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The Lifespan Development of Writing

Charles Bazerman, Arthur N. Applebee, Virginia W. Berninger, Deborah Brandt, Steve Graham, Jill V. Jeffery, Paul Kei Matsuda, Sandra Murphy, Deborah Wells Rowe, Mary Schleppegrell, and Kristen Campbell Wilcox

Although writing begins early in life and can develop well into adulthood, we know too little about how writing develops before, during, and after schooling, as well as too little about how an individual’s writing experiences relate to one another developmentally across the lifespan. *The Lifespan Development of Writing* is a first step toward understanding how people develop as writers over their lifetimes.

The authors present the results of a four-year project to synthesize the research on writing development at different ages from multiple, cross-disciplinary perspectives, including psychological, linguistic, sociocultural, and curricular. First collectively offering the joint statement “Toward an Understanding of Writing Development across the Lifespan,” the authors then focus individually on specific periods of writing development, including early childhood, adolescence, and working adulthood, looked at from different angles. They conclude with a summative understanding of trajectories of writing development and implications for further research, teaching, and policy.

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“Coal Keeps the Lights On”: Rhetorics of Nostalgia for and in Appalachia

Will Kurlinkus and Krista Kurlinkus

“They went plumb down crazy in Washington. / They’re talking about closing the mines. / They’re gonna bleed us all dry from the inside out. / They don’t care that much about the little man or the calloused hands. / It’s a way of life ‘round here, just like it’s always been. / Coal keeps the lights on.”


May 5, 2016. “And I’ll tell you what folks,” presidential candidate Donald Trump preaches to a crowd in Charleston, West Virginia, a striking mix of working-class and white-collar citizens attired in mining coveralls and hardhats, suits and dresses:

We’re gonna put the miners back to work. We’re gonna get those mines open. Ah, coal country, what they’ve done. And how ’bout Hillary Clinton? I was watching her three or four weeks ago. [crowd boos] See, I’m gonna put the miners back to work, and she said, “I’m gonna put the miners and the mines out of business” . . . . Folks, you’re amazing people and we’re gonna take care of a lot of years of horrible abuse. (“Donald”)
As this excerpt and the “Make America Great Again” signs waving around the Charleston arena typify, Trump welcomes a class-striated electorate into a community of nostalgia: a diverse constituency united by pride in region and industry, longing to recover a golden age of jobs, and loss caused by years of “abusive” regulation and globalization. At first glance, such yearning doesn’t seem to hold up to fact checking. It’s “a sadness without an object,” folklorist Susan Stewart describes, “... a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience” (23). Black lung, monopolistic company towns, homicidal Baldwin-Felts guards, and layoffs well before the EPA—there was no golden age of coal in Appalachia.

To be sure, outside of Trump’s community of nostalgia, the press hasn’t been silent about such “inauthentic” memories. Throughout 2016, ’17, and ’18, headlines asked, “Can We Stop the Politics of Nostalgia That Have Dominated 2016?” (Mudde); critiqued “Trump’s Rhetoric of White Nostalgia” (Brownstein); predicted, “Donald Trump’s Budget is Nostalgic and Deeply Destructive—And It Will Backfire” (Shephard); and explained “How Nostalgia for White Christian America Drove So Many Americans to Vote for Trump” (Bailey). Each article shares a rejection of nostalgia as propagandistic, evil, and regressive in order to simplify post-election chaos. And for so long this is what nostalgia criticism looked like: criticism of nostalgia.

In contrast to such anti-nostalgia headlines, political scientist Kimberly Smith traces how reproach for nostalgia historically structures “progressive responses to the questions of whether and whose memory is a reliable basis for political action” (505). The view of nostalgia as politically regressive, Smith argues, arose in the late eighteenth century as a way to medicalize “dissenting voices—conservatives, agrarians, and traditionalists of various sorts—that oppose the ‘progressive’ rationalization... The claim that such opponents are suffering from nostalgia both explains and delegitimizes their political stance” (506). Seen today in every stereotypical media portrayal of Appalachians, critics brand a people nostalgic, traditional, and backward in order to dismiss that group’s concerns and/or sell them something new. In modern rhetorical education, such rejection surfaces in teaching students to banish appeals to tradition to a pile of other rhetorical fallacies. But quickly denying longing as inauthentic doesn’t relieve us of its influences. Rather, it relieves critics of the responsibility of understanding the complex people beneath the term and thus the possibility of democratic futures.

In response to such nostalgia-blindness, in this article we offer a rhetoric of nostalgia: a route to probing what people are nostalgic for, why, and to which ends, without being condescending to citizens who feel the emotion or excising...
nostalgics from definitions of a critical citizenry. To do so, we first lay out our rhetoric and then complicate it through studies of (1) nostalgia’s historical role in preparing Appalachia for industrial paternalism and (2) how the psychology of nostalgic self-sacrifice is rhetorically primed by industry advocates to keep longing for coal fresh today. We’ve chosen Appalachia, and specifically West Virginian coalfields, as the site of our study because of how often the rest of the nation has concurrently longed for the simplicity of the region, dismissed it as backward, and attempted to capitalize on, distort, and sell back a nostalgic ideal to its citizens. But within our analysis, we also consider how critical nostalgia can uncover gaps in yearning, seek divergent traditional identities, and build emancipatory futures. That is, we’ll argue that though theorists like Jenny Rice suggest “critical regionalism obviously risks confusion or an unfortunate conflation with nostalgia,” critical regional movements are often powered by the emotion (2).

