

**GHOSTLY BODIES AND WORKER VOICES:
POWER AND RESISTANCE IN RON RASH'S *EUREKA MILL***

by Randall Wilhelm

Ron Rash's 1998 award-winning collection of poems, *Eureka Mill*, is dedicated in part to his grandparents, James Moody Rash and Mary Lee Miller Rash, both of whom worked in the Eureka Textile Mill outside of Chester, South Carolina in the 1920s and 1930s. In these poems, Rash's eloquent voice documents the conditions of this small town factory and its often crushing effects on those who were employed there. The first poem of the collection features Rash's grandfather, who, drowning in the "metal squall" of the "warping and filling" weave room, thinks to himself momentarily "*This is my life*" (l. 6). The title of the poem, "Eureka," like the name of the mill itself, offers ironic and biting commentary regarding the relations between power and labor in the American South in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Greek *heureka* is translated as an interjection following a burst of inspiration, the 'A-ha, I have found it' a reward for diligence and thoughtful probing, as in the example of Archimedes, who uttered the word upon discovering how to measure the volume of an irregular solid. The title and the anecdote fuse together here, for James Moody Rash has indeed discovered something, but his realization is hardly one of triumph. What he grasps intuitively is his spatial enclosure, his loss of autonomy, the large-scale shift in his world from agrarian to industrial values, where people who were once self-sustaining individuals are now conceived of as "irregular solids" who are measured, shaped, and distributed much like the goods they produce in the weaving rooms in which they labor.

Eureka Mill is an important text for understanding Rash's literary work because it reveals his design of linking form and theme in unique ways in service of a larger cultural and personal mission. Rash's brilliant technical skill and evocative language has been the focus of nearly every critical response to his work. And rightly so, for Rash's achievements in verse, his crafting of language, his darkly surprising imagery, and his shaping of poems into syllabic lines borrowed from traditional Old English and Welsh forms create effects of stark and haunting beauty. Rash is a master stylist and one of the most original voices in contemporary American poetry. But as insightful readers such as Anthony Hecht and Matthew Boyleston have acknowledged, Rash's form is intimately fused with his identity as a Southern Appalachian. Hecht's introductory note to *Among the Believers* has provided a type of formal and thematic map for reading Rash's work, delighting in his poetic achievements but also linking them to Rash's ancestors, who have "lived in the southern Appalachian mountains since the mid-1700s, and a knowledge and feel for this region, its folklore, faiths, superstitions, loyalties and culture, is an abiding presence in his poems" (xiii). Boyleston's recent essay examines the influence of Seamus Heaney on Rash's poetry "through the lens of the greater cultural story that is the settlement of the Appalachian region" (11), a history spanning the Atlantic Ocean and unfolding through waves of immigration. Central to Boyleston's argument is the linking of phonetics and speech patterns, that "Appalachian speech retains certain 'Anglo-Saxon,' 'Chaucerian,' and



'Elizabethan' patterns of diction," and that for Rash "one's speech is a marker of one's identity" (16-17).

In *Eureka Mill*, themes of power, identity, and resistance intertwine and are woven into the very fabric of the language and forms themselves. Through Rash's use of dramatic monologues and intricate sound patterns, he gives voice to the frustrations, confusions, and anxieties Southern millhands felt in response to their new spatial and economic identities in the mill system of the Piedmont. The poems are divided into six books, each of which dramatizes the forces assailing Appalachian identity under the spatial compression of the mill system. While many critics have heaped praise on Rash's formal achievements and the beautiful music of his verse, what Jesse Graves has strikingly called "a feast of sound chimes" (83), there has been less attention devoted to Rash's thematic concerns, especially those regarding power and the representation of working lives. In all of his work, from the first stories in *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth* to his latest haunting novel about greed and overarching ambition *Serena*, Rash has been a passionate defender of the faithful, the exploited, and the invisible. In story after story, poem after poem, Rash shows his sympathy for the historically silenced mountain folk, the blood kin from whom he springs, the ghosts who people his own "spirit world" with glittering intensity. *Eureka Mill* is Rash's most overtly political book, and while the poems obviously evoke sympathy for the millworkers and their plight, Rash is certainly not in lock step with a leftist agenda and offers no easy answers for the complexities of the mill enterprise.¹ He does, however, offer us clues to reading the book by his inclusion of Frank Tannenbaum's comments from *Darker Phases of the South*, a verbal framing device which draw a sinister picture of this mill world:

