

# Portrayals of Stigmatized “Mountain English” in Southern Literature

By Andrew Burlile

Written for Sociology 4054: Appalachian Language and Cultures  
Taken in Spring 2015  
11 October 2015

Abstract: This paper uses a comparative analysis of James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance* and James Still’s novel *River of Earth* to parse popular language ideologies concerning the Appalachian English dialect of ‘Mountain Speech.’ *Deliverance* inadvertently portrays Appalachian natives as ignorant and violent, utilizing non-standard orthography to represent eye-dialect of Appalachian Speech; it feeds the story on stereotypes related to the popular stigmatized terms for Southerners as “rednecks” and “hicks.” James Still’s *River of Earth* portrays Appalachian language and culture in a way that celebrates it. Yet, despite these critiques, *Deliverance* remains the more popular novel, even having been turned into a movie in 1972. This paper proposes the theory that Dickey’s novel is more popular because his voice as a Southern writer lends credibility to popular stereotype, whereas Still’s combats stereotype by offering a rich perspective of quotidian life in Appalachia, garnered from his time amongst Appalachian natives.

I originally decided to pursue this topic when discussing the inherent racism within some novels, particularly when it diverged from, or converged to, Standard English (defined as the form of English that is spoken as the language of power in the United States), paying special attention to the contexts in which authors portrayed a cultural group that did not habitually speak Standard English; this form is also represented by traditional orthography, which is the normative style of the form of words. I've encountered this several times within novels like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. And then a thought occurred: if a dialect can be portrayed just as cruelly – or ignorantly – as a particular language, then it may be possible to look at two texts and do a comparative analysis of the portrayals of Appalachian natives' speech within them, delineating those cultural and linguistic habits that are expressions of stereotype, those that are considered organic, and those that complicate the identities of the characters and their portrayal. To this end, I chose James Dickey's *Deliverance*, widely celebrated as a popular novel, and James Still's *River of Earth*, which, despite its lackluster popularity, is thought of by Appalachian scholars to be one of the premier representations of Appalachian life, language, and culture. My hypothesis was that the representation of the native residents of Appalachia would be more negative from an etic/outsider point of view than a representation from an emic/insider perspective, in which *Deliverance* is taken as the outsider text and *River of Earth* the insider text.

Dickey was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1923. He enlisted in World War II in 1942 and “flew more than 100 combat missions in the Pacific Theater” (“James L.”). He started writing poetry afterwards in 1947 (“James L.”), and even served as the Poet Laureate Consultant for the Library of Congress from 1966 to 1968, after which he took up a position as poet-in-residence at the University of South Carolina (“James”). During his time at this position he published

*Deliverance*, which became a best-selling novel (Hart 441, 455) that still holds the candle of suspense in American literature. In one interview, Dickey told a reporter that he considers himself a Southern Writer, saying, “The best thing that ever happened to me was to have been born a Southerner. First as a man then as a writer” (Spears).

And yet, in his novel, Dickey portrays Appalachia – a region commonly, and mistakenly, indexed as the South – as volatile and violent. One of the few bloggers to speak out against *Deliverance*’s popularity, Podcast Appalachia, had this to say about the book:

Probably the worst ever portrayal of the Appalachian people, and certainly the most influential, comes from outsider James Dickey, author of *Deliverance*. This novel, which was later adapted into a film, portrays the Appalachian people as violent, unstable, and inbred. The unfortunate images presented by Dickey continue to live on in the minds of many outsiders (Brown).

Unfortunately, this rings true. Public perception will be returned to later, although there are some thoughts to consider beforehand: as an etic representation of the South, despite his own self-assured confirmations of his authenticity – though neither James Dickey nor his ancestors were ever “hicks” (Hart 16) – how was it that Dickey’s novel became so popular as to become a movie in 1972?

