

*Judith D. Hoover*

## “Miners Starve, Idle or Working”

*Working-Class Rhetoric of the  
Early Twentieth Century*

**I**n 1931, a West Virginia Mine Workers press release called “Charleston,” written by Helen Norton, illustrated the most compelling issues facing coal miners and their families during the Great Depression. It read:

Mrs. Chris Devitta’s baby is dead. Three weeks ago a constable kicked Mrs. Devitta and threw her to the floor when she objected to being thrown out of her house at Hugheston with her two little children and all the household furniture at the order of the Hugheston Gas Coal Company. The doctor who attended her at the birth of the child said it had been injured by the assault. . . . The father never saw his infant daughter alive. He was in jail in Charleston, picked up by a state trooper the week before and given a five day sentence and a \$10 fine because a pen knife was found in his pocket. Sunday morning . . . Devitta went out and dug a little hole in the pasture where the tent colony of evicted strikers is, and buried his baby daughter. The cemetery at Hugheston is a company cemetery and there is no place there for strikers’ babies. There will be other little graves at the tent colony soon if the union cannot buy milk for the babies and nourishing food for their mothers.

This article was part of a fundraising effort by the West Virginia Mine Workers to aid strikers in the southern part of that state. Such primary sources, woven together with theoretical perspectives, are the basis of my “working” working-class rhetoric—“working” in the sense of providing a means by which working-class voices can be legitimated both in the general culture and in the academic realm. Many sociologists and other theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as-

sert that working-class communication reflects support for and acquiescence to a capitalist status quo; this study challenges those assertions. It is critically important to hear the words of those struggling for survival during this nation's greatest internal economic crisis, struggling long before the significant changes wrought first by the New Deal and then by World War II. Once large numbers of women entered the workforce and once the post-war era's GI Bill of Rights allowed education to be sought by more working-class men, the crisis situation faced by the working class was somewhat alleviated. Primary source documents from the early years of the twentieth century may, therefore, be unique in their contribution to the study of working-class rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Theoretical perspectives that relate to the concepts of ideology, hierarchy, and hegemony all present a rather dismal outlook for identity creation among members of the working class. In his chapter titled “Class: The Presence That Dare Not Speak Its Name,” Donald Ellis contends that each of the separate groups in a society “acquires and expresses its identity in social interaction.” He delineates “communication” as a “ubiquitous social activity that is the building block of all collectivities formal and informal alike.” His goal is to “understand how the concepts that are used to describe certain commonalities among people (e.g., ethnicity, class, education, etc.) are grounded in the real communicative experiences of human beings” (177). He explores the “language and communication patterns associated with various social groups” in order to determine “how members of various social classes, ethnic groups, and substrata of society communicate and thereby reflect and reproduce their own social conditions” (181).

Ellis distinguishes between social differentiation and social stratification, which he defines as “the institutionalized social arrangement that determines who gets what and why,” and he notes that “rank and status are associated with these arrangements.” In the United States, he claims, “Americanism is equated with support for the business community.” That equation results in inequality among social classes in terms of tax, finance, and inheritance laws that allow the society's goods to be held by the same class generation after generation (181). In a class system, of course, people are not compelled to remain in a lower caste to which they were born. However, Ellis shows that because people of lower status must rationalize their position, blaming it on “the economic system, history,

or some other group,” their “[c]ommunication patterns solidify the boundaries between groups” (183). In addition, racial and sexual stereotypes are often used to “place group members in particular social strata,” thus denying members of some groups opportunities to move upward through their own achievements (184).

According to Ellis, the most potent force that perpetuates the hierarchical social stratification system is ideology, and he notes that “[f]or an ideological system to legitimate a particular stratification system, it must be perceived as fair” (184). The truism that individuals are responsible for their own success or failure, common in the United States, supports stratification. When we communicate that truism, when we thus create “a sense of objective reality” about success, “this becomes a justification for the fact that some people are wealthy”; indeed, Ellis notes, “because of the positive reactions to their success by others,” successful people “believe that their own actions brought about that success” (185).