He moved to the mill village. There was only one condition attached. He and children who worked there were expected to work in the mill. That is all. And that is enough. That makes the house a spiritual grave and the mill village a spiritual cemetery. It buries its inhabitants and hides them from the world. (xiii)

At the core of Rash's literary project there resides an abiding obsession with recapturing lost voices and "raising the dead" from historical and cultural erasure. While Rash has discussed his tendency to write about characters who are not like himself,² in *Eureka Mill* the subject is decidedly personal. In "Invocation," Rash writes himself into the book as speaker and conduit who performs a ritual balanced on the margins of the living and the dead. This poem can tell us a great deal about both Rash and his intentions in *Eureka Mill*. Pooling moonshine into the lid of a mason jar, he summons his grandfather's spirit, "a tobacco-breathed haint, shadowless shadow, / bloodless blood-kin, . . . to hear my measured human prayer":

Grandfather guide my hand
to weave with words a thread
of truth as I write down
your life and other lives,
close kin but strangers too,
those lives all lived as gears

in Springs' cotton mill
 and let me not forget
 your lives were more than that. (ll. 19-30)

Janet Zandy's foundational study of working class theory, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, operates through the metaphor of its title, the human hand as signifier of "protean meanings" that also "mirror[s] hierarchies of power, control, and ownership" (xi-xii). Rash's image of the human hand in this poem—both praying and writing—is as layered as the lines etched into his grandfather's grimed palms. In addition to the work these hands perform, both immersed in a type of introspective spiritual activity, the scene sutures past to present and reveals the conceit that ghosts in *Eureka Mill* are signs of unfinished business. For Zandy, ghosts "hover between presence and absence, invisibility and visibility, trailing the residue of life, of relationships, of labor performed, a history buried but not completely lost. . . . they are emblems of a particular reversal, workers who have been *ghosted*, living human beings turned into dead workers" (94).

This conceptual trope relates to nearly everything Rash has written, but especially so in *Eureka Mill* where his obsession with the past reveals itself most clearly regarding his views on power and the powerless. Quite bluntly, Rash refuses to let these bodies remain victimized and invisible. Through language and the weaving of both personal and regional memories, Rash exposes the often damaging effects unequal power relations have had on Appalachian identity.³ Rash's articulation of sympathy for his blood kin is an act of rebellion, a linguistic defiance that reinterprets economic history by giving voice to the historically silenced and by reframing exploitative power systems in terms that deconstruct their own complicit ideologies. Faced with economic servitude and bereft of their family lands, many of Rash's speakers seek to maintain psychological integrity by resisting the mill's power through a variety of defiant gestures. They challenge its strategy of turning humans into cog-like automatons that hum ceaselessly and mindlessly over their work, indistinguishable from the menacing machines, which devour fingers, hands, arms, even a young woman's scalp when she steps too close. As James Moody Rash thinks to himself amid the roar of the weave room,⁴ he realizes "Here was no place for illumination . . . and catching himself before he was caught / lost wages or fingers the risk of reflection"⁵ (ll. 1, 7-8).

