Reviews


Reviewed by Christina Fisanick, Xavier University

On the way to present a conference paper at an honor society’s annual convention, we stopped to refuel at a gas station off the interstate bound on each side by Illinois cornfields. As a senior English major at a small, state liberal arts college, I knew what a privilege it was to be traveling to a conference at the expense of the school and to be accompanied by the head of the psychology department and the vice president of student affairs. Growing up in a trailer park in Appalachia, I had never imagined that I would one day be on such an excursion in such company, but I had learned that my intelligence and perseverance could take me places I once dared not dream of. I had taken off my brand-new dress shoes a few hours before and did not think to put them back on when I climbed out of the van to stretch my legs. As I did a few deep knee bends, I heard snickering from the car on the other side of the pump, followed by a man’s voice saying, “I told ya they don’t wear shoes.” Looking first at the man’s pointing finger and then down at my own bare feet, I realized that he was talking about West Virginians. The school seal was embossed on the side of the van with the name of our state clearly marked below it. Furious and embarrassed at the same time, I stood there in silence as the man and his companion drove off.

Years later, that moment remains with me. I have faced other such stereotypical commentary over my lifetime; however, the timing of this act was crucial to the formation of my identity as an academic and as an Appalachian. Later, it seemed odd to me that the man would make such a comment given that we were quite clearly from a college. Yet education, or the insinuation of it, did not seem to override the negative implications of the Appalachian stereotype. I realized at that moment and in the days and years that followed that no matter how far I went in my academic career, my Appalachian heritage would sometimes dampen my intellectual integrity and success. I also realized that I could either try to hide and ultimately reject my background or embrace it. Thankfully, after the
early, difficult years of graduate school, I learned not only to embrace my hillbilly heritage, but to use it as a deep well of resources from which I would draw time and time again.

Not all academics or Appalachians are of the same mind-set. At the beginning of her book-length study, Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices since College, Katherine Kelleher Sohn discusses the redneck jokes she overheard two conference presenters tell at breakfast at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) held in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1994. Angered not only by the jokes but also by the conferees’ prejudicial attitudes toward their breakfast server, who had a thick southern accent, Sohn finds it ironic that at this very conference she was presenting a paper about the need for working-class white folks to be considered part of the multicultural discussion. Of course, the point of Sohn’s anecdote is to show that even within an academic community that values multicultural diversity, Appalachians remain the object of ridicule.

Appalachians are often left out of efforts to build and maintain multicultural diversity on college campuses. Even teacher-scholars, like the compositionists Sohn overheard, who would undoubtedly define themselves as multiculturally aware and dedicated to advancing the concerns and needs of minority students, fail to see that Appalachians are a distinct ethnic group with their own values, needs, and talents. Perhaps this resistance stems from public portrayals of the stereotype of the ignorant hillbilly or from the general disregard faced by rural citizens in mainstream American culture. In his foreword to Sohn’s book, Victor Villanueva, author of Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color, echoes her characterization of Appalachians as “the color without a name,” which is certainly a controversial statement both inside and outside the vast Appalachian community (xv). However, as Sohn notes, if professors and administrators fail to recognize the complex challenges, such as lack of solid writing, reading, and study skills, faced by Appalachian students as they enter university culture, and the talents and life skills they bring with them, then colleges run the risk of shutting these students out from the many advantages that a college education has to offer. As she asserts, “Overlooking these kinds of students because their backgrounds are so weak keeps them powerless” (119).
In her study, Sohn was interested in how going to college changed the literacy practices of working-class women. Using a Kentucky college as her primary site of research, Sohn gathered initial data from seventeen women and narrowed her list of participants to eight nontraditional female graduates who were Appalachian-born for at least two generations and had been divorced or married with children during their college career. From that list, she developed case studies of three women, based primarily on her own personal interest in their lives and literacy practices and in the differences between them. Sohn observed these women and their literacy practices in the workplace, at home, and in the community. After describing the rationale and methods behind her study, Sohn offers readers compelling close-ups of the lives of these three women: Lucy, Jean, and Sarah.