Others have described this relationship between ideology and social class in the United States. Berger, for instance, defines ideology as “a systematic and comprehensive set of ideas relating to and explaining social and political life. Ideologies ‘explain’ to people why things happen and, in so doing, tend to justify the status quo” (58). He asserts that capitalist ideology creates “a sense that things are the way they have to be, that success is a function of willpower (the American Dream), and that matters of socioeconomic class in the United States, an egalitarian nation, are relatively unimportant” (60). Hooks claims that those who receive low wages or no wages see themselves as having failed personally and consequently “internalize the powerful’s definition of themselves and the powerful’s estimation of the value of their labor” (104).

Various writers have used the term “hegemonic domination” to describe the ability of the powerful classes to “convince those who were being exploited that their situation was natural and thus universal, which meant that things could not be changed” (Berger 63). Raymond Williams, for example, showed that hegemony “both includes and goes beyond [. . .] culture” and “beyond ideology” in its ability to dominate everyday life (108–9). Whereas an ideology can be revealed and understood and thus countered, hegemony can not be detected because it is “ubiquitous and amorphous,” and because it “pervades the social and cultural realms” in “hidden and disguised” forms (Williams 110).

The role of communication in this pernicious circular process must be understood. Ellis shows that the images commonly held regarding social groups or classes result from the language choices applied to those groups. He claims:

“Those in control of linguistic and communicative resources use these to manage the impressions of others. Those not in control of linguistic resources have this used against them by way of negative attributions” (185). Control of resources equates to power, which results in respect. Conversely, lack of resources, lack of power, and lack of respect result in justification of one’s lower place in the hierarchy.

Ellis utilizes Bourdieu’s explanation of the uses of “symbolic power” to deconstruct the relationship between “linguistically deprived” individuals who come to believe in the legitimacy of “superior” forms of communication and those in command of those superior forms. The power differential created by this relationship is “invisible” yet “legitimate” and results in members of lower social groups’ “actively contributing to their own social, political, and economic disadvantage” (Bourdieu 127 qtd. in Ellis 185). This process is enhanced, of course, by the presence of an educational system that “sanctifies and perpetuates an established order” and that endows some with “credentials, titles or qualifications” that allow them to “exploit differences,” which themselves “become more fixed to the extent that they appear more objective” (Ellis 187). Those who lack language facility and credentials may also “learn ways of thinking about themselves that reduce their self-esteem and control, and increase their alienation and distrust.” Further, they lack the connections of “marriage, kinship, private schools, universities, and clubs” already at the disposal of upper-class members (189).

Ellis refers to a much-cited study of British working-class communication by Willis, which showed that attitudes reflected in common word usages became a “class code” that prevented the young men being studied from taking advantage of educational opportunities that could have potentially moved them out of the working class. The word *school*, for instance, took on meanings such as “‘resentment,’ ‘waste of time,’ and ‘conflicting authority,’” which prevented the young men from seeing their school as a positive environment and from gleaning any of the benefits of education (Willis 11–14 qtd. in Ellis 192). Class consciousness, Ellis shows, is “shaped” by the work environment “where language and relationships are regulated in ways that maintain differences in power, and differences between the dominant and knowledgeable individuals and those with little power and symbolic resources.” This work environment features unequal knowledge distribution, a lack of opportunities for decision making, “monitor[ing]” of one’s work, “reprisals,” and “class-based attitudes about work and leisure.” If working-class members also respect and voice their support for such values as “accomplishment” and “competition,” they further disadvantage themselves (Ellis 193).

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Helen Norton, who wrote the article at the start of this chapter, also penned a contemporary press release that described twelve families' daily living conditions: "a battered old tent through which the rain comes in waterfalls into the beds, the dresser, the best rocker covered with a rug." One mother of a little girl, Mrs. Kelly, "crouches under a quilt on the bed and coughs. She is far gone with tuberculosis and the rainy weather has brought on bronchitis." Her daughter "stirs a pot of beans, but the stove smokes and wood is wet—wood, in a land rich with coal!" Children "paddle around in the mud underfoot and try to dam up the water that wants to make a creek bed straight through the tent." Babies, "the chief sufferers in the strike," may "die unless their fathers go back to work under the same old conditions," unless "the rest of America will give dimes and dollars to buy milk" ("When Miners Are Evicted").