A Rhetoric of Nostalgia: How to Analyze Who We Think We Wish We Were

Haunting the crossroads of past, present, and future; emotion and critique; space and time; the real and imaginary; the individual and communal—one of the first obstacles to would-be nostalgia critics is how wide-ranging and self-contradictory definitions of nostalgia are. The word was coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in 1688 as a portmanteau of the Greek nostos (return home) and algos (pain/sorrow). In contrast to a harmless yearning for yesterday, Hofer’s disease described medical effects from nausea to suicide that soldiers faced after leaving home for battle. Unlike the modern political label, nostalgia wasn’t initially an uncritical longing for the past; it was a life-changing desire to return to a place upon which soldiers built their identities. As typified by Odysseus’s nostos voyage, if soldiers could only get back home, they could be their ideal selves again. Life would be simple and known again. Such identity recovery in the face of upheaval is deeply tangled in pride, longing, loss, control, and a tension between space and time that differentiate nostalgia from memory at large.

A disease, a coping mechanism, a political backwater, homesickness, time-sickness—since its original classification, nostalgia has been defined and redefined across history (Lowenthal), geography (Bonnett), social psychology (Sedikides et al.), cultural studies (Boym), marketing (Holbrook and Schindler), and political science (Smith). Still, perhaps because the most recent humanistic take on memory studies arose in the 1970s and ‘80s (Nora) with the charge of recovering traumatic diasporic memories (of holocaust survivors, former slaves, and displaced populations at large), the more sanguine mending narratives of
nostalgia have been understudied. In rhetoric and composition, for instance, there are hundreds of analyses of collective memory and memorials but just twelve articles/chapters on nostalgia and no books.¹

That’s not to say that there hasn’t been essential rhetorical work done on the topic. Greg Dickinson’s “Memories for Sale” uses classical memory theory to read citizens’ consumption of architectural nostalgia in order to create stable identities in the changing landscape of Old Pasadena, California. In “Collective Memory, Political Nostalgia, and the Rhetorical Presidency,” Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles examine President Clinton’s deployment of nostalgic references to the Civil Rights Movement to generate forgiveness for his scandals. And in his “I’m Sorry to See It Go,” Kendall Phillips traces documentarian Michael Moore’s morally ambivalent nostalgia as it recalls an “idyllic world of 1950s middle-class America,” tracks “the ruin and devastation wrought by contemporary capitalist policies,” and calls for a “return to earlier policies” (300).

As these studies illustrate, what makes nostalgia acutely rhetorical is its adaptability as a tool for revealing cultural values (architecture norms, civic justice models, middle-class ideals), how quickly such values are mobilized to action (“slow down,” “forgive my sins,” “quit capitalism”), and how the bias of such longing hints that all history affords multiple interpretations. Most importantly, a rhetoric of nostalgia also expresses what we yearn for: in times of instability, nostalgia calms our lives by providing an easy model for who we think we wish we were. To better understand our rhetoric, let’s walk through its steps to analyze how President Trump’s West Virginia speech erects such an easy identity scaffold.

*Find the god memories in play: Rhetoricians of nostalgia survey what audiences long for.*

The first step of our rhetoric is cataloging the mnemonic touchstones longed for by a community of nostalgia. Andreas Huyssen calls such memories “temporal anchors,” traditions used to moor cultures that crave stability in face of “increasing instability of time and the fracturing of space” (28). Using rhetorical shorthand, we call these recollections *god memories* because of their similarity to rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s “god terms,” key words (e.g., *freedom, natural, progress*) that embody a community’s ideals. “In any term we can posit a world,” Burke observes, “in the sense that we can treat the world in terms of it, seeing all as emanations, near or far, of its light . . . we must forthwith ask ourselves what complexities are subsumed beneath it” (*Grammar* 105). In the first few minutes of Trump’s speech, for example, we find

- “Make America Great Again.”
- “We’re gonna put the miners back to work. We’re gonna get those mines open.”
“There’s always been something about West Virginia. I’ll tell you a little secret. I’ve always been fascinated by the mines. I always have. I don’t know why. I love construction. I love the whole thing. I can tell you more about Caterpillar tractors than the people that work there.”

A lost ideal America, a time when miners had all the work they could handle, a childlike fascination with construction—what makes such god memories parallel but distinct from god terms are their omnitemporal emotional valences. Each memory is simultaneously bound in a pride for the past, a feeling of loss in and critique of the present, and a hopeful longing to recover an ideal future. Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym calls this drive to reinstate and deflect the drawbacks of a carefully selected past “restorative nostalgia,” a type of longing that “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition” (“Nostalgia” 13). Restorative nostalgia is prepackaged, simplified, and nondivergent. But, as we’ll see, not all nostalgia is restorative, and the nostalgia critic’s goal in cataloging god memories isn’t to dismiss the communities that hold them dear but to open dialogues by revealing the logics and insecurities “subsumed beneath” them by asking, What are you nostalgic for, why, and to which ends?

Analyse god memories for their constitutive force: Rhetoricians of nostalgia study how past models of community (who were we?) stabilize the present (who are we?) and urge collective action in the future (who should we be?).

From celebrating civil rights victories to visiting confederate Civil War memorials, “The groups I am a part of at any time give me the means to reconstruct them,” Maurice Halbwachs writes of collective memories, “upon condition, to be sure, that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking” (38). In rhetorical terms, nostalgia is epideictic. It calls a community “to join together in thoughtful acknowledgment, celebration, and commemoration of that which is best in human experience” (Prelli 3). In this light, nostalgic rhetoric always answers the question who are we?—Who is included in our community? What are our values? Who do we trust? What are our facts?—by showering the audience with examples to be proud of, to long to recover, and to fight to protect. This last point often escapes nostalgia purists. The nostalgic god memory, the object of longing, needn’t be entirely lost. In Trump’s speech, for instance, though the golden age of coal may be gone, existing mining jobs must be protected. Nostalgia involves both loss and threat of further forfeiture.

