

The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2006: 35.1

SPECIAL SECTION: REGION(S)

POSTCOLONIAL APPALACHIA:

BHABHA, BAKHTIN, AND DIANE GILLIAM FISHER'S *KETTLE BOTTOM*

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In the popular imagination, Appalachia is stereotyped as backward and insular, epitomizing negative qualities associated with regionalism. But surely as we have become more attuned to immigrant, multicultural, and postcolonial perspectives, our sense of the region—any region—has shifted toward awareness of identities and cultures as heterogeneous hybrids, inseparable from global influences. Promoting such awareness, Diane Gilliam Fisher's 2004 award-winning book of poems, *Kettle Bottom*, offers students a revealing vantage point for seeing Appalachian regional culture in a postcolonial context. An artful and accessible poetic sequence that was selected as the 2005 summer reading for entering students at Smith College, *Kettle Bottom* enables diverse students to reconsider their notions of Appalachia, and of regional identities, while also gaining a better understanding of postcolonial theory. In particular, Fisher's poems provide vivid examples that make Homi Bhabha's approach to postcolonial analysis not only relevant to the students themselves, but revelatory. Combining Bhabha's notion of hybridity with Mikhail Bakhtin's views on hybridization, polyglossia, and heteroglossia, we can see how these concepts can come alive for students when they are tied to Fisher's poems.

Kettle Bottom portrays compelling events and clashing cultures of the 1920-1921 mine wars that were focused in Mingo County, West Virginia, with mining deaths and anti-union violence eventually drawing 9,000 or more miners into an armed uprising that was only quelled by national forces (Shogun 208). Fisher's dramatic poetic sequence rivets the attention of students, but the book's many voices also illustrate postcolonial theory, in that the poems present regional culture as a multicultural mix created by conflicting discourses, sites of cultural encounters within a globalized region. And *Kettle Bottom* represents these sites of encounter through its very structure, since the poems unfold a story, stretching over a year's time, through the voices of diverse members of the mining community, including women and children, workers and owners, those born in the region and migrants brought there to work.

To see how the poems and theoretical concepts illuminate each other, let's consider three types of hybridity in *Kettle Bottom*. First, in poems voicing perspectives of Italian immigrants and migrant African Americans, hybridity marks a borderline, a meeting of national languages (Bakhtin's polyglossia) or of regional, ethnic idioms—the dynamic heteroglossia that Bakhtin finds within any national language (60-61, 66-67). One of Fisher's most powerful representations of polyglossia emerges in *Kettle Bottom*'s second poem. Offering an entry into the mine experience, as well as a gloss on the book's title, “L'Inglese” dispels nostalgic notions that a regional culture will be encapsulated in a romanticized dialect, essentially rooted in the locality and free from foreign impurities. Note the clash between languages experienced by the Italian immigrant speaker in “L'Inglese,” a strangeness felt “in the mouth”:

The English is rocky in the mouth,
so many hard sounds they batter the tongue
like coal clattering from the tipple
into the railroad car. It makes a longing
in the ear for a voice to rise and fall
like a fountain. They make new words—
they have no Tasso, they have no Dante
to tell them the names. It is months
I am wondering: What is “kettle bottom,”
il sotto della caldaia, that they fear?
Finally I ask Henry Burgess. He laughs,
he says it is the petrified tree trunk
buried in the mountain, two, three hundred
pounds. *Drops through the mine roof,*
Henry says, and makes a loud clap
with his hands. *Kills a man*
just like that. For such a thing
I would not say “kettle bottom.”
For such a thing I would say,
Lasciate ogni speranza
voi ch'entrate qui. (8)

Ending with Dante's famous words of warning above the entrance to hell, “Abandon all hope, Ye who enter here,” this liminal poem warns Fisher's readers concerning the experience they are entering, as they read their way into the coal camps and the dark, threatening mine itself. But by voicing and evaluating the local miners' idiom

from the perspective of the Italian immigrant, “L’Inglese” portrays the polyglossia that Bakhtin describes as occurring where different national cultures come together and interact, giving rise to the “polyglot consciousness” (65) we observe in the Italian miner who is absorbing, yet challenging and resisting, the local language. And considering how *Kettle Bottom* would typically be viewed as part of our country’s regional literature, we can also see “L’Inglese” as supporting what Bhabha calls the “worlding” of literature, a shift of emphasis from “the transmission of national traditions” to the “transnational histories of migrants,” along with other displaced, refugee, or colonized people (12). Rather than looking for mythically pure, regional identities, Bhabha would have us attend to the cultural hybridity that joins a region to the world.