A housing contract made between the Raymond City Coal Company and an employee, Charley Null, in 1931 helps to illustrate the plight of the homeless tent dwellers. In March of that year, Charley Null was given "permission" to "garden . . . ¼ acres at House #37." By signing the agreement, he authorized the company to deduct an unnamed amount from his first paycheck. He also agreed to the following: "Should the undersigned lay off from his work to work or till the above described ground, [. . .] it is understood and agreed he forfeits all his rights under this permit, and forfeits to the Company all growing or grown produce thereon, [. . .] and further in case the Company serve notice on me for any reason, to vacate the house I am now or may be living in at the time of said notice" ("Copy"). Since the document is signed by the tenant in the same hand as that of the company official, I speculate that Charley Null could not read or write and thus, perhaps, missed the significance of the words "in case the Company serve notice on me for any reason, to vacate the house."

Another sort of agreement bears mention here. In order to be hired by the Hatfield-Campbell Creek Coal Company during the 1920s, one had to sign a contract that not only included questions about one's age, weight, height, color, and scars or deformities, but also required an oath about the "rightness" of nonunion shops. First the applicant had to agree that he was "not now a member of the United Mine Workers of America, the IWW, or any other organization of mine workers, and will not, during this employment, join or affiliate with any such mine labor organization." Then the applicant had to agree that he was willing to sign because he "believe[d] the preservation of the right of individual con-

tract, free from interference or regulation by others, and payment in proportion to service rendered, to be in my interest, to the best interest of the public and of all industry.” Finally, the applicant had to agree that the company could “make deductions on pay roll for Medical Attention, Hospital and Burial Fund” (“Contract”). No amounts were listed for any of these deductions; the employee simply had to trust the company to decide on a reasonable fee.

“Miners Starve, Idle or Working” is one of many potential slogans listed for use by miners during Depression-era strikes or other worker actions. Others on the list include the following:

- “Coal operators’ kids never cry for food.”
- “Why should we starve quietly?”
- “We want work or food.”
- “The Red Cross won’t help us.”
- “We won’t starve amidst plenty.”
- “We’ll raise Hell for our kids.”
- “We’ll vote in friendly law-makers in 1932.”
- “Hoover can call Congress.”
- “What if *your* kids were hungry?”
- “Let us have the surplus wheat.” (“Slogans”)

A number of these slogans appear throughout 1930s sources and are reported to have been seen on the picket signs and parade banners described in strike bulletins distributed by the West Virginia Mine Workers in the early 1930s.

Tom Tippet, a union organizer who had himself been a coal miner, also wrote Depression-era accounts of miners’ living conditions. This “largely self-taught intellectual” had worked at Brookwood Labor College in the 1920s with Katherine Ellickson, a self-labeled “unionist and labor economist”<sup>2</sup> (Ellickson 1), and was appointed head of the Worker Education Division of the New Deal Works Progress Administration in the 1930s (Rodden). Tippet described a wintry scene in the Coal River area of West Virginia, saying “I am pretty well aware of poverty and human suffering—after the textile strikes in the Carolinas—but I think I have never seen before quite so intense misery.” He wrote of a miner’s family that lived

in a shack in the town of Whitesville [. . .] situated on the edge of coal river that bounds down through the valley lying at the feet of very high mountains covered with pine trees and as I write buried in snow. On either side of the camp and puncturing the shimmering beauty of the mountain side is the mouth of a coal mine. From this great black spot coal comes forth and slides down a 600 foot incline to railroad cars. As it goes the coal dust rumbles forth, settling down on every thing below. The house and yard [. . . are] like a slack pile.

Tippett's narrative includes a description of life inside the shack. He wrote:

Some coals were burning in a grate and around it were huddled Mrs. Walker and three small children. All of them were without shoes. On the bed in the same room was a tiny baby—three months old. Still another child died this year. From where I stood I could easily see through the house in a crack that marks every board in the wall. It was just as easy to see the sky through the roof. All of them were hungry and have been underfed for months.