In response to such threat, nostalgic rhetoric also calls for future action: “Let’s protect our past!” This constituency mobilization, as we’ll see, is especially important in nostalgia for coal because it performs the magical feat of uniting upper-class mine owners and working-class miners, historic enemies. We see such class-bridging social capital in Trump’s ability to persuade his audience
that he is one of them (and, perhaps, if they fight hard enough, they could be one of him). Beyond sharing nostalgia for construction, for example, midway through his speech candidate Trump invites Chris Hamilton, vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association, onto the stage to give both an endorsement and a symbolic hard hat, which the crowd chants at Trump to put on. Trump, a white-collar man all his life, dons the hat and pretends to shovel coal. In this act of visual rhetoric, a nostalgic restyling of dangerous industry into pantomime, there’s a transformation of billionaire into miner. Thus, although older nostalgia theorists like Fred Davis argue that you can only be nostalgic for things you’ve personally witnessed, we view nostalgia as a culturally experienced event—one that individuals rhetorically learn, rehearse, and use as passkeys to join a protective community in times of instability.

Uncover nostalgic cruxes: Rhetoricians of nostalgia catalog the ways that communities of nostalgia blame outsiders who have caused the community’s loss.

As much as nostalgia is about uniting citizens through shared longing, it’s also about scapegoating those who supposedly led to the golden age’s destruction. We call this person, group, or thing the nostalgic crux, an oversimplified problem that, once defeated, will seemingly restore the lost ideal. No matter how tradition-bound they are, these cruxes are habitually labeled “new”: new tech, new immigrants, new politics that threaten our identity. Trump illustrates:

• “Of course, in this country you can’t really go anywhere else because you can’t get a job. Because our jobs are going to everyone else but us. You know, we’re sending our jobs to Mexico. China is taking our jobs. Japan.”

• “Ah, coal country, what they’ve done. And how ‘bout Hillary Clinton? I was watching three or four weeks ago. See, I’m gonna put the miners back to work and she said ‘I’m gonna put the miners and the mines out of business.’”

• “I’m gonna stop the gravy train for all of these consultants and all of these people who are ripping off our country.”

Boym describes this scapegoating power as akin to conspiracy: “‘We’ (the conspiracy theorists) for whatever reason feel insecure in the modern world and find a scapegoat for our misfortunes. . . . We project our dislike onto them and begin to believe that they dislike us and wish to persecute us” (The Future 43). Such nostalgic accusations again reveal something about the emotion’s source. From being sent overseas to fight to losing your job, the work of nostalgia is homeostatic, as social psychologists Constantine Sedikides and his coauthors write:

(i) Noxious stimuli, as general as avoidance motivation and as specific as self-threat (negative performance feedback), existential threat (meaninglessness, mortality awareness), social threat (loneliness) . . . intensify felt nostalgia; (ii) in
Sometimes existential resolution happens through remembering better times (god memories) together. Just as often, the existential threat is resolved by finding an easy crux to blame.

Scout for neostalgia: Rhetoricians of nostalgia examine the edges of communities of nostalgia for pride, longing, and hope that resist, counter, and/or appropriate the dominant nostalgia to create new traditional identities.

Though nostalgia can be a propagandistic force that mires audiences in one ideal past/identity, it also reveals alternative ideal pasts and futures that have been paved over by historical determinism. We call this recovery force neostalgia, a critical longing for futures that could have been. In contrast to President Trump’s coal-centric future, for example, neostalgia helps us speculate, anthropologist Brad Hoey writes, “not of a sense of place composed of essential qualities imparted by a singular history, set of practices, or a bounded, defined geography, but rather as potentially conflicting debate . . . [around] the entire state of West Virginia” (77). As explored by scholars of Appalachian rhetoric (Webb-Sunderhaus; Snyder; Greer; Donehower), neostalgia doesn’t reject tradition and longing but rather sponsors competing and critical regional identities.

Rachel Garringer, for example, researches how queer Appalachian organizations are navigating limiting constructions of traditionality and redefining tradition in ways that make space for the contemporary and historical presence of LGBTQ+ people and people of color, while simultaneously drawing on traditional musical and cultural histories as central tools in their organizing. (6)

In this case, neostalgia asks, What if queerness had always been a recognized Appalachian tradition rather than floating below the radar? Neostalgia reveals alternative timelines to build alternative futures. Such nostalgia is “reflective,” in Boym’s typology; it “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (The Future 41). Where restorative nostalgia sponsors one ideal past to future narrative and, thus, one ideal traditional identity, reflective nostalgia highlights our ability to perform conflicting traditions and identities that question one another.

Ultimately, within these four steps we find a definition of nostalgia, one that highlights its emotions, personal and communal footings, and mooring in both real experiences and artificial reminiscences: nostalgia is pride and longing for lost or threatened personally or culturally experienced pasts. In the rest of this essay, we’ll complicate this definition by reading texts that have groomed...
longing both for and in Appalachia. In doing so, we’ll also answer a final defining question of our rhetoric: Who wants whom to remember what and why?

LONGING FOR APPALACHIA: HOW COLOR WRITERS AND COAL BARONS BOUND A REGION IN MEMORY

Well before its formal governmental definition by the Appalachian Regional Commission in 1965, Appalachia was rhetorically used as a tool to stabilize the rest of the nation in a community of nostalgia. Historically, this rhetoric evokes two stereotypical memories: the romanticized mountaineer and the demonized hillbilly. During national identity crises, from the Civil War to The Great Recession, these mythic representations mark a path forward. As presented in Trump’s speech, the first memory—the racially pure, industrious, bootstrapping mountaineer qua miner—is a paragon that deserves to be recovered by the rest of the country. The second—the genetically degenerate, lazy, violent hillbilly qua welfare queen—is a blight on society that represents the loss of the mountaineer’s industriousness. This simultaneous use of Appalachia as both god memory and crux has deep historical roots that highlight, as Douglas Reichert Powell puts it, “region’ is always at some level an attempt to persuade as much as it is to describe” (21).

