aunt Molly Jackson’s “Kentucky Miners’ Wives Ragged Hungry Blues,” the whole lyrics of which were put at the opening of the *Harlan Miners Speak* book. In the opening part that introduces the miners as the old stock, the detached, compressed style is evident:

The fact that the exploited class in Harlan County is of old American pre-Revolutionary stock, that the miners still speak

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the language of Patrick Henry and Daniel Boone and Andrew Jackson and conserve the pioneer traditions of the Revolutionary War of the conquest of the West, will perhaps win the more sympathy from the average American than he would waste on the wops and bohunks he is accustomed to see get the dirty end of the stick in labor troubles. (62)

Donald Pizer, comparing the two versions of Dos Passos's depiction of Harlan miners, states that "Harlan: Working under the Gun" is not a documentary that was often used "because of its intrinsic nature as a group or collectivist enterprise in which a group reality . . . is rendered by dramatically displaying the speech and actions of the activity's multiple participants" (7); rather, it belongs to the genealogy of reportage in which a writer shows "his personal understanding of the meaning" of his experience with his own "literary style" (14). Indeed the open admiration of NMU that pervaded *Harlan Miners Speak* mainly through the essays and testimony is not here. Rather the tone is ambiguous. Dos Passos, using the first person "I," narrates that the plight of mining people is such that "the miners felt that they were fighting for their lives and were ready to join any organization that would give them back solidarity. . ." and he "talked to men who had joined all three unions." The part that corresponds to the Chapter XI conveys the miners' condition in a compressed manner without using the kind of passionate expressions employed in the Chapter XI, and the closing section takes on an ironical tone, suggesting that what the committee craved for was the testimony and that they were not totally sympathetic to the predicament of Harlan miners:

The next morning the committee picked up its testimony and left for New York, to be followed by the "toothpick indictment" of Mr. Dreiser and a general indictment of all concerned,

including the speakers at the miners' meeting, for criminal syndicalism. (66)

The tone is detached and no longer empathetic, and indicates that the committee would never “give them [miners] back solidarity and support them in their struggle against intolerable conditions” (63).

This detachment from the NMU finally figures itself as the word “foreigners” in the very last *Camera Eye* of the *U.S.A.* trilogy. *U.S.A.* is known for its highly elaborated narrative devices. Of its four modes of newsreel, biography, narrative, and *Camera Eye*, *Camera Eye* is marked by its abstractness caused by its stream of consciousness. Donald Pizer argues that the last *Camera Eye* (51), is a “climactic moment of insight into his interior life as a writer” because of its mode of “viewing experience entirely through the perspective of his own inner being” (20). I would further argue that this achievement also marks the stylization and aesthetics of his departure from the Popular Front and collective activism.

Camera Eye (51) consists of three scenes of his Harlan experience: an injured, dying miner; the county jail and imprisoned miners; and the office of the county sheriff. In each scene there are foreigners. In the first scene, the foreigners here designate those who visit the dying man. The “I” is one of the foreigners, but when “the firelight flares” covers everybody there—the dying man, his family, and the visitors—alike, they share the tragic sense. In the office scene, the sheriff treats union members as foreigners. The separation of “I” is most evident in this jail scene:

. . . in the jail it's light too hot the steamheat hisses *we* talk through the greenpainted iron bars to a tall white mustachioed old man some smiling miners in shirtsleeves a boy

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faces white from mining have already the tallow look of
jailfaces

foreigners what can *we* say to the dead? *foreigners* what
can *we* say to the jailed? the representative of the political
party talks fast through the bars join up with us and no other
union we'll send you tobacco candy solidarity our lawyers will
write briefs speakers will shout your names at meetings they'll
carry your names on cardboard on picketlines the men in
jail shrug their shoulders smile thinly our eyes look in their eyes
through the bars what can *I* say? (1208; emphasis added)

. . . *we* have only words against (1210; emphasis added)

The “I” in the group of “we” the “foreigners,” foreign both to the jailed miners and to the sheriff appearing the next scene, is there, alienated, looking at and listening to the exchanges between jailed miners and the other members of “we”, the party and union members. Their offering of “tobacco, candy and solidarity” and legal support does not impress the jailed. As powerless as they were in front of the dying miner, the “we” are also powerless here. The repetition of the phrase “through the bars” stresses the disconnectedness, and the malfunction of the party language. Detached from the exchanges between the jailed and the party members, the “I” is aware of his powerlessness. The narrator “I” is conscious of the limitations of their language: “what can we say?” And then he moves on to his recollection of dead bodies that he saw in the battlefield during World War I.