Tippett made a point of Mr. Walker's work ethic. He said, "Walker is not a shiftless fellow. He gathered up his pay envelopes, which he proudly has kept for 10 years. A bunch of them lie before me as I write. His record for steady work over the years is perfect." The difference, Tippett explained, was that Walker had lost his job because of his union membership. When the union was active in that region, Walker's pay envelope had shown he earned \$99.43 in two weeks. Once the union had been outlawed, Walker's two-week pay was \$8.43. "Now," noted Tippett, "he lives on a much lower standard than the mine mules."

An unsigned document titled "Launching a Workers' Class in West Virginia," contains a description of Tippett himself at work educating miners and their families a few months after he wrote the above narration.

Close to a hundred people were crowded in the school house at Ward—men crouched on the floor, women with babies in their arms, small children watching attentively. A Negro had vaulted onto the top of a six-foot cupboard and lay in a half-sitting posture close to the speaker. The class had started outdoors on the grassy stretch near the school house. [. . .] Then the rain had come and the crowd had been forced into the small hot school room, lighted by two gas mantles, where there were not nearly enough benches to go around. On the blackboard was printed neatly: 'Please do not spit on the floor or use profane language.'"

The writer turned next to Tippett's message to the class. He spoke of "their daily problems, of the influence of wages on marriage and children, of how the job causes quarrels between man and wife." He "explained the purpose of workers' education, told them of the book, *Your Job and Your Pay*, [. . .] explained how he and Katherine Pollak [later Ellickson] were both teachers at Brookwood and how they were interested in developing workers' education in West Virginia." Then he told of the "singing of the Marion textile strikers and suggested that [they] might practice the song 'We are building a strong union, Workers in the mine.'" The writer concluded, "Thus on June 4, 1931, was launched the first workers' class in the West Virginia coal field."

This reference to singing indicates the significance of music in working-class rhetorical campaigns. In the tradition of the Industrial Workers of the World's (IWW) "little red songbook," songs of local interest and understanding to min-

ers in West Virginia were given new lyrics to fit each occasion. The official state song, “The West Virginia Hills,” was changed from:

Oh the West Virginia hills, how majestic and how grand,  
 With their summits bathed in glory like our Prince Emmanuel’s land,  
 Is it any wonder then that my heart with rapture fills  
 When I stand again with loved ones on the West Virginia hills.  
*Chorus:* Oh the hills, beautiful hills,  
 How I love those West Virginia hills,  
 If o’er sea or land I roam, still I’ll think of happy home,  
 And my friends among the West Virginia hills. (King and Engle)

The new lyrics became:

Oh the West Virginia hills, how majestic and how grand  
 With their miners standing loyal like a union man should stand  
 Is it any wonder then that our heart with rapture thrills  
 For again we have a union in these West Virginia hills.  
*Chorus:* Over the hills, beautiful hills,  
 There’s a union in these West Virginia hills.  
 If o’er scab field I should roam, still I’ll think of happy home  
 And the red necks in the West Virginia hills. (Seacrist)

Civil War era chants such as “Freedom” and songs such as “Tenting Tonight” were reworded to become union marching songs. An old folk song became the newly refurbished “Kanawha County Jail,” with defiant words for “tinhorn courts” and “noble turnkeys” alike. It literally invited “all you jolly red necks” to “listen to my tale” the story of “the boarding house they call the county jail,” where “when you get your breakfast, your bread is hard and stale, your coffee looks like tobacco juice in Kanawha County Jail” (Seacrist).

Within the one-page “Strike Bulletins” issued by the West Virginia Mine Workers in 1931 are news items, slogans, pleas, messages from the leadership, meeting announcements, poems, humorous asides, promises of help to strikers’ families, explanations about miners’ rights, accounts of confrontations between strikers and coal operators, admonitions against violence, and stories of successes meant to help the strikers maintain a united front. The July 8 bulletin ended with the story of a “grand parade” of miners and their wives marching “up Sand Creek way” and “carrying the American flag.” Although forty-four miners had worked July 6, only seven worked on July 7, and “today [July 8] the mine is tied up tight as an operator’s pocketbook” (“Strike Bulletin No. 1”).

In the July 10 bulletin, two stories were told to tie together the idea that “it takes miners to mine coal.” First, it said, “bums and loafers” were being brought

in to mine the coal at Gallagher. Then it reminded readers that the governor of Kansas had once called in the National Guard to break a strike there. The conclusion to that story was that those “soldier boys got their faces all dirty and their hands all blistered and their backs all lame, but as for getting out coal—well, you couldn’t have kept a kitchen stove going with it” (“Strike Bulletin No. 2”).