Of course, to answer this question it must first be understood why Dickey’s story can be harmful to conceptualizations of Appalachia, which – though distinct from the South in scholarship – may not largely be understood by the general public to be separate from the South. First and foremost, within the first few pages the protagonist – who is hinted by the author to be himself (Lyttelton) – describes his studio as “full of grey affable men who had tried it in New York and come back South to live and die” (Dickey 13). Dickey, who believes in a dichotomy

between civilization and nature (“James”), approaches the South as the harbor of failure. He poses New York, the traditional American center of success, wealth, and ambition, against the South, insinuating that those who were not skillful, intelligent, or educated enough to succeed in New York sought solidarity in the slow and peaceful hills. This dichotomy relies on symbols associated with stereotypes, reducing both images of civilization and nature to simple descriptions, rather than characterizing them in all their complexities. Furthermore, the “red-neck South” (Dickey 38), as described by the protagonist, is a portal into the underbelly of American deviance and crime. Another character explains that “every family [he’s] ever met up [in the mountains] has at least one relative in the penitentiary...they don’t think a whole lot about killing people up here” (Dickey 45). This, I believe, stems from a historical cultural assumption that those who lived as hermits in the mountains were hiding for a reason, especially if running from the law. However, their reasoning to live in the mountains can be as harmless as a desire to live off the mountains, or perhaps as simple as an enjoyment of solitude. Unfortunately, Dickey plays off those cultural stereotypes, portraying nearly every Appalachian character as a moonshiner (45; 108), a murderer (45; 148), a thief (65), an idiot (64), or even a rapist (114 – 115). These descriptions create a morally polarizing effect, where Dickey positions the Appalachian people against those that are considered civilized.

The dress, the environment, and the language of these people also serve as normative cultural indices that stereotypically reference their Southern, Appalachian nature. They are often portrayed as wearing overalls (Dickey 46; 63; 108), which is – as supported by the novel’s popularity – frequently perceived as the traditional dress of the “clannish” mountain people (45), a representation that regurgitates this seemingly ‘backwoods’ dress as the norm. In the story, the protagonist is unconscious of his own hypocrisy, first littering the river with his beer cans

(Dickey 76), and then criticizing the Southerners' ability to keep their rivers clear of debris and waste (76). It would make sense if this was an attempt to satirize the attitudes of "civilized" folk, but, unfortunately, satire is ultimately lacking from the novel altogether, forcing the reader to take these descriptions and approximations of "Mountain Folk" at face value. The protagonist even makes fun of the phonology of Mountain Talk, often using the civilized protagonists as mouthpieces against phrases such as "These people don't want any 'furriners' around" (Dickey 123-124), which invariably portray those who use these forms of speech as idiotic, or ignorant of the "correct" pronunciation. Dickey, as the author, uses correct morphological overstandardization, which is the overuse of normal word endings; in this case, Dickey uses the regular verb ending "-ed" in "drownded" (Dickey 235), accentuating the hyper-prescriptive ending of "-ded" to make them sound stupid: "*Drownded.*" Furthermore, he continuously and consciously divides Standard English dialect from Mountain Talk with words like "you'us" (you was), "this-yere" (this here), "fust" (first), "kin" (can), "you'uz" (you was) (Dickey 256), "thu" (through), and "kilt" (killed) (262). The utilization of a nonstandard orthography has the same effect as described above: it makes them sound different to the readers, and, through the use of eye-dialect – which is the use of nonstandard spelling to show pronunciation – even makes it look distinct from the speech of the protagonists. It portrays it not as some 'regular' form of speech, but as some bastardized and ignorant form of English whose speakers simply don't know the correct form. Whenever these features are used, they are used by the native inhabitants of the area; if they are used by protagonists, such as "drownded", as mentioned above, then they are often used mockingly. This, alone, implies that there is only one correct way to speak, and that is the way of Standard English.