As many scholars of Appalachia have noted, the economic history of the region is one of exploitation and dominance by single-industry economies which exerted near-total control over their workers, in wages as well as in other restrictive measures. At the heart of these economic ventures rests the dynamics of power and powerlessness, an exclusive system of access and agency that has always threatened practices of democratic egalitarianism. In "Last Interview," Colonel Springs, *Eureka's* owner, self-consciously reveals himself as an economic predator cloaked in social Darwinist theory, a system of hierarchy that legitimizes unequal power relations as a form of democratic pragmatism:

All Men created equal? Yes, perhaps
 but see how soon we sort the top ones out.
 Watch any group of children, they have leaders,
 followers and stragglers. It does not change

as they grow older. No one questions rank
in war or politics so why not business. (ll. 19-24)

Springs swells with the largesse of his ideological position, stating “Noblesse Oblige / is an idea we still live by in the South. . . . I know the truth. I gave them [the workers] more than they ever had before” (ll. 17-18, 32-33). And while Rash shows sympathy for Springs in other poems such as “1934,” where he keeps the mill open in the darker days of the Depression, filling his warehouses with cloth “there was no market for” (l. 16), *Eureka Mill* consistently interrogates the mill’s power and its duplicitous methods of recruiting workers and training their bodies for its own economic advantage.

In “Hand-bill Distributed in Buncombe County, 1915,” for example, Rash exposes such efforts as deceitful and manipulative, for the narrative on the poster claims a “fourteen year old girl / earns more than a grown man in the hills” (ll. 11-12). Come on down, the poster pleads, to where Eureka Mill “provides you with a place to live,” with fuel at your door, and where they will “treat you like a king” (ll. 13-15). Many mountain farmers believed the advertisements and moved their families to the new mill villages where they felt both confused and intimidated by the visual conformity and spatial compression of their new industrial landscape, where all houses looked alike and “lined both sides of every road / like boxcars on a track” (“Mill Village” ll. 1-2). The mill house, like its partner the weave room, serves as metaphor for the entire mill village enterprise. Its policy of controlling worker bodies through repetitive and dangerous tasks locks the individual into a state of psychic isolation, where one must choose between thinking and doing, subjectivity and objectivity, resistance or compliance. This is where bodies are “ghosted” into figuratively dead workers and where workers are linguistically turned into the “hands” that perform as “gears in Springs cotton mill.”

The politics of the mill village world throughout the South varied from location to location, state to state, region to region, and it would be disingenuous to draw a definitive picture of mill owners as overbearing brutes and millhands as a coherent unit all seething at the newly imposed economic system. In fact, many workers gratefully accepted work in the mills, especially during the hard times of the Depression years. Erskine Caldwell’s fictional Will Thompson in *God’s Little Acre*, for instance, embodies the former rural Southerner’s acceptance of mill life and embraces his new identity as a permanent industrial laborer, as Bryant Simon writes in his study of the politics of South Carolina millhands, for Thompson “the noisy streets, the roar of machinery, and the hacking coughs of the men and women sick from the lint-filled air of the factories were not the sounds of death but of the precarious, yet still vibrant life of a millworker” (2). However, despite some workers like Thompson who “bought into” this new economic system (and who is ultimately gunned down by the mill’s guards in a battle over who controls the “power”),⁶ Rash’s speakers were not born in mill villages, but find themselves nevertheless locked into its alien world strictly out of economic necessity.

Although the world of Rash’s *Eureka Mill* is not strictly autobiographical, its conditions of labor are historically accurate. Nearly all millhands during this time performed in a controlled space under regulated conditions and were nearly powerless to enact even the smallest beneficial changes, such as better work conditions, shorter hours, or increased pay. In fact, as Simon claims “because of the southern textile industry’s traditionally low

wages, many cotton mill families could not survive on one or even two paychecks” (*Fabric* 19). It is their gradual realization of this economic exploitation that leads many of Rash’s speakers to rebel against the mill system, which they increasingly regard as dishonest and manipulative. As the mill complex grew in South Carolina, from around a dozen mills in 1880 to around 115 in 1900 and to 184 in 1920 (*Fabric* 15), much of the labor force became increasingly disillusioned with such conditions, fomenting increased hostility toward a system that they conceived of in terms of demonic slavery. As one millhand put it, “[It is] . . . the true device of the devil. It is enslaving our workers, making nervous wrecks of them and bringing their youthfulness to an end” (*Fabric* 47).