As long as he is associated with the party, he cannot find words any more. Indeed, his last words are just suspended: “we have only words against,” without the object of the preposition “against.” In the manuscript it was “Power Superpower” that was put after “against”—the same as used for the title of the next biography depicting the life of

Thomas Edison (Pizer, *Toward a Modernist Style*, 1939). But Dos Passos deleted the direct association of the words “Power Superpower” with the preposition “against” as if the language of party politics was powerless, or there was no simple language or no simple solution. In the next chapter, the final narrative part titled “Mary French,” the dissociation of the “I” in *Camera Eye* looks as if it is transferred to, or dramatized as, Mary French’s eventual alienation from party politics.

It was when he finished the second book of the trilogy *1919* that Dos Passos visited Harlan County. What his repeated accounts of Harlan and the change of its rendition show is that *Camera Eye* (51), with its stylized mode, is closely connected with his departure from party politics and collectivity and a shift toward a very individual literary mode. The trilogy ends with one more biographical part, “Vag,” about a nameless “young man,” apparently hitchhiking. His eyes capture a plane overhead but cannot catch any pilot’s eyes. Left alone, dissociated from the progress and the wealth, he is deprived of the promised benefit of “Power, Super Power”:

The young man waits on the side of the road went to school, books said opportunity, ads promised speed, own your home, shine bigger than your neighbor, the radio crooner whispered girls, ghosts of platinum girls coaxed from the screen, millions in winnings were chalked up on the boards in the offices, paychecks were for hands willing to work, the cleared desk of an executive with three telephones on it. (1240)

He is still waiting for the promises he has learned at school and in advertisements to be realized. The opening part, “U.S.A.,” added after the compilation of the three novels into a trilogy, also features “the young man” walking alone among the crowds. The last paragraph of this opening part is made up of sentences that have “U.S.A.” as their

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subject, indicating what will be told in the trilogy: “U.S.A.” is “a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bankaccounts [sic.],” “a lot of men buried in their uniforms in Arlington Cemetery,” and “the speech of the people” (vii). The young man in both the opening and ending parts is speechless. He just walks, looks at people, disconnected, and waits. As if the possibility of collective activism sought throughout the work is a failed promise, the young man walks on, speechless, and that speechlessness eloquently conveys the eventual dissociation of Dos Passos from party politics. Separating himself from the Popular Front, he later associated himself with the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, the U.S. affiliate of Congress for Cultural Freedom, the anti-communist advocacy group, known for disseminating the Cold War apolitical cultural policies with its emphasis on the value of literary modernism with prominent members including Sidney Hook, Melvin J. Lasky, Lionel Trilling, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Irving Kristol.⁴

If the Dreiser Committee appropriated the plight of Harlan miners, the transformation of Dos Passos’s Harlan also abstracts the experience aesthetically when he tries to detach himself from the lexicon and the rhetorical style of party politics. Essays by the committee members treat the Appalachian miners as exceptional when they associate the miners with primitiveness. Likewise, Dos Passos also exceptionalizes them when he depicts the “old stock” as worthy of “sympathy from the average American” (“Harlan” 62). As such, Jennifer Rae Greeson’s argument about the South applies here. Appalachia also “lies simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literature” and “diverges from the nation writ large on the basis of exploitiveness. . . and on the basis of its exploitation—as the location of systematic underdevelopment, military defeat, and occupation” (3). In these binary sets—rural/urban, developed/underdeveloped, and so on—Appalachian miners are rendered the object of salvation by the intervention of a helping hand

from outside. The silent, wordless “young man” of Dos Passos seems to evade the geographical binary and assumes the laboring body of the “U.S.A.” His abstractedness, an aesthetic dissociation from party politics, however, may have left the miners behind when the narrator of *Camera Eye* (51) suspends his words by saying “we have only words against.”

Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of the paper with the same title that was read at “Selective Tradition in the Pacific: A Conference on Class, Writing, and Culture” held at Victoria University, Wellington, NZ, September 1-2, 2017.
2. Dos Passos here misrepresents the miners’ community by presenting it as if it were one of Anglo-Saxons and Scotch-Irish. See Ronald Lewis, “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity,” in *Backtalk from Appalachia*.
3. Donald Pizer also points out the significance of the names of the founders of the U.S.A. and goes as far as to assert that it is his offering of “an alternative to the Marxist rhetoric of NMU spokesmen” (“John” 14).
4. Their letterhead printed the names of the members. See, for example, a press release prepared by Sidney Fook on February 2, 1951 (“ ‘For Immediate Release’”).

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