It's possible that this is planted as a stylistic device to offer Ed redemption at the end of the novel, in conjunction with the author's attempts to temper the damage that he's done to the stigmatized culture, as if the events that transpired enlivened an enlightened transfiguration for the protagonist. Furthermore, Dickey's understanding of Appalachia as a place of masculinity and self-reliance is expertly expressed; at the end of the adventure, it was Ed who saved everyone, not the rugged outdoorsman Lewis. In this sense, Dickey uses Appalachia as the setting of a bildungsroman, where Ed can reassert his self-assuredness and become the man that civilization had feminized. As if to mirror this acquaintanceship with the mountains, gradually, no prejudiced remarks appear. And yet, Dickey still does damage by adhering to stereotypes, as (towards the end) the protagonist is still describing people in relation to their cultural stereotypes: "We shook hands. He was an old seam-faced light-bodied man with hazel eyes. He wore his hat at the prescribed country tilt, which always amused me wherever I saw it. I almost smiled, but instead took a cigarette he offered and lit up" (Dickey 255). At the very end of the novel, the only remark that one would be able to successfully categorize as semi-positive is "This is not such a bad town" (Dickey 262). At the end of their adventures, from all the real and imagined harms of these mountain people, and all the good that they did in helping them in the end, the only thing that he can say is that it, this particular town in the mountains, and not the Mountain culture itself, is not so bad.

So, if all of this overt stigmatization is in the book, why is it portrayed as number 42 on Modern Library's Top 100 Novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ("100")? Or as number 31 on Time Magazine's all-time best novel list (*Time*)? After extensive searching on public forums, Goodreads, and even the Amazon.com rating system, as of October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 I could not find a single poor review for *Deliverance* that discusses its negative portrayal of Appalachia. This

wasn't what I expected at first, but after thinking it through critically it began to make sense. As the podcast mentioned, "The unfortunate images presented by Dickey continue to live on in the minds of many outsiders" (Brown). The 'outsiders' in this context are the dominant, normative culture – the people that don't live in Appalachia – and Dickey gave them a perception of Mountain Folk which reinforces the stereotypes, further instigating regional profiling in the stereotype-driven parent culture. Dickey's place as a "Southern Writer" likewise gives the story a validity and authenticity that it otherwise wouldn't have had if he had not written about his own region. He gave the people what they wanted to believe, and in providing an 'authentic voice' that is trusted to represent factual evidence – even if it isn't at all factual – he became successful, perpetuating the stereotypes of the Appalachian people. Unfortunately, I don't believe that this was done out of maliciousness – a motive that would lend itself easily to excommunication from literary canon – but, rather, out of ignorance of the implications of his book. Dickey's conceptualization of the South and Appalachia are altered by his "identification with both "hillbillies" and suburban Atlanta men" (Satterwhite 150); *Deliverance* was an attempt to unify the masculine and the civilized, turning Ed into a symbol of masculine authority by having him survive the gauntlet of brutality within the book. Its vivid descriptions of wildlife were his love letter to the region. It was this attempt at unification that turned his novel from a celebration of man's resilience in times of adversity to a derisive imitation of the culture. Though it was unintended, this is the effect that the novel has had.

A contrasting example is James Still's *River of Earth*, published in 1940. It centers on the deficit of jobs created after the coal industry's boom and collapse in the 1920's due to industrialization and the subsequent decrease in demand for coal. As was remarked in the introduction to Still's novel, "The result was landless, jobless, hungry, perplexed people" (Still

vi). Still, himself, was born July 16th, 1906. Although he wasn't born in Appalachia, having moved there from Alabama after achieving his MA from Vanderbilt University, he lived "most of his [adult] life in Kentucky" ("Papers"), writing many of his stories "in an ancient log house on a small eastern Kentucky farm, green and flowering, between Wolfpen Creek and Deadmare Branch in Knott County" (Still v). In addition to writing novels, he wrote poetry; the combination of the two has led him to be referenced as the "Dean of Appalachian literature" (Brown). In fact, James Dickey believed Still held a place "as the 'most remarkable poet that the mountain culture has produced' because throughout the poems is a sense that the everyday things one does to survive take place 'in a kind of timelessness' " (Bogges).