Sohn asserts that "the women of eastern Kentucky's stories upset our notions of feminism and class and teach us how we can teach better" (151). From these women, she learned to value the knowledge that nontraditional female students bring to the classroom, gained primarily from their practical experiences with raising children. Many of these women come from home lives that are economically and emotionally difficult. Only by seeing these students as hardworking women with barriers to overcome can college instructors offer them the assistance they need to achieve their goals. As an example, she describes the hurdles that Lucy faced while in college. Her husband would not allow her to keep any books, including her textbooks, in the house, so she had to either study in the car or go to campus early in the morning. He also physically abused her. The families of other women in the study chastised them for attending college and thus "abandoning" their children and their duties as wives. The families' reactions reflect the old Appalachian saying that gives Sohn's book its title: "Whistlin' women and crowin' hens, always come to no good ends" (9). To help these students make the transition from home to college and from college to the workplace, Sohn recommends that administrators actively recruit them by offering scholarships and other sources of funding and by creating flexible enrollment and reenrollment procedures that make it easier for these women to step in and out of college. She also urges instructors to allow these nontraditional students more time to complete assignments and courses.
Although many scholars have completed studies on Appalachian linguistic variety, Appalachian students in elementary and secondary schools, and Appalachian college students, not much work has been done with this population after they have completed college. Sohn shows us through vivid descriptions and narratives how literacy works in the lives of these women. For example, after obtaining a degree in art, Lucy was forced to stay at home instead of entering the workplace, in part because she suffers from a disability and because she needs to care for her daughter, who has cystic fibrosis and needs constant attention. Most of the reading and writing she does pertains to the care of her daughter. Her literacy practices include doing extensive research about the disease, keeping a regular journal about her daughter's health care and her son's visits away from home, and regularly reading local newspapers. Despite these extensive reading and writing practices, Lucy does not define herself as literate.

Sohn encountered the same disjuncture between academic and practical literacy in her observation of Jean. Jean, an intensive care nurse, spends at least 50 percent of her shifts writing nursing assessments of her patients. Jean employs the same skills in preparing these assessments as she used in taking notes and studying for exams while in college. In addition to these written reports, Jean also reads nursing journals, studies for certificates and higher degrees, and attends retraining programs. Yet, like Lucy, Jean does not see the writing and reading she does at work as being literate acts, even though she admits to doing more writing on the job than she did in college.

On the other hand, Sarah, Sohn's third case study participant, does not discount her own literacy as Lucy and Jean do. As a social worker for various organizations, Sarah keeps extensive files on each of her clients. She clearly sees that this writing and the reading she does to help her serve her clients make her a literate person. This belief is reinforced by the number of workers at her current agency who ask her to write important documents because her writing skills are so good.

The diverse experiences of these three women thus emphasize the need for scholars and teachers of composition and rhetoric to expand the notion of literacy beyond academic writing. After completing her study, Sohn realized that "teachers need to be aware of academic literacy's
limitations within the total picture of the literacies students have accumulated throughout their lives" (162). Indeed, academic literacy practices are often the only types of literacy acts that students are required to perform in the first-year writing classroom. While many scholars have urged composition instructors to expand the kind of writing done there to include the writing of everyday life and writing in the workplace, writing teachers are understandably concerned about preparing their students for future academic writing tasks. To fill this gap, Sohn argues that we must provide at-risk students, like the women of her study, with the time and assistance they need to overcome poor basic writing skills and make the connection between everyday writing and academic writing. To encourage an exploration of identity, Sohn recommends that writing instructors assign personal essays, which will help these students build self-confidence and bridge the gap between life experience and academic writing. She also urges the adoption of writing across the curriculum, which will help these students understand the types of writing that will be expected of them in the workplace.