When facing such a double-bind—driven to endure suffocating and hazardous working conditions for little pay and forced into a controlled social and economic identity, how does one maintain a stable psychic balance, a sense of one’s Appalachian identity? If one is not who one “used to be”—a familiar lament among first generation textile millworkers⁷—and the organ of change is the mill system itself, the very place, for better or worse, that one now relies upon for economic survival, what strategies of protest or resistance may be employed to sustain one’s sense of self?

The problem of political resistance in Appalachia is rooted in the very culture and history of the region itself. John Gaventa’s study, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, addresses this paradigm and repudiates the notion of Appalachian workers as passive victims, too uneducated or unmotivated to gather enough strength to alter oppressive economic situations or as violent malcontents who, unhappy with their lowly status in the economic sphere, perform as self-destructive “troublemakers.” Such theories lay behind the widespread stereotypes seared into the national consciousness in the early twentieth-century as a result of the bloody coal wars, the feuding of families such as the Hatfields and McCoys, and the general lack of large-scale community-based protests. Cultural factors also contributed to many Appalachians’ disdain for group organizations aimed at political change. As Stephen L. Fisher notes in *Fighting Back in Appalachia*,

[c]ollective resistance was further undermined by cultural traditions that stressed individualism, nurtured racial prejudice and dictated passivity and acquiescence for women, and by the strength of capitalist ideology, the absence of grassroots regional identity and strong local organizations, illiteracy, and poor transportation and communications systems. (3-4)

Rash’s speakers fall prey to and are failed by many of these personal and communal shortcomings. Mountain values such as pride and shame, and a code of self-reliance that transmuted into a particular brand of Appalachian stoicism made it nearly impossible for a man to show weakness, express regret, or ask others for help. “My Grandfather Swallows His Pride” provides a clear example of this type of personality. James Moody Rash, after having walked to town only because his wife is ill, returns with a sack of salt instead of sugar, the mistake a product of his illiteracy. And yet, after realizing his error, he will not admit the mistake:

he knew or thought he knew the price he’d pay,

a smirk at best, at worst a story saved
 to buy a laugh at his expense. No, he drank
 his coffee black all winter, into the spring,
 let it scald his bitter, stubborn tongue. (ll. 10-14)

Despite these various impediments to group or individual protest, many Appalachians still found ways to resist. In contrast to group movements in other areas of the nation which employed more visible means such as picket lines and documentary photography, individual resistance in the Appalachian mindset frequently took less visible forms such as gossip and backtalk, what James Scott has referred to as the “hidden transcript” of the oppressed, or what Sherry Cable describes as “periodic fussin’.” In *Eureka Mill*, despite a cultural ethos hostile to organized disobedience, Rash’s speakers still employ a variety of resistance measures such as imaginative reverie, backtalk and gossip, violation of open game and liquor laws, transference of hostility, civil disobedience and vandalism, use of culturally expressive forms such as song and storytelling, and occasional collaboration with outside social reformers. These strategies are designed to maintain a sense of Appalachian identity despite their new spatial positioning and economic reality in the small towns of the Piedmont, where their clothing, speech, and habits mark and marginalize their bodies as “lintheads,” as others distinctly different from the common fold.