Part of the difficulty of *River of Earth*, though, is that there are so many cultural accuracies that anything that could be picked would be merely paraphrasing. The cultural taxonomy alone needs to be broken down into stratified structures, of which the first manifestation is in the genealogical landscape, which describes how a "Southerner's...sense of place" is a "hallmark of their regional identity" (Allen 152). While travelling to another farm, passing a variety of places in the local area, the protagonist's father points them out to his son: "That there is Sob Miller's messing...he's got a way o' leaving as much timber as he takes out. A puore fool would know white oak is wormy growing on the south side of the hill and mixes with laurel and ivy" (Still 24). Furthermore, they create a sense of spatial awareness that's tied between what was and is, and the paths that take people there, such as how they relate travel as "did you come along down Sand Lick by Aus Coggins' place" (Still 41). Still often retains the intersect between place, time, language and kin that is present in some Appalachian communities, many of which are longstanding and have a history entrenched in the earth, a story to tell for every stone and a name for every creek. This is a practice that is central to the

conceptualization of geography and narratives within the Appalachian dialect, and the inclusion of this practice in the novel reflects Still's skill as an ethnographer, as he was able to include quotidian examples from his own experience rather than rely on etic observations of phonology.

Still also relates the cultural fascination with 'rusties,' or practical jokes. At one point the kids are tricked into eating tree gum by their Uncle Jolly, getting their mouths stuck together. After scraping the gum out of their mouths with a stick, their uncle says, "That there's no way to act when a feller pulls a rusty on you... Take hit like a man, and start figuring on one to get even" (Still 36). Practical jokes are ubiquitous within the book, especially from Uncle Jolly, who follows his own moral sense of right and wrong. However, the novel likewise clearly defines the line between a "rusty" and being rude, as is often the case with the protagonist's father's cousins, Harl and Tib, when they get trapped in the mine from their own attempt at a 'practical joke' of closing someone else in (Still 209). However, Father won't turn them away because he "can't turn [his] kin out" (Still 4). This story itself can act as a performative, moral folktale to teach the boundaries between right and wrong, which is – in itself – displaying the cultural function of a story, another import narrative faculty within Appalachian culture.

The structural features of the story, as well as the stories within the story, are many, starting off cleanly with personification and sharp imagery, describing many scenes where "the crows hung on blue air" (Still 13). There's embellishment and confidentiality too, like when Uncle Samp talks about when he saw Abe Lincoln, saying "Abraham Lincoln was a big man... biggest feller I ever saw... I never saw him in the flesh for truth... but I saw a statue o' him in Louisville once. It stood nine foot, if it stood an inch, and his head was big as a peck measure" (Still 205). In these forms, they also serve cultural functions which create a culture of storytelling, whether alone, like the protagonist speaking words out loud "to know their sound"

(Still 147), or as a community. The book itself features heavy use of dialogue, often utilizing stories within the stories. This story serves the social function of teaching Fletch, the protagonist's younger brother, not to be ashamed of his hand with three fingers, lost by sparking dynamite:

Son...I was born big an awkward. Never a chair large enough. Couldn't git my legs stretched proper under a dinner table. Against I was sixteen my feet stuck over bed footboards. Used to hunch my back, bend my knees a speck, trying to look like a human being. But them was fool notions. I be as I am. I got to be tuck that way. Well, now, I notice you're allus hiding that three-fingered hand in your pocket. I say, wear that hand like it was a war medal. Wear it proud. (Still 233)

This story acts a way to create a communal identity centered on Fletch's sense of self. Should he think well of himself, he'll be a benefit to the community. Furthermore, as a member of the community, he is privy to the privileges of having the community look out for him as Darb does.