Like other scholars who have attempted to listen to the voices of oppressed groups, Sohn works hard at not only hearing what these women have to say, but reporting it carefully and using it to improve her own teaching practices. Sohn encourages writing teachers to act as caregivers and supporters by carefully listening to and guiding these students through their college years. Like other minorities, these women need help in traversing the boundaries between their home life and college life, which for many nontraditional Appalachian woman can be like traveling to a new world. According to Sohn, “The most important role of educators is to lessen students’ feelings of being outsiders” by validating their life experiences as unique skills (162). These women, and the women of their community, value common sense and survival skills and frown on anyone who “gets above their raisin’. Teachers must acknowledge the usefulness of common sense and help students incorporate school-based knowledge with those basic survival skills. In other words, Sohn argues that writing instructors must recognize the values these women hold and show them how to use what they are learning in college in their everyday lives.

In the many excerpts of narratives written or spoken by the study
participants, Sohn’s readers have the chance to see a minority group—nontraditional, female, Appalachian students—in a larger light. These women are intelligent, articulate, and hardworking in their jobs, communities, and home lives. Among the conclusions that can be drawn from this study, three stand out as most important. First, while these women originally attended college to improve their economic status, they eventually realized the importance of literacy to their own personal growth and satisfaction. Second, although going to college was a struggle for all these women, in part because it challenged the social norms of their community, they all realized that education gave them the power to avoid being trapped in abusive and otherwise undesirable relationships. Third, to help women like Lucy, Jean, and Sarah succeed in college, teachers and administrators must recognize these students’ strengths and weaknesses and meet them where they stand.

Ultimately, Sohn’s study reveals the need for further scholarship on the literacy of Appalachian people. Rather than regard the state of Appalachian literacy as a result of “willful ignorance,” as compositionist James Moffett once did, researchers need to focus on successful examples of literacy so that knowledge may be applied to those students who are struggling. Appalachian students are often invisible in the college classroom; however, they are a minority group that needs attention. Sohn reveals that through advanced literacy, Appalachian women can gain voice and power in their lives and contribute greatly to the success of their families and their communities.

Over a decade has passed since that warm fall night when I stood barefoot and outraged at a gas station in northern Illinois. Rather than allow that one moment of bigotry to destroy my already fragile self-esteem, I used it as a fulcrum for ensuring my success in life. I would not let one man’s ignorance about my heritage prevent me from achieving my goals. It helped immensely, though, that I went to a college that supported me well beyond my undergraduate degree. My professors got to know me, believed in me, and made available all the opportunities it would take to get me from a life of poverty and dependence on others to a PhD in writing and rhetoric and a well-paying job. If, as Sohn says, the role of college educators is “to prepare critical thinkers and problem solvers to contribute those skills for survival in their communities” (93), we must be willing
to see our students as individuals and to understand that they all have unique literacy challenges and strengths. Without such help, I doubt that I would have even completed my bachelor’s degree. Now, I am whistlin’ and crowin’ from the podium in my own classroom, showing my students and anyone who will listen that we outspoken hens do come to good ends.


Reviewed by Diana George, Virginia Tech University

Sometime after the fall of Pol Pot in 1979 and until 2002, a visitor to Tuol Sleng (the Phnom Penh high-school-turned-torture-and-death-house-and-then-museum) would have seen a remarkable map of Cambodia. As many as 300 human skulls of those killed at the site had been used to form the shape of that country. Even after the map was disassembled, some skulls have remained, now placed on shelves behind glass—an arrangement much more in keeping with the kinds of displays we are used to seeing in natural history museums, except that these are hardly ancient ancestors.

Outside Phnom Penh in Choeung Ek, at a spot still known as The Killing Fields, a Buddhist stupa rises above the field where thousands of men, women, and children were slaughtered. The stupa is filled, on every level, with human skulls (more than 8,000 altogether) behind glass so that only as the visitor comes closer and the interior sharpens do the skulls begin to take shape, does the viewer understand what she is seeing.

At the former Khmer Rouge prison Wat Sauphy, deteriorating rooms remain bare except for piles of skulls and scattered bones of the dead from that site.

At a roadside stop outside Siem Reap and only a few miles from Angkor Wat, a dusty, open air museum displays land mines dug up, most of them along the border that separates Thailand from Cambodia. The