The word Appalachia comes from the Apalachee Indians described by Hernando de Soto, and the first European depiction of the region (as “Apalchen”) was on cartographer Diego Gutierrez’s 1562 map (Walls). But it wasn’t until 200 years later that a specific population of Appalachians began being characterized as the stereotypical mountain people imagined today. The Cohees were a group of yeomen farmers and highland hunters distinguished from the slave-owning elite, the Tuckahoes of eastern Virginia. The Cohee-Tuckahoe binary ended with the Civil War and the creation of West Virginia. Many Cohees migrated west. But those who stayed shaped American perceptions of the region in the stories of local-color writers.

Will Wallace Harney, Mary Noailles Murfree, and John Fox Jr.—such authors penned hundreds of tales depicting Appalachian mountaineers as “quaint and isolated, living peculiar lives in the shadow of awe-inspiring peaks” (Collins qtd. in Walls). Often featuring a forbidden tryst wherein a non-Appalachian man tames a rugged Appalachian lover, the rhetorical goal of such fiction was to unite a community of nostalgia, as Washington Irving did post-Revolutionary War. God memories of a local, traditional, undeveloped Appalachian America, “figures suggestive of the Homeric Age,” created a stable, preconflict US identity, neither North nor South, to return to during Reconstruction (Shapiro 5).
On the other hand, the hillbilly label was being rhetorically harnessed by an Appalachian urban elite, who wished to separate from the ignorant identity in order to gain positions of power as the region industrialized. Historian Bruce Stewart, for example, describes how the “Appalachian Uplift Movement” discouraged moonshining in order to welcome industrialization:

In 1885 . . . Samuel T. Kelsey from the resort community of Highlands complained that Macon County moonshiners “come in and sell out their whiskey on the sly, make some of our people drunk, pick quarrels. . . . [Highlands] has bright prospects unless the Govt. allows these ‘moonshiners’ to control the country.” (169)

The community of nostalgia united by longing for Appalachia, therefore, rhetorically uses the mountain “other” to define an older, purer, stable United States, but in doing so, also removes the power of that mountain identity by labeling it backward, precluding self-representation, and transforming Appalachia into capital. “[T]heir discussions of the nature of Appalachian otherness were rarely made with reference to . . . the normal complexity of social and economic conditions [that] prevailed in the mountains,” writes historian Henry Shapiro. “[D]issenting voices, including those of the mountain people themselves, went largely unheard” (xiv). One ideal past, one ideal future, no dissent, no self-representation—this is restorative nostalgia.

We call this simultaneous embrace, disgust, and rhetorical use of Appalachian identity, *nostalgic othering*. Nostalgic others differ from other “others” of scholarly discourse (e.g., Said’s Orientalism) in that their alterity is not primarily based in race or ethnicity. Rather, in concurrent identifications and divisions, the nostalgic other is distinguished from the rhetor by time. We live in the present; they live in the past. The creation of the nostalgic other allows mainstream populations to commodify the racial purity and stability of the past (the mountaineer) but refuses the community agency to change in the present by highlighting its negative traits (the illiteracy, poverty, and insularity of the hillbilly). This contradictory rejection and embrace often falls into absurdity, as seen in Bill O’Reilly’s 2012 diatribe that “[t]he culture in Appalachia harms the children almost beyond repair. Their parents are screwed up. Kids get married at 16 or 17, their parents are drunks. . . . I don’t want to rebuild the infrastructure of Appalachia. I want to leave it pristine, it’s beautiful.”

By the twentieth century Appalachia became locked in nostalgic otherhood, demarcated by problems, outsiders, and the past rather than a self-defined future. The citizens of the region, for example, were not given the identifier “Appalachian” until Berea College President William G. Frost delineated Southern Appalachia as a region in need of Christian salvation. “Religious, truthful, hospitable, and much addicted to killing one another,” Frost writes in 1895, “They
are leading a life of survivals, spinning cloth in a manner of centuries ago, and preserving many fine Shakespearean phrases and pronunciations; they may be called our contemporary ancestors!” Shakespeare-speaking killers—this is the duality of the nostalgic other. As uplift literature, Frost’s nostalgia was meant to protect Appalachians. But his argument, what became known as the “Appalachian problem,” was soon separated from theological ends. Appalachia’s economic and social deficits would be cured by industry, not religion. Thus enters big coal.

Until 1880, West Virginia had a largely agrarian economy. With the earliest commercial coal operations beginning in the 1850s, the first boom didn’t occur until 1890–1920. Correspondingly, from 1900 to 1920 West Virginia’s population increased by 53 percent—with 64 percent of this increase located in the 10 largest coal counties (Simon 165). But rather than creating a strong economy, this boom left the state unstable. Extractivism grew a political system that favored outside industrialists over local investment: “From 1888 until 1924, all of the state’s governors were either coal company officials” or men chosen by those companies (Batteau 104). Again, the seeds for this domination had been sown by the color writers, who spread the myth of an Appalachian backwardness that required political, economic, and social domination. One of John Fox Jr.’s most popular works, for instance, *A Mountain Europa*, tells the Pygmalion-esque story of Clayton, a young mining engineer, who comes to Kentucky and civilizes a rough-edged mountain woman, Easter Hicks. In this oft-repeated metaphor, Appalachians need to be saved by industrial paternalism. It’s important to remember, however, that by this time the pure mountain culture the color writers described was gone—if it ever existed. The mining population was made of former Cohees, yes, but also hundreds of thousands of immigrants and freedmen. Their stories were and are rarely told because they rupture the myth of the white nostalgic other, “our contemporary ancestor,” that justifies white capitalist paternalism. Of course, this savior system quickly became a mugging perpetrated through low wages, exploitative company stores, murderous strikebreakers, and unpaid “dead work,” the time miners spent on safety repairs. Because of family and wages paid in scrip rather than cash, miners had a tough time leaving the region, and there were few other jobs as coal doggedly prevented other industries from taking root.