In “Mill Village,” the speaker adopts a position of imaginative nostalgia as an attempt to maintain a sense of his former self. Like Rash’s grandfather in the opening poem, this speaker has become frightfully aware of his new spatial and social reality, where privacy has been eliminated from daily life, the houses “so close / a man could piss off of his own front porch, / hit four houses if he had the wind” (ll. 2-4). The speaker’s solution is visual escapism, for to combat the compression of the Mill village’s spatial constraints, he buys “a dimestore picture, a country scene, / built a frame and nailed it on the wall, / no people in it, just a lot of land / stretching out behind an empty barn” (ll. 9-12). At night, the speaker stuffs his ears with cotton and stares “up at that picture like it was a window, / and I was back home listening to the farm” (ll. 15-16). In “County Fair,” millhands try to escape their lives through temporary sensory stimulations and cheap amusements. “After they spent a week’s pay / for trinkets and souring stomachs,” they would end up behind the livestock arena “urged here / to herd with the exiled, unribboned losers,” where the men “talking little, then hardly at all” (ll. 9-10, 15-16, 19-20), each one slipping into reverie and mute remorse. These men realize their folly and learn their place, just as the speaker in “Mill Village,” for he also realizes “But what was done was done,” and “Before too long I took the picture down” (ll. 17, 20).

A more successful resistance strategy involves the cooption of language to “backtalk” authority during temporary shifts in power relations. In “Low Water,” for instance, the millhands take advantage of drought conditions in August to mock their employer Colonel Springs, for when a large rock appears in the river the water-level is too low for the Mill to run, so “We called that rock the Colonel’s Colonel. It was / the one thing in the county that bossed him,” so “There was nothing else that Colonel Springs could do / but let us go, at least a little while” (ll. 5-6, 11-12). The millhands rub it in even more, singing “Rock of Ages” and other hymns, backtalking the Boss and delighting in both their freedom and his temporary powerlessness: “It was an easy time. That hour or two made mill work more

tolerable” (ll. 17-18). In “Jokes,” the workers use language as both political satire and self-comforting humor. The speaker is relating the workers’ jokes about Depression-era conditions and states

The best was that if Hoover ever died
and six pallbearers took him to his grave,
he’d rise up in his coffin and he’d swear
four men could do the job as easily. (ll. 1-4)

Essentially harmless criticism and mockery, this backtalk allows the powerless some degree of psychic balance by siphoning power away from those in positions of authority through the medium of language. The President may still be the President, but the jokes paint him as an uncaring fool out of touch with the realities of life, qualities which diminish his humanity and provide the millhands the pleasure of a moral and ethical superiority as the jokes are told and retold throughout the community.

Other times, humor is used as a strategy for altering reality in a more positive, although desperate, sense. Shooting squirrels for food during the lowest point of the Depression, the millhands “call them Hoover hogs, another joke / we filled our mouths with so we could go on” (ll. 11-12). In “Revival,” language is used more aggressively in direct confrontation and refutation, but this backtalk is noticeably aimed at the wrong target, not Colonel Springs and the Mill superstructure, but the visiting Reverend preaching about hell and men’s souls. “Forgive me if I interrupt,” (l. 19) a worker shouts,

because that place you’re telling us about
is across the road, Eureka’s weaving room.
After tonight I see why mill and hell
are spelled almost the same and sound alike. (ll. 21-24).

Later though, the speaker’s backtalk returns as false bravado and reveals his sense of complicity in his own defeat, guiltily recalling personal shortcomings in an effort to understand his fate:

We laughed that night but later there were times,
when we were sweating in that cotton mill
we’d try our best to remember another life,
and what bad things we’d done to end up here. (ll. 25-28).

The Appalachian sense of fatalism and doom pervades the workers even amidst their-resistance attempts, for their release is always temporary and bought at a stiff price. As workers gradually accepted a marginalized existence in the mill structure, they increasingly transferred hostilities to other targets than the mill ownership itself. In “Preparing the Body,” violence between workers is shown as an effect of their spatial constraint and political and economic powerlessness. The workers’ damaged identities provide a tinder-box for violence:

Sometimes it only took a single word,



just a look if they had drunk enough.
A hawkbill knife would flash, sometimes a gun.
The doctor closed their eyes and it was done. (1-4)

In “Fighting Gamecocks,” the men violate open game laws and transfer their anger to the animals in which they play out their violent fantasies vicariously. Rash’s use of the Old English ceasura form with its insistent alliterative pattern infuses the poem with a sense of barbaric intensity and desperation:

brought our best birds well groomed and well gaffed.