A similar cultural hybridity appears in poems voicing the experiences of African Americans who were part of the migration from the South, as the speaker of “At the Colored Bathhouse” describes:

We come on the railroad from Alabama,
me and my brother, not riding
like the dagos, but out front, timbering
and laying track. . . . (16)

Rather than suggesting that the union ideal of solidarity among workers easily overcame ethnic and racial divisions among the miners, Fisher’s poems representing African Americans’ perspectives convey ongoing—and potentially lethal—partitions in space and classification. Such demarcations are apparent in a poem that, like “L’Inglese,” criticizes the miners’ idiom from a migrant outsider’s position. The first lines voiced by the African American miner expose the racism pervading a certain phrase, presented in the poem’s title, “Good Man in the Mine”:

That what they say.
It like a badge,
make you white
in the mine. Make you
a good man—
in the mine. (81)

After indicating the dangerous assignments given to African American miners before they earn the “white” designation (that still only applies “in the mine”), this speaker tries to infuse the word “colored” with different ideological associations: “We *all* colored / down there in the dirt / and the dark” (81). Revealing the stratified, conflicted diversity of idioms and word use within a national language, Fisher’s poems illustrate Bakhtin’s conception of heteroglossia as playing out a struggle between contending worldviews (291-92). But since she shows that racist segregation and exploitation continue to be perpetuated by exploited white miners, her poems also serve a function that Bhabha attributes to postcolonial critique, which offers “a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order . . .” (6).

Along with cultural hybrids spurred by the presence of immigrant and migrant workers within the Appalachian coal mines, *Kettle Bottom* conveys a second form of hybridity in the merging of biblical texts with idioms of business and labor. These hybrids reflect either a struggle to reinforce corporate hegemony or labor’s resistance to that imposition. In “The Gospel According to Stone Mountain Coal,” Fisher symbolically represents capitalist business ideology by hybridizing scripture with the stylized voice of a corporation’s promotional literature; the poem thus displays the familiar rhetorical strategy through which a dominant group claims a transcendent,

universalized mandate for exploitation (in this case, of the land itself as well as the mine workers). Yet this interpretation of “The Gospel” can seem to hold out a great promise:

Stone Mountain Coal came to West Virginia
to bring forth the abundance of these hills, to feed
the railroads and ironworks and steel mills
which are the blood and heart and bones
of our land the way the Lord fed the multitude
from two fishes and five loaves. To feed
our country from the coal fields that had lain
fallow generation after generation, waiting
for such men of faith and vision—faith greater
than a grain of mustard seed, who say
unto these mountains, *Remove*, and they
are removed. Who say unto those who upheave
the natural harmony between owners
and workers—a harmony guaranteed
by contracts signed of their own free will—
what the householder said to his laborers
in the Lord's parable of the vineyard: *Friend,*
I do thee no wrong. Didst thou not agree
with me for a penny? Is it not lawful for me
to do what I will with mine own? (58)

Students respond strongly to this poem's satirical ironies, which can be appreciated through Bakhtin's way of analyzing “*parodic stylization* of incorporated languages” that interact in a dialogic manner with the author's own implied point of view (312). “The Gospel According to Stone Mountain Coal” epitomizes what Bakhtin calls “a hybrid construction,” containing “two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems” (304), as the poem's capitalist and religious discourses are conflated in ways that many readers will question.