And yet, in the face of capitalist inequality, states like West Virginia have a proud history of violent strikes and union activism that could rupture nostalgia for coal. But such activism has slowly faded (as have union mines) over the past two decades as the region has been othered by liberals. From 1932 to 1996, West Virginians voted Democrat fourteen out of seventeen elections, but recently a neoliberal elite has rhetorically used the region as a signifier of all that is wrong
with poor, white, irrational America. Appalachia is rejected as “Trump Country,” despite many urban locales like Long Island voting for Trump as well. Following the 2016 election, this scapegoating manifested in the popularity of J. D. Vance’s Appalachian poverty porn Hillbilly Elegy, a memoir that explains the Appalachian problem as a personal (and at times ethnic) moral failing, “not created by governments or corporations” (255). By eating up Vance’s narrative, progressive America needs the Appalachian nostalgic other “because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives,” writes Ronald D. Eller (3). Thus, as Elizabeth Catte critiques, liberals use the frozen Appalachian other to explain post-election chaos:

According to the bulk of coverage about the region in the wake of Trump’s election . . . individuals who do not exist include all nonwhite people, anyone with progressive politics, those who care about the environment. . . . The intentional omission of these voices fits a long tradition of casting Appalachia as a monolithic “other America.” (9)

Progressives reject this population as traditional and, thereby, irrational so they can find a simple answer as to why someone would vote for Trump. Let’s complicate that.

Democratic socialist Bernie Sanders decisively won the 2016 primary in West Virginia; in March 2018, West Virginian teachers earned a 5 percent pay raise after an eight-day wildcat strike; and there’s been a rise of pro-union, working-class groups that offer alternative pictures of Appalachian tradition. Redneck Revolt, for example, is a self-described “anti-racist, anti-fascist community defense formation” that recovers the term redneck as a liberatory god memory:

In 1921, the term became synonymous with armed insurrection against the state, as members of the United Mine Workers of America tied red bandanas around their necks during the Battle of Blair Mountain, a two week long armed multi-racial labor uprising in the coalfields of West Virginia. (“Redneck”)

That’s not to say that this group is liberal: “Today, the term redneck has taken on a demeaning connotation, primarily among upper class urban liberals who have gone out of their way to dehumanize working class and poor people” (“Redneck”). Redneck Revolt, thus, draws upon nostalgia for working-class rebellion to create a new future. They ask, What if Appalachia had not lost its radical pro-union roots? What if the rest of the nation knew the past and present activism of Appalachian organizations like the Young Patriots or the Highlander Folk School, rather than simply labeling the region “Trump Country”? This diversity is what we mean when we say nostalgia: longing for futures that could have been catalyzes change.
LONGING IN APPALACHIA: HOW THE COAL INDUSTRY PROMOTES A PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-SACRIFICE

Coal mining is and always has been dangerous. In 2017, there were fifteen deaths in US mines. The 2010 Upper Big Branch Mine explosion killed twenty-nine West Virginians due to skirted regulations. We’ve seen how the nation has used Appalachia as a nostalgic other, a tool of longing to define themselves with and against, but why are Appalachian citizens still pining for such a dangerous industry? It’s an unfair question. First, to be sure, not all Appalachians long for mining, and to think so would fall into a narrative that has benefited coal paternalism. Second, the psychology of nostalgia is engrained in all human psyches and ripe for manipulation. Thus, we reject claims that Appalachians have been duped, their longings are disparate, or, as Vance hints, their Scots-Irish blood has made them exceptionally nostalgia prone. Instead, our rhetoric of nostalgia reveals how the psychology of longing has been groomed through industry-sponsored god memories in Appalachia (as it has been groomed in different ways in different locales) to create what Theresa Evans calls “the myth of self-sacrifice,” “the belief that unpaid or poorly compensated work is acceptable when it serves some greater civic or moral good—even in contexts when taking on such work subjects the worker to extreme hardship” (86).

To understand this rhetorical act we turn to psychology, where nostalgia research has boomed over the last decade. Led by Constantine Sedikides, most recent studies focus on recovering nostalgia as a positive homeostatic emotion that humans use to create “self-continuity” (Sedikides et al.) in times of existential instability. Researchers have discovered that nostalgia appears across eighteen countries and eight continents (Hepper et al.), boosts creativity (van Tilburg et al.), increases willingness to take risks (Stephan et al.), encourages donations (Zhou et al.), and raises the quality of life of people with dementia (Umar et al.). And, yet, while these results illustrate the importance of nostalgia for identity regulation, they don’t tell us how nostalgia is rhetorically wielded to introduce or block the resources people use to build such self-continuity. The communities one travels in provide and restrict god memories and possible identities. In this section, then, we examine both the psychological frameworks and rhetorical plays upon them that have contributed to nostalgia for coal, continuing to ask, who wants whom to remember what and why?

One psychological mechanism that leads some mining communities to disregard the pain of coal, for example, is the “fading affect bias,” a feature of remembering that ensures memories of extreme/painful emotions fade more quickly than positive ones. As described by John Skowronski and his coauthors, “(1) over time, the affect associated with positive memories tends to fade more
slowly . . . (2) it is more often the case that events that were negative at their occurrence will ultimately come to prompt positive affect-at-recall” (163). Like other strains of nostalgia, one of the primary drivers of this effect is rhetorical presentation: people like to tell positive stories about themselves rather than stories of failure in order to create a strong identity. Positive emotions, therefore, are more socially rehearsed and kept fresh in our minds. In Appalachia, such storytelling transforms painful stories of masculine self-sacrifice into badges of honor. The mining cave-ins, chemical spills, and slurry dumps that mark West Virginia as a “national sacrifice zone,” a low-income area with few regulations that’s sacrificed so that the rest of the nation functions, are rhetorically renovated into god memories.