In midair they’d meet feathers would fly.
Bright blood would stain soak the sawdust. . . .

All strut and hate their instinct to kill
pity was not a part of their nature. (ll. 3, 5, 9-10)

In “The Front,” a martially-coded cinderblock poolroom on the outskirts of town, the bleary-eyed men hurl their bodies at each other like birds of prey, their rituals of violence and despair abruptly called at midnight when the men stagger home, and where wives turn “pockets out to see what was left, / a few crumpled bills, coins, mainly lint” (ll. 17-18). These rituals provide a temporary release from the suffocating restraints of the mill, but such resistance is fruitless and delusional. These bodies are already ghostly, silent-eyed and empty as their turned-out pockets.

David Whisnant has called Appalachian culture “a web of both resistance and complicity” (46), a position that *Eureka Mill* surely supports, particularly in poems such as “The Stretch-Out,” where a seventeen year-old girl’s first day on the job is a competition with one of the machines for the amusement of the shift manager: “Let’s see how fast these looms will run, / he said, a stopwatch in his palm” (ll. 3-4). The work exhausts her to where she can hardly lift a fork at dinner, “still weary when the whistle blew” (36). For millhands, the term “stretch-out” was a multi-layered codeword associated “with stopwatches, industrial engineers, new supervisors, the frenzied pace of production, rising workloads, falling wages,” and the bone-weary exhaustion one felt at the end of one’s shift (*Fabric* 47). Simon discusses how South Carolina mill owners generally did not use the term, substituting more positive phrases such as the “separation system,” “extended labor system,” and “multiple-loom system” (257). Regardless of the spin, though, the concept of the stretch-out outraged millhands and “captured workers’ sense of betrayal, their feeling that management had reneged on an unspoken agreement to pay them a fair wage for a fair day’s work” (*Fabric* 47). The seventeen year-old speaker in Rash’s poem embodies this sense of dismay and despair, her realization that her life is weaving the fabric of her own defeat:

The child inside me felt it too,
and right then seemed to just give up.
I felt its life bleed out of me.

I cried but I cried quietly

and let the sheets slicken and stain, . . .
I closed my eyes and slept again. (ll. 9-13, 16)

Despite the urge toward self-destruction, guilt, and violence, some of Rash's speakers are able to take more positive steps toward resistance through the use of culturally expressive forms such as songs and storytelling. In "Listening to WBT," an isolated worker derives a sense of class consciousness and solidarity by listening to songs on the radio such as "The Weave Room Blues" and "Cotton Mill Colic, No. 3." The songs stay with the young man, and "days later you'd catch yourself / humming those lines as you worked your shift," the "prettied up" words lightening his heart "like a deep-water Baptist hymn" (ll. 12-17). But the significant difference in this poem is that the speaker is not merely escaping into a fantasy landscape but learning the potency of communication and expression as necessary components of political identity, for "in the end it was the words, / the bare-assed truth making a stand / in a voice that could have been your own" (ll. 18-20). "The Ballad of Ella Mae Wiggins" continues this thread of resistance as a millworker's death by strikebreakers is used as a call for resistance and collective struggle against undemocratic labor practices: "Oh mothers tell your children this sad tale / so they will tell their children when they're grown. / She sacrificed her life to save the union" (ll. 13-15). Despite occasional collaboration with outside agencies such as unions, for the most part millhands tended to shy away from groups and organizers, especially from ones outside the region, but the use of these culturally expressive forms allowed personal experience to gain collective legitimacy in the minds of individual workers across the South and, therefore, provided one of the more positive and effective measures of resistance.