The July 14 bulletin provided a short feature about the “Labor Chautauqua,” which had put on a play that “showed how the bosses work their men over time until they have too much goods on hand and then lay them off and let them starve.” They had also taught the crowd some songs, such as “Solidarity Forever” to the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and “On the Picket Line” to “Polly Wolly Doodle.” The writer urged that “some of you fellows with mouth organs or banjos might practice up on these tunes” (“Strike Bulletin No. 3”). These stories, in addition to providing historical context, also have a theoretical value.

### *The Narrative Paradigm*

In explaining his concept of the narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher clarifies that by “narration” he means “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them,” rather than “a fictive composition whose propositions may be true or false.” Indeed, he shows, the narrative paradigm “can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme.” To Fisher, the communication practices of human beings “should be viewed as [. . .] stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons” (2).

Fisher claims that the narrative paradigm “challenges the notions that human communication—if it is to be considered rhetorical—must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of inference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic.” However, the paradigm “does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amenable to all forms of human communication” (2). Fisher contrasts his narrative paradigm with the “rational world paradigm,” which “presupposes that”:

- (1) humans are essentially rational beings;
- (2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is argument—clear-cut inferential (implicative) structures;
- (3) the conduct of argument is ruled by the dictates of situations—legal, scientific, legis-

lative, public, and so on; (4) rationality is determined by subject matter knowledge, argumentative ability, and skill in employing the rules of advocacy in given fields; and (5) the world is a set of logical puzzles which can be resolved through appropriate analysis and application of reason conceived as an argumentative construct. (4)

Fisher provides the “presuppositions” of the narrative paradigm as follows:

(1) humans are essentially storytellers; (2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is “good reasons” which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media; (3) the production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character [. . .]; (4) rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives; [. . .] and (5) the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation. (7–8)

In contrasting the rational world paradigm and the narrative paradigm, Fisher shows that whereas the rational world paradigm “essentially held that rationality was a matter of argumentative competence: knowledge of issues, modes of reasoning, appropriate tests, and rules of advocacy in given fields, [. . . and] as such, rationality was something to be learned, depended on deliberation, and required a high degree of self-consciousness [. . .], [n]arrative rationality does not make these demands.” Rather, the “operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation” (Burke 20 qtd in Fisher 9).

In regard to the concept of hierarchy, inherent in any system of social stratification, Fisher notes that the rational world paradigm “implies some sort of hierarchical system, a community in which some persons are qualified to judge and to lead and some other persons are to follow.” Although the narrative paradigm “does not deny the legitimacy (the inevitability) of hierarchy,” it condemns “the sort that is marked by the will to power, the kind [. . .] in which elites struggle to dominate and to use the people for their own ends [. . .]” (9). When some narratives meet the criteria of narrative fidelity and narrative probability better than others, then a narrative hierarchy has come into existence; however, since all persons are capable of storytelling, “all [. . .] have the capacity to be rational in the narrative paradigm” (10). Because we reflect on our own lives, we learn to make judgments about the stories others tell about us based on our own experiences. No teaching is required for this process to occur. For rational argument to be learned, however, we must acquire “specialized knowledge of issues, reasoning, rules of rationality, and so on” (15).

### *Analysis of Narrative Discourse*

Miners used slogan suggestions, rewritten songs and chants, and strike bulletins both to seek identification with other miners and to differentiate themselves from “others.” These examples may be thought of as typifying “class codes.” In the slogan, the miners sought to identify themselves as those who “dig your coal,” and those who “created America’s wealth.” They blamed the “operators,” and assorted political leaders such as President Herbert Hoover, Congress, the national government, the Farm Board, and the Red Cross for their plight (“Slogans”). The codes used in the songs were much more graphic. The miners identified themselves as “red necks” and as “Christian hobos,” as heroes “noble and brave” who as “union sons and daughters” have “gone to an early grave.” They were opposed in these lyrics by “lawless tyrants and ruffians” and by “scabs” who tried to take their jobs (Seacrist). The strike bulletins took the terms for the “others” another step by labeling them as not only “scabs,” but as “flunkies,” “bums and loafers,” “soldier boys,” and “lapdogs” who wear “ice cream pants and stick candy neckties” or “stiff collars” (“Strike Bulletin No. 1”; “Strike Bulletin No. 2”; “Strike Bulletin No. 3”).