Religion also plays a healthy note, as the mountain family goes to church when they have to head to town. Very distinctive to the protagonist is when they're all singing a hymn, which to his young ears sounded like "The words caught in the throats of the hearers, buried in the melody. The hollow under the ceiling shook. A wind of voices roared into the grove" (Still 75). The singing is composed of merely sounds, without the use of words. It is described by one of the characters as if the words were "caught in [their] throats," which may be like the shape singing of a Primitive Baptist church. Moreover, the preaching style shows a man who is moved by God, allowing Him to direct the service, rather than his own desires:

The preacher raised a finger. He plunged it into the Bible, his eyes roving the benches. When the text was spread before him on the printed page he looked to

see what the Lord had chosen...My brethren, they hain't a valley so low but what hit'll rise again. They hain't a hill standing so proud but hit'll sink to the ground o' sorrow. Oh, my children, where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying – the living and the dead riding the waters. (Still 76)

As independent churches were often made up of local people, it would also make sense that the local dialect – present here – would be prevalent throughout the sermon and the service. This only furthers the proof that it's likely to be an Appalachian Primitive Baptist church.

Despite this bounty, there's still more that Still has done, and more to this text than can be summarized. After the protagonist's grandfather downed a couple of pigeons he makes an indirect request for a pot pie, saying to his wife, "A pigeon pie would make good eating...I figure on eating me one before them birds traipse off" (Still 117). An indirect request in this context, a concept theorized by Dr. Anita Puckett, is an "approved" cultural form of asking for something (Sawin 481), to which a person is supposed to volunteer to make that request happen. The language in the text itself is poetic and centered on culturally-relevant practices; by utilizing phrases like "bright as a blue-grass lawyer" and hollers like "Aye-oo, aye-oo" (Still 43, 72), Still is able to reference music that is often attributed to Appalachia, as well as the hollers that were necessary to allow one's voice to reach across the vales and hills of the areas. Like Dickey, Still uses eye-dialect in his text. However, unlike Dickey, Still's use of eye-dialect is ubiquitous and consistent within the book, particularly with words like "hain't" and "hit" displays 'h/-insertion,' which is a phonological feature of Appalachian English where a /h/ will precede a tense vowel. In *Deliverance*, eye-dialect is used as a feature of alienation, dividing the residents of the mountains from the residents of civilization, and thereby creating a stigma about the

Appalachian natives' "otherness." Conversely, Still uses eye-dialect as a way to bind the community together in their language, showing how the characters relate to one another through dialect, creating a sense of cultural pride in their speech – a pride that is altogether lacking from Dickey's representation. In addition to the language, James Still is able to incorporate many important cultural points within his book, including songs, Scots-Irish vocabulary (such as "dobber" and "brogan" (Still 82; 83)) and the power of oaths, such as when Hodge swore that he'd kill the teacher if the teacher beat his boy again, and when the teacher beat his boy he was shot (Still 97). His power as an author is in his ability to incorporate all of the intricate simplicities of life in Appalachia, making it tactile.

Of course, despite his ability to portray Appalachia – and winning the Southern Author's Award for the novel in 1940 ("James Still") – Still obviously isn't for everyone, and scores just as well on Goodreads as other semi-popular novels, often being quoted to "drag on" ("River of Earth"); Goodreads users had varied and scattered opinions with an average rating of 4.01 ("River of Earth"). And, despite the intrinsic poetry of Still's voice and his masterful use of dialect, *Deliverance* is still more popular by far, even with its slightly lower average rating of 3.85 ("Deliverance"); at the time of writing, there were 20,873 ratings and 725 reviews for *Deliverance* ("Deliverance"), and only 476 ratings and 50 reviews for *River of Earth* ("River of Earth"). Six months later, as of October 10<sup>th</sup> 2015, *Deliverance* has increased to 21,895 ratings and 770 reviews ("Deliverance"), while *River of Earth* has only increased to 501 ratings with 55 reviews ("River of Earth"). Why might this be? One possible reason is subject matter: the specifics of the struggles of Appalachian life may not be of interest to some, particularly if the normative sociocultural conception is stigmatized with a sense of stupidity and ignorance, despite the fact that Still's novel in its entirety combats that stereotype in every turn of phrase.

However, it may also be his use of dialect which indexes the South and its cultural stereotypes. Although it's not overtly simple for native speakers of Standard English to understand, outright, some of the sentences, with a bit of effort the reader can grow comfortable with the eye-dialect to the extent that understanding the text is not difficult.