In *Eureka Mill*, the workers' most effective and satisfying episode of resistance is an act of civil disobedience and vandalism, the dismantling of the shift whistle in "Breaking the Whistle." The event is significant for the workers take physical action against the Mill structure itself and symbolically "steal" time, for they are able to sleep late and enjoy a leisurely breakfast in the absence of the shift-announcing screech of the whistle: "It was after eight when they woke us up, / supervisors going door to door. / We dressed and ate and took our time" (ll. 25-27). The event is a form of backtalk, of silencing the Boss, of taking charge of time for once, and of controlling the supervisors' bodies as they scurry from door to door trying to assemble a workforce. And the gesture becomes embedded in storytelling, which gives it more power in the community, "By morning most workers knew our names. / . . . They called us heroes, linthead Robin Hoods, who stole time from the rich to give the poor" (ll. 29, 31-32). Such moments are short-lived, but linger as the tolling of a great bell in the minds of millhands struggling with spatial enclosure and political and economic powerlessness. Actions and gestures are translated into anecdote and story, the strands cohering into a potent narrative of resistance against monolithic structures, invisibility, and powerlessness. In this poem, doing and saying weave together in the millhands' resistance and form a common ground for the negotiation of identity and communal values, if not political or economic justice.

Eureka Mill is, as Faulkner would call it, "a last look back" at a vanished culture, and in these poems the final act of resistance is Rash's own. Through the poet's measured

human prayer the book's gathering of disembodied voices provides readers a ghost-laden stage teeming with the vitality and spirit of his Appalachian kinfolks. The collection's last poem, "July 1949," frames the book with another moment of ghostly imagining as Rash's mother, "rising / to dust half a mile / up the road, . . . / in the trembling heat" (62), runs to a car that will take her out of the mountains to meet her future husband, a man

who cannot hear through the weave room's
 roar the world's soft click,
 fate's tumblers falling into place,
 soft as the sound of my mother's
 bare feet as she runs,
 runs toward him, toward me. (ll. 22-27)

Rash has spoken of the written word as a type of "conjuring" that can bring character and place "more intensely to the reader's mind" (Wilhelm and Graves 223). *Eureka Mill* does just that, for in these poems Rash gives dead workers ghostly presence through the medium of language. Their stories contribute to the larger fabric of Southern and American history, struggles against change, doubt, betrayal, and despair; against tyranny and exploitation; against "fate's tumblers" and the greater powers over which we have no control. There is a tenacity in Rash's work that reveals the character and ethos of his mountain upbringing, a fighting spirit unique to the southern highlands that lives in and through Rash himself. Tai Erikson's axis of variation is an important model for understanding the character and shape of cultural identity as fluid, that contrary tendencies and adaptive measures "are not only sources of tension but radiants along which responses to social change are likely to take place" (83).

Even though many of the speakers in *Eureka Mill* ultimately yield to their conditioning in the mill system, this change does not mean that Appalachian identity is erased or exists only in a haze of romantic nostalgia. Resistance and adaptation are natural parts of culture, and for Appalachians these shifts are not occasions for burial but rituals of vitality and growth. *Eureka Mill* shows that such changes are a part of the larger cultural pattern of which Rash himself is an integral part. As Rash has said, when it comes to preserving southern Appalachia, he will do "anything but surrender" (Higgins 58). Ultimately, *Eureka Mill* is his backtalk to history, a ritualized raising of the past, where the voices of ghostly workers are channeled through the poet's voice with such a deep sense of compassion and humanity that it feels like a special kind of grace.