All three kinds of documents contain references to the values sought by the miners. In the slogans, the miners speak most of feeding their children, but they also ask for solutions to their plight, such as giving them the nation’s surplus wheat or providing unemployment insurance. In the songs, they speak of “freedom from bondage and political chains,” of liberty and peace, of their own “noble land,” and of “free elections.” In the strike bulletins, they speak most often of rights—the right to keep their jobs, their rights as taxpayers, the right to picket peacefully, and their “American birthright” that includes “liberty and economic independence” (Seacrist).

Although the slogans and songs contained genuine threats, the strike bulletins countered the threats with ridicule of the mine operators and strong suggestions that miners not resort to violence. Slogans suggested that the miners would “keep coming,” that they “must have food,” that they “won’t starve,” that they would “raise Hell,” and that they would vote. The songs, similarly, indicated that the miners were “not afraid” and that they would “lay down arms” only when agreements could be reached “on union terms.” Calls to arms were made in song, along with references to the “union sword”; one song ended with the phrase “union or death” (Seacrist).

The strike bulletins provided statistics and other informational messages to reassure the miners that help was on the way and that the strikes were work-

ing. They reported the number of mines shut down and the number of miners on strike, as well as data on food distribution efforts, sites, and amounts. Their attacks on the operators came in the form of name-calling and ridicule. Their instructions to miners suggested that they should stop production by walking off their own jobs and “picketing every mine.” They advised miners to “swallow your wrath” and avoid “being provoked to violence,” but to try to “get to the scabs somehow” (“Strike Bulletin No. 1”; “Strike Bulletin No. 2”; “Strike Bulletin No. 3”).

Many of the words found in this account of working-class rhetoric are harsh and unpleasant to the sensibilities of academics as well as the general public. Talk of red necks and scabs is not appealing to the reader. Why was it necessary? Why should we be interested in these words and the people who used them? How do their efforts expand our concept of rhetorical discourse? If we look back at our theorists’ contentions, perhaps we will begin to see the relevance of not only the ugly words, but also the heartbreaking stories and the sense of righteous resistance to the inhuman treatment accorded the working class in general and West Virginia coal miners specifically.

Ellis claims that the working class disadvantages itself to the extent that its attitudes conform to the values of capitalism. This concept is not new. In fact, Karl Mannheim, writing during the heart of the Depression, noted, “in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it” (40). If the workers, the coal miners in this instance, had acquiesced to the rationale of the coal operators that the economic system and they themselves would be best served by closed shops, then they would certainly have disadvantaged themselves. Although a recounting of the long history of coal mining is beyond the limits of this study, suffice it to say that at various times miners did disadvantage themselves in the way Mannheim suggests. Miners in West Virginia were first attracted to the United Mine Workers (UMW), then disillusioned by that same group; they turned to the West Virginia Mine Workers and then, during the Great Depression, membership in that organization languished. They returned to the UMW, but were deterred by the closed shop provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act, which was vetoed by President Harry Truman, but upheld (through a veto override) by the Republican-controlled House and Senate in the 1940s (see Rodden).

Still, a careful look at the kinds of discourse practiced by the miners in this study indicates defiance rather than acquiescence, resistance rather than ideological legitimation of social stratification. Indeed, there are class codes present in this discourse that blame the troubles of one group on the privileges of the

other and solidify the boundaries between those groups, but these codes do not acknowledge “fairness” in any way. They never suggest that the coal operators “deserve” their condition in life because they have “succeeded,” whereas the miners have not worked hard enough to succeed.

So what do these miners say instead? They sing songs, they recite poems, they tell tales. All the while, they give support and encouragement; they seek funds and empathy; they offer narrative evidence of the woeful world of the working class during the Depression era, asking for understanding and for a solution to the misery that accompanies their lives. They do not seem to believe that they are linguistically deprived. They speak in their own voices and attempt to convey their meanings in tried-and-true methods of “the people.” Some of their messages are argumentative and persuasive, while others are literary and aesthetic—in other words, they exploit the narrative paradigm in both of its manifestations.