Resistance to the mining company's claim to a scriptural mandate emerges in “One Voice,” a paired, counter-hegemonic poem that represents the perspective of a preacher who blends the words of a New Testament prophet with those of a union leader. Thus John the Baptist appears in the same line with John L. Lewis, the United Mine Workers president, so that when the speaker later asks, “Do you not hear in the words of John / the voice of the union crying in the wilderness?” (75), *which* John is utterly ambiguous. Students might compare “One Voice” with the scene from John Sayles's *Matewan* in which a lay preacher uses biblical text in what

Bakhtin would call a “double-voiced” sermon (324-25): the young preacher conveys his union-oriented message in a way that will not be discerned by coal company's thugs, who hear only a conventionally pious homily. Shedding light on deliberate hybrids of this sort, Bhabha writes that we need to observe how disempowered groups may strategically draw upon cultural traditions, “restaging the past” in discourses that are an ongoing “invention of tradition,” a way of gaining authority for their own “cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (2).

Kettle Bottom presents a third type of hybridity in poems that bring “world” literature together with “regional” culture, as these categories have traditionally been constructed. This meeting of cultures occurs through education, and in these poems hybridization represents both resistance and dialogue, rejecting claims both of the dominant culture's hegemony and the region's isolation. Fisher's poems of education as cultural exchange exemplify Bhabha's idea of the “borderline work of culture,” which he says, “creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation”—not mere transmission (7). Such acts of translating the past can be seen in the book reports of a tough-minded eighth-grade student, Pearlie Webb, who has been assigned to read Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The two prose poems that represent Pearlie's written responses convey her strong awareness of her audience, Miss Terry, especially the sense that she needs to address possible misunderstandings she expects from a “*company teacher*” (69).

While Pearlie's first report compares the mistreatment of females in passages from Ovid and the Bible, in “Another Book Report, by Pearlie Webb” she evaluates the story of Orpheus and Eurydice by interweaving its plot, and some of its wording, with an “old song” Pearlie remembers from her grandmother—in fact, a centuries-old Child ballad (#278), “The Farmer's Curst Wife.” [\[1\]](#) In this song, the wife is consigned to the Devil by her husband, but frees herself from hell by terrorizing its demons. It is easy to contextualize this poem (as Fisher herself does in her readings) with additional lines from “The Farmer's Curst Wife,” including the Devil's farewell to the farmer: “Well I've been a devil most all of my life / But I never been in hell till I met your wife.” Quoting Ovid, Pearlie's book report is critical toward the very different ending “in the *Changes* book,” since Eurydice “just *dies a second death* and *did not reproach her husband*” (64-65). And so, as Pearlie says,

I conclude that it is better to be curst by a husband like the farmer in Mamaw's song than it is to be loved by a husband like Orpheus. It seems like if you are a wife you are going to Hell no matter what, but at least in Mamaw's song—

There's one advantage women have over men.

A woman can go to Hell and come back again. (65)

Pearlie's report ends with lines from a song that is part of her mountain culture. Her hybridization of a European master-text with the scripture and folk music of her regional culture exemplifies Bhabha's “insurgent act,” since Pearlie consistently quotes the texts she has been given while adding her own critical inflections. In Bhabha's terms, she is creatively “refiguring” the past (diverse cultural traditions) to define, in her own written texts, her “newness,” her own position and identity (7). As Bhabha would note, this postcolonial identity is situated in a globalized region, subjected to an invasion motivated by capitalist exploitation and supported by hegemonic uses of culture, conveyed through representatives like the company teacher. But Fisher shows in Pearlie Webb and other outspoken mountain people of *Kettle Bottom* how it is possible for those on the margins to be active participants in cultural exchanges, part of global conflicts characterized by dialogue, resistance, and even understanding, just as it appears that Pearlie's lively writing is appreciated by Miss Terry. Fisher's cultural exchange between student and teacher provides a model for education today, since such understanding of their own position, and their possible power as writers, is certainly what we hope students will gain from their encounters with both literature and postcolonial theory.

[1] Versions of this song, also called “The Devil and the Farmer's Wife,” can be found in numerous websites, as well as in editions of Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

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Teaching graduate and undergraduate critical theory courses at the University of Akron, [Sheryl Stevenson](#) (Associate Professor of English) relishes opportunities to promote students' close engagement with writers like Diane Gilliam Fisher and British novelist Pat Barker, whose works are still emerging. Her most recent publications are an interview with Barker and an essay drawn from a book manuscript on Barker's fiction, both of which appear in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* (University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

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