Notes

1. Although *Eureka Mill* represents Colonel Springs and the mill system in a largely negative light, there are poems that complicate such a simplistic view. In "Plane Crash" and "Funeral," for example, Springs attains a type of humanity in his grieving over the death of his son, although these moments are short-lived. In "1934," workers reject union leaders appeals and instead of striking they leave their shift "to walk outside. / We filled our fists to welcome them" (ll. 23-24).
2. See Wilhelm and Graves' interview with Rash in *Grist: The Journal for Writers*, especially pages 234-235.
3. Discussions of essentialism regarding Appalachian identity are fraught with difficulty. Somewhere between the rigid defenders of a timeless Appalachian "code of conduct" and equally rigid theorists who dismiss the idea of 'authenticity' as facile and naive, there is room for further exploration and debate. Although these

issues are outside the bounds of this essay, Kai T. Erikson's chapter on "The Mountain Ethos" is especially helpful in seeing Appalachian "culture" as embodying unique traits formed by pioneer ancestors but which is also under constant modification along an "axis of variation that cuts through the center of a culture's space and draws attention to the diversities arrayed along it" (82).

4. See Michael Chitwood's *The Weave Room* for another approach to the lives of workers in the mill system. Chitwood writes about another era of mill history and dedicates the book in part to the employees of the Angle Plant, Rocky Mount, Virginia. While his account shows the mill enterprise in a more sympathetic light than Rash, the ambiguous question of power lingers and is made explicit in the last poem "Threads, End of Another Day," where the speaker asks "In the building at my back / I could feel the throb of second shift / working the fine strands / that, which was it?, held them up / or held them back from better lives." (ll. 6-10).
5. In several poems in *Eureka Mill*, the risk of reflection or fatigue has severe consequences. In "Photograph of My Parents Outside Eureka Cotton Mill. Dated June 1950," Rash writes of his father's left arm "that sprouts a wire-meshed fist. / . . . the fingerless / awkward clutch of metal, as if / caught in a sprung-steel grip" (ll. 3, 7-9).
6. Although Caldwell's Will Thompson is determined to get the mill running again after the owners shut it down, he is aware of the unequal power relations and seizes nearly every opportunity to rail against it: "The mill can't get us back until they shorten the hours, or cut out the stretchout, or go back to the old pay. I'll be damned if I work nine hours a day for a dollar-ten, when those rich sons-of-bitches who own the mill ride up and down the Valley in five thousand dollar automobiles" (52).
7. In *One Foot in Eden*, Isaac is troubled by the connection of identity to place. Cleaning out the remains of their mountain home in Jocassee Valley, he thinks "I was learning that leaving a place wasn't as easy as packing up and getting out. You carried part of it with you, whether you wanted to or not" (170). Later, when he returns to their family's rental house in town, he realizes how different his life will be: "An ambulance wailed on the by-pass. Someone across the street slammed a front door, a car passed a few yards from my window. All town noises none of us had gotten used to" (188).

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JAKE RICAFFRENTE

HOMECOMING, TEXAS

It's the slow knead of Midland Basin oil;
The butter beans, corn, okra, drippings-roux,
And thick-cut, cross-rib chuck in Brunswick stew;
The Denny's waitress-drawl that drives me home:
Those flat and goddamned plains where we played kick-
The-can, played monkey-in-the-middle—the "it"
Hiding out in Devil's Walkingstick
To count until he couldn't, or sulk and sit
Alone. I'll settle in a place my grand-
Father, eighty, from a different land, might see
And tuck his thumbs into his waist, nod twice,
And thank the Lord; might offer up advice
On pickling, savings bonds, and saving self,
Or his hound to watch the yard. But I don't need
A bluetick baying at the shotgun house
Down FM 1, the latchkey kids inside,
Don't need the family Bible filing away
The smokers, reverends, hardened arteries,
And cradle rolls that share my blood. I want
To cook his recipes by heart, learn all
Five stanzas of his country's anthem, hum
Along the barbershop quartets on AM
Stations we won't find again. I need
The child in him—that Filipino boy
Who hides in cellars, ate tapegrass, leather soles,
And rice throughout the war—to show me how
To make the soil sing in bitter chards,
To wipe his strong and leathered hands on my old shirt
And say, *This is what I prayed for all along.*