We see this transformation even in response to tragedy. In the online memorials of those miners killed during the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster, for instance, one finds identity-protecting lines like: “loved running coal and was known for never asking his men to do anything he would not do himself” and “‘Mostly his passion was work,’ according to his brother-in-law. ‘He started out in the coal mines at an early age. He’s been working there for almost 30 years’” (Upper). Even the most critical part of the memorial website seeks to recover god memories of resiliency and sacrifice: “The roadside memorial . . . stands as a solemn reminder of the human cost that West Virginians have so dearly paid to power this great nation” (Upper). In Kentucky, the Hurricane Creek Miner Memorial similarly reads,

This memorial is dedicated to the 38 men who died here in the explosions. . . . Miners who gave so much that future generations may benefit with a better life. They sacrificed for their families, labored and lost their lives” (Devereaux).

Within such sacrifice rhetoric there’s no call for change, no mention that safety laws were broken. Rather, the nostalgic mindset that seeks positive identity in chaos and failure suggests that someone had to make this sacrifice—they chose to give their lives and are heroes for doing so. Sacrifice rhetoric is, thereby, homeostatic, as René Girard theorizes, “[T]he purpose of sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (8).

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca further describe that “the sacrifice is a measure of the value attributed to the thing for which the sacrifice is made” (248). In this case, health, environment, and lives have been sacrificed; thus, coal equals life. This is the enthymeme needed to keep national sacrifice zones running, as Catte notes of Sago Mine disaster news coverage: “It is not natural to recycle the raw grief of devastated families into a spiritual lesson about sacrifice, as reporters did” (20). This transformation of death into honor also creates a strange ecology of trust in which, for instance, CEO of the Upper Big
Branch Mine Don Blankenship served but one year in jail for defrauding safety inspectors and then ran for US Senate in 2018, chuckling, “I think on the explosion and the prosecution, if you will, it’s probably a badge of honor, . . . in West Virginia at least to have been jailed by Obama and Loretta Lynch” (Belvedere).

On a national stage, we see the transformation of negative event into positive characteristic in the lyrics that prefaced this article. Before a 2013 performance of his song “Coal Keeps the Lights On,” on America’s Got Talent, Jimmy Rose, a former miner and Iraq veteran describes how dangerous mining is and that he joined the marines to escape it: “It’s such a hard life and it’s dangerous. It kind of made me think if you’re gonna risk your life, then risk it for your country” (Jimmy). And, yet, Rose’s lyrics reflect fondly on mining:

Coal keeps the lights on.
My hometown keeps food on the spoon in my youngin’s mouth.
Tires on the truck and a sundress on my baby girl.
Coal keeps the bills paid, the clothes on the backs,
and shoes on the feet in the high school halls of the Mountain Lions
and the Bill County Bobcats on the hill. (00:03:27-00:03:58)

You can almost see the fading affect bias at work—a self-described dangerous experience recounted in a positive way to fit into the community of white patriotic nostalgia of contemporary country music and America’s Got Talent (Mann).

God memories of masculine self-sacrifice also rhetorically transform mining from a working industry into what brand psychologist John Balmer calls a “heritage brand,” “a dimension of a brand’s identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important” that connects workers and companies across multiple generations (Urde et al. 4). Though the mono-economy of coal in West Virginia creates a cycle of booms and busts that would seemingly destabilize coal identities, paradoxically, it’s this reliance on one fickle industry that generates heritage. To create hope and control in times of chaos, Appalachians pass down nostalgic, family-defining stories of the boom times during the busts: “We are a coal family.” Mining isn’t just a job; it’s a ritual act of familial identity preservation and, as Rose sings, “a way of life ’round here.” If you quit, you don’t care about your family’s sacrifice. One sees such heritage scaffolding on the homepage of the National Coal Heritage Trail:

The Coal Heritage Trail is located within the National Coal Heritage Area and winds through more than 187 rugged miles of scenic industrial heritage, where thousands of hard-working miners labored to produce the coal [that] created modern America. . . . a remarkable legacy of working-class culture, industrial might, racial and ethnic diversity, and the creation of a unique and distinctive culture of national significance.
“Rugged,” “hard-working,” “created modern America,” “distinctive culture”—there are no memories of death, unions, or oppression for citizens to build identities upon.

Coal companies thrive within this heritage system whereas governmental regulation, environmentalism, unions, and even injured miners fail because their narrative of danger, collectivism, and worker’s comp challenge the mountaineer god memory of individual toil that families pride themselves in and suggest that sacrifice is meaningless. It’s no surprise, then, that miners buy into the myth of self-sacrifice. There’s no alternative viable identity offered. The rhetoric of coal creates a logic in which mining is the only “common sense” way forward. If you challenge it, you are othered as outsider, tree hugger, hippie, un-masculine. If families of fallen miners object to this myth, they are ejected from the community of nostalgia they’ve lived in all their lives and, seemingly, left with nothing. We also need to be careful, then, in suggesting that all mining families are simply gung-ho for coal. Though nostalgia is a homeostatic mechanism of survival, as Todd Snyder depicts, there’s a grim awareness to it:

We have been conditioned to believe our fates are unchangeable. When high school is over it is time to pick up your dinner bucket. . . . As children, we watch our fathers slowly march into the darkness of the coal mines. Each evening they return as blackened heroes. . . . fathers slowly come to realize their less-than-enviable-existence. . . . forced to confront this harsh reality in the dingy waiting rooms of local hospitals. (71)

A nostalgic sacrifice logic soothes, but it doesn’t blind. Indeed, it’s worth noting that it’s often people without direct mining experience (from Trump to family a generation removed) who are most nostalgic for coal.