These narrators may not have been trained in the ways of attorneys or judges, but they “know” and can explain how human beings ought to be treated. Their stories possess narrative fidelity, or faithfulness to experience, because those whom they address have lived these stories, too. Their stories possess narrative probability because they present coherent accounts that retain their character and integrity from time to time and location to location. Perhaps the single most powerful force operating in these narratives is that of identification.

Analysis of the miners’ narratives is enriched by ideas utilized in the field of women’s studies. For example, bell hooks asserts: “Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin.” The result of that limited perspective is that “feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences” (“Preface” x). Although hooks wrote in terms of race and gender, rhetorical theories also lack a class component, indeed a class consciousness. How difficult it must be for those who have been neither hungry nor homeless to comprehend or identify with working-class rhetoric of the Depression era. The closest current scholars may have ever come to such talk is, perhaps, the Polish Solidarity Movement of the early 1980s. Academics typically study the rhetorical discourse of those in power rather than those with less authority and less education. After all, those in power got there, we assume, because they were persuasive. So the study of the rhetoric of the powerless has been put aside, not consciously, perhaps, as not worthy of study. This putting aside, or never taking up, has further legitimated the power structure.

I agree with Ellis that these samples of Depression-era working-class rhetoric provide evidence of blaming that would certainly seem to reinforce class boundaries. But what if the villains actually are villains, actually are responsible for the starvation and homelessness experienced by the West Virginia miners and their families? To speak such a simple truth does not conversely admit equal blame for their plight on the part of those who were suffering. Indeed, these desperate times finally brought American society to the recognition that people could work as long and hard as humanly possible and yet not earn a “living wage.” Mannheim illustrates that even during the Depression, theorists understood the power of ideology to blind us to that reality. He said, “ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination” (40).

Speaking of the oppressed, hooks asks, “Who defines them? Who creates their realities? How are they defined?” Speaking to those who may be blinded by ideology or hegemony, she says, “Resistance and strength can come to even the poor and weak if they perceive that they can,” if they are able to “reject the realities projected on them by others” (90–91). Primary source documents by miners reveal their efforts to define themselves and others, efforts to resist ideology and control over their own realities, and rejection of the idea that as Americans they had no rights other than those given to them by their employers. Their communicative methods consisted mostly of stories, some harsh, some poignant, but all rhetorical in the best sense of the narrative paradigm. They rejected the “rational world” assumptions inherent in capitalist ideology and relied instead on “good reasons” why change was needed.

#### NOTES

1. The primary sources used for research in this chapter come primarily from the Katherine Ellickson Collection at the Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in Detroit and from the West Virginia University archives. In order to isolate the rhetorical artifacts of the working class, I have selected items distributed by unions, for instance, such as press releases, lists of suggested slogans, accounts of contemporary events and contemporary living conditions, strike bulletins, and familiar songs rewritten to feature labor issues. The Ellickson Collection, as well as those of Mary van Kleeck and Ann Blankenhorn, also contain materials related to the history of the CIO and AFL, publications that show the point of view of the mine owners, contracts that forbade union membership, contracts that pertained to living in a company house, and legal documents, such as a martial law proclamation issued by the governor of West Virginia in 1921 during a strike which he described as a “state of war, insurrection and riot” (Morgan 1).

2. Katherine Ellickson was first a “Vassar College and [ . . . ] Columbia University” graduate. She became a teacher at the “Affiliated Summer Schools for Women Workers” and then at

Brookwood Labor College. Ellickson was a fieldworker, along with Tom Tippet, in organizing "Southern textile communities" and later an organizer with the West Virginia Mine Workers. She helped organize the "young Socialists in New York City" and was a member of the American Federation of Teachers, helping organize in North Dakota in 1934–1935. She was the "assistant to CIO Director John Brophy when the national office was opened," then "assistant director of the ALF-CIO social security department"; and in 1938 she became an analyst for the National Labor Relations Board (Ellickson 1–4).

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