As much as Dickey's novel harmed the public perception of Appalachia, Still's gave it some authority to the dialect's beauty. The linguistic stigma that surrounds the Appalachian culture also gives it a sense of covert prestige, where they have the power to define themselves in their own terms and definitions, rather than any normative culture's attempts to isolate and categorize them. As a result of this project I've come to discover that a book that plays on stereotype in Appalachia can go further than a representation that does the Appalachian image good. This is partly because general society has a set of preconceived notions about "hillbillies" or "mountain people", and partly because any authentic representation has to fulfill a lot of culturally and linguistically relevant checkboxes, whereas all an insensitive representation needs to do is pay no mind. However, there are authentic representations in literature, and though you may not encounter them often, they can be found. It is important to ensure that the texts preaching understanding of this stigmatized community are widely read so as to help stamp out stereotypes concerning Appalachia, and, largely, to aid in removing the associated stigmas concerning their way of talking, which books such as *Deliverance* vilify. That is why it is all the more important to make sure that texts such as *River of Earth*, and literary celebrations of 'Mountain Talk' in general are widespread and discussed, so that these views might reach the popular opinion of the public.

## Works Cited

- “100 Best Novels.” *Random House LLC*. Modern Library, 2015. Web. 17 Apr. 2015.  
<http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-novels/>
- Allen, Barbara. “The Genealogical Landscape and the Southern Sense of Place”. *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures*. Ed. Barbara Allen and Thomas J. Schelereth. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990. 152 – 163. Print.
- Bogges, Carol. “The Poetry of James Still’s Days and Ways.” *Wordpress*. Asheville Poetry Review, 25 Oct. 2003. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.  
<http://www.ashevillepoetryreview.com/2003/issue-13/the-poetry-of-james-still>
- Brown, John Norris. “PA 6: ‘Appalachian Literature.’” *Podcast Appalachia*. Podcast Appalachia, 15 Apr. 2008. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.  
<http://podcastappalachia.blogspot.com/2008/04/pa-6-appalachian-literature.html>
- “Deliverance.” *Goodreads Inc*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.  
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/592657.Deliverance>  
 -- *Goodreads Inc*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2015.  
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/592657.Deliverance>
- “Deliverance.” *Time Inc*. Time, 07 Jan. 2010. Web. 24 Apr. 2015.  
<http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/deliverance-1970-by-james-dickey/>
- Dickey, James. *Deliverance*. New York: Delta Publishing, 1970. Print.
- Hart, Henry. *James Dickey: The World as a Lie*. New York: Picador USA, 2000. Print.
- “James Dickey Facts.” *LoveToKnow*. YourDictionay, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2015.  
<http://biography.yourdictionary.com/james-dickey>

“James L. Dickey.” *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, 2010. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/james-l-dickey>

“James Still (1906-2001).” *Chapter 16*. Chapter 16, 18 Jul. 2012. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

“James Still papers, 1885-2007.” *University of Kentucky*. Kentucky Digital Library, n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

Lyttelton, Oliver. “5 Things You Might Not Know About 'Deliverance,' Released 40 Years Ago Today.” *The Playlist*. The Playlist, 30 Jul. 2012. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

<http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/5-things-you-might-not-know-about-deliverance-released-40-years-ago-today-20120730>

“River of Earth.” *Goodreads Inc*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/77589.River\\_of\\_Earth](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/77589.River_of_Earth)

-- *Goodreads Inc*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2015.

[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/77589.River\\_of\\_Earth](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/77589.River_of_Earth)

Satterwhite, Emily. *Dear Appalachia*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. Print.

Sawin, Patricia. “Reviewed Work: *Seldom Ask, Never Tell: Labor and Discourse in Appalachia* by Anita Puckett.” *Language in Society*, 31.3 (2002): 480 – 483. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

Spears, Monroe K. “James Dickey as a Southern Visionary.” *University of Virginia*. Virginia Quarterly Review, 12 Dec. 2003. Web. 17 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.vqronline.org/essay/james-dickey-southern-visionary>

Still, James. *River of Earth*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978. Print.