And, to be sure, heritage and sacrifice identities don’t come from nowhere. Coal companies funded the Upper Big Branch memorial, the Coal Heritage Trail, even Jimmy Rose, to control an ecology of god memories that rhetorically shapes longing. “Coal Keeps the Lights On” isn’t just a country song; it’s a slogan of the Friends of Coal political action committee. Like all nostalgia, the mantra is omnitemporal: it maintains a pride in self-sacrifice (our toil has kept the nation’s lights on), uses the present tense “keeps” to point out that coal is a current issue, and threatens a future in which the lights go out (if you, Appalachian citizen, don’t vote with us, you won’t be able to pay your bills).

Peter Bsumek and his colleagues call such deployment of trade associations, country singers, and memorials “corporate ventriloquism”: “the industry. . . . ‘throws’ this voice through ‘front groups’ to create the impression of broadly based support for coal. . . . masks its own influence . . . [and] undermines the value of dissenting, textured, and independent voices” (21). In their Faces of
Coal campaign, for instance, the Federation for American Coal, Energy, and Security (FACES) attempted to show Appalachia and the nation who the citizens that rely on coal are. To humanize big coal, its website displayed pictures of a flower vendor, a grandmother waving an American flag, and a young family. But Bsumek and his coauthors report, “[B]loggers discovered that images from the FACES website—images of people who were literally meant to represent the ‘faces’ of coal—were actually generic images from a service called iStockphoto, which supplies marketing campaigns with stock photos” (28–9). Once again, as we’ve seen historically, Appalachians haven’t been allotted a space to represent themselves. Rather, FACES ventriloquizes the region, pretending voters from all walks of life support coal. Appalachia is coal.

Still, for coal to remain a relevant heritage brand to Appalachian families as jobs decline, it must continuously prompt cross-generational storytelling. At primary schools, one sees this nostalgia priming in the industry’s use of in-class activities and mine field trips. Friends of Coal, for example, passes out an activity book in West Virginian schools which reminds: “Coal mining provides jobs for lots of people!”; “the more coal we produce in the U.S., the less we have to depend on other countries for fuel”; and “Coal is a big part of our energy future!” Similarly, under the “Kids” tab on the Friends of Coal Ladies Auxiliary (FOCLA) website, a history of coal reads:

Coal has a rich heritage in West Virginia and has contributed significantly to the progress and well-being of West Virginians. . . . The industry has also been a center of controversy and the brunt of unfounded criticism, giving rise to battles in the arenas of labor, environment and safety. (McGehee)

Psychologically, when people have positive experiences with coal during the period between ten and thirty when memory production is the strongest (the “reminiscence bump”), they are more likely to be nostalgic for it in the future (Rubin et al.). What particularly grooms nostalgia, however, is the cross-generational conversations heritage activities encourage. In a promotional video for FOCLA, for example, one grandmother explains, “My grandson Dominick . . . was so excited . . . telling us all about coal mining and what types of coal and how its mined. . . . And now he can come home and talk things over with his granddad who is a superintendent of coal mines” (“Friends”). If the goal of such activities wasn’t straightforward enough, Bill Rainey, president of the WV Coal Association, ends the FOCLA video by reporting, “I’ll tell you this is such an important program. . . . It’s our legacy. . . . we need young coal miners.” Again, we see coal as an omnitemporal heritage brand—not a job but a shared history for families to pass down and protect.
Moreover, research on such intergenerational remembering (Svob and Brown) suggests that parents’ “conflict knowledge,” memories of political upheaval and painful transition, are more likely to be passed to children. Thus, when FOCLA sparks intergenerational conversations about coal history as unfair persecution, a “center of controversy and the brunt of unfounded criticism,” children are more likely to remember and take up the values taught. In fact, such conflict knowledge also creates “oppositional brand loyalty” (Muniz and Hamer). Think Mac vs. PC, Coke vs. Pepsi—in oppositional brand loyalty, consumers not only build identities upon the brand they like but also against the brand they hate. We are a coal family, not an environmental family. Alternative possible identities are closed.

**Neostalgia: Nostalgia for Diverse Regional Identities Sponsors Diverse Traditional Futures**

Throughout this article, we’ve examined the ways that deeply entrenched nostalgic rhetorics have been used both externally and internally to shape Appalachia—often to the region’s detriment. “Such is the difficulty for progressives,” journalist David Roberts writes of coal country. “It’s not just that the status quo has more money, it has more stories, deeper-rooted and more broadly resonant. Novel narratives about, say, ‘green jobs’ do not have the same emotional depth.” But this isn’t entirely true. We’ve seen that neostalgia can rupture nostalgia. Indeed, progressive regional organizations increasingly have adopted reflective Appalachian nostalgia in order to plumb new ways forward.

The word *neostalgia* is used by popular writers to describe a simultaneous feeling of nostalgia and newness, rediscovery, and longing for a future that never arrived, as in Daniel Wilson’s longing for the promised Jetsonian sci-fi futures of the 1950s and ’60s in his book *Where’s My Jetpack?* When we use the term, we mean the process of imagining futures from lost ideal pasts through a series of what-if questions. What if, for instance, historical Appalachian ingenuity in mining, chemistry, and rocketry had propelled Appalachia into a self-determined technical hub instead of miring it in outsider extractivism?

**Mined Mines** is a web design nonprofit that answers this question. In 2015, native Appalachian Marvin Laucher saw layoffs at his mining job and knew he needed a backup plan. So he learned to code websites from his brother-in-law. After retraining, he realized other miners could do the same and began the design school Mined Mines with his sister, Amanda, and brother-in-law, Jonathan. In an interview on PBS NewsHour, Amanda describes some of the transferable skills of mining:
The idea that you’re solving problems constantly. They make decisions all the time that could risk people’s lives. . . . they’re very thoughtful. There’s also the teamwork aspect of it. If you’ve got a group that can trust each other and work together and communicate, that’s amazing, that’s what we really need. . . . That and a hard work ethic, being able to just carry on. (“This”)

Laucher’s rhetoric is neostalgic, praising traditional Appalachian god memories—problem solving, communication, teamwork, trust, hard work—and bringing them into the future. In this way, pride in familial history is maintained but transformed. Web design becomes a heritage brand with the same god memories and skills grandpa used in the mine.5

In fact, studies by Jonathan Haidt’s research group on “moral foundations theory” reveal that because communities of nostalgia have a strong commitment to such god memories, unpalatable ideas can be rhetorically transformed by playing to those traditions. An experiment by Christopher Wolsko and his colleagues, for example, found that as long as the message appeared to come from a member of their in-group, formerly resistant conservatives were likely to agree with a pro-environmental message when it was framed as protecting a traditional way of life. The experiment contained a persuasive script rife with god memories:

Show you love your country by joining the fight to protect the purity of America’s natural environment. . . . you will be honoring all of Creation. Demonstrate your respect by following the examples of your religious and political leaders who defend America’s natural environment. (10)

Ideally, such control of moral foundations provides more identity opportunities. Still, it also might simply provide another uncritical, restoratively nostalgic way forward.

In contrast, Appalshop of Whitesburg, Kentucky, is a media nonprofit that uses film to mobilize Appalachian heritage and promote social and economic change in the region. But rather than outsider nostalgia for a monolithic mountain culture, Appalshop trades in diversity:

Since 1969, Appalshop has been enacting cultural organizing and place-based media, arts and education to document the life, celebrate the culture, and voice the concerns of people living in Appalachia. . . . We present stories that commercial media doesn’t tell, challenge stereotypes, support grassroots efforts to achieve justice and equity, and celebrate cultural diversity as a positive social value. (“About”)

Again, we see god memories—a play to place-based, self-constructed, authentic Appalachian identities—being used to fragment restorative nostalgia. In Appalshop’s online archive, you’ll find documentaries on Anne Braden, who fought
for equitable housing in Jim Crow Kentucky; Belinda Mason, Kentucky AIDS activist; and the contemporary women of It Goes Without Saying, who take care of families, run STEM programs, DJ, and continue the Appalachian tradition of being “the backbone,” “[building] our communities from the ground up,” and serving as “gatekeepers in our region” (Appalshop).

As these quotes hint, building on forgotten and diverse Appalachian women’s voices is neostalgic work, too. And it’s such stories that illustrate why rhetoric scholars shouldn’t just reject nostalgia. Advocating for Appalachia and fragmenting coal nostalgia necessitates the development of new place-based identities built on pride in diverse traditions, what Jennifer Ladino calls “counter nostalgia” that “envisions the ‘home’ as fractured, fragmented, complicated, and layered; to ‘return’ to this sort of home is to revisit a dynamic past and to invert or exploit official narratives in ways that challenge dominant histories” (91). Imagine if such diverse traditions were explored (through Appalshop-like storytelling and filmmaking assignments) from elementary school to college in the same way coal traditions are. A critical nostalgic literacy might be developed through an assignment that asks students to go out and record a story about a surprising Appalachian tradition that ruptures propagandistic ones (Kurlinkus 205–21). Nostalgia need not always be a smooth pablum; it can be full of crunchy, contentious, and conflicting bits that make us pay attention as we chew history over.

In the end, then, it’s this ability to find hope, new identities, and liberation in neostalgic futures and this responsibility to challenge dismissals of nostalgics as backward that we believe makes nostalgia a ripe area for rhetorical analysis. We hope future research explores transdisciplinary questions including: What might a pedagogy that teaches students to analyze appeals to tradition beyond logical fallacies look like? In what other places—the polluted oilfields of Texas, the frackquakes of Oklahoma, the timber industry of the northwest—might analysis of the nostalgic other and sacrifice logic aid in critical regionalism? In what ways do scientific and progressive “just the facts ma’am” nostalgias for rationalist Truth close off inclusive futures? And how can nostalgic rhetoric bridge progressive and conservative traditions? Ultimately, nostalgia is an inescapable part of all identity formation and memory, and rhetoric studies seems well suited to understand, critique, and aid in the democratic movements that might stem from it.

Notes

1. Our review of forty rhetoric and composition journals and presses reveals twelve nostalgia-centric publications (as opposed to texts with brief mentions of nostalgia): Dickinson (1997), (2006); Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles; Phillips; Lavrence; Smith; Brunner; Barney; Von Burg and Johnson; Kalinina; Qian; and Greene. If we’re missing any, we’d love to hear from you at wkurlinkus@gmail.com.
2. See Murfree’s “The Star in the Valley” and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Lodusky*.

3. Though they did hold the power to travel between mines.

4. After the decline of coal, the chemical, metallurgy, and electrical industries continued West Virginia’s sacrifice legacy. Led by Union Carbide, DuPont, and Monsanto, Kanawha Valley became “Chemical Valley,” housing the highest concentration of chemical plants in the nation.

5. Unfortunately, Trump’s proposed 2018 budget eliminates funding for the Appalachian Regional Commission, the agency that funds retraining programs like Mined Minds and Appalshop. And, indeed, a recent study by Reuters found that President Trump’s nostalgia for coal has discouraged some coal miners from retraining, hoping the industry returns (Volcovici).

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