
Reviewed by Theresa L. Burriss

Published on H-South (February, 2018)

Commissioned by Seth J. Bartee (Guilford Technical Community College)

*Rereading Appalachia: Literacy, Place, and Cultural Resistance*, edited by Sara Webb-Sunderhaus and Kim Donehower and part of the Place Matters: New Directions in Appalachian Studies series by the University Press of Kentucky, contains diverse, well-researched chapters on historical and contemporary Appalachian literacy issues. Not only do the contributors incorporate reputable sources to bolster their positions, many also include compelling personal testimony that provides readers insight into the authors' motives for entering the literacy field. Given the scope of this collection, the text would serve various scholars and educators, along with a variety of undergraduate and graduate classes, whether Appalachian studies, education, or English courses. Even history, anthropology, and sociology instructors would find the chapters useful to illustrate, for example, Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theories at work in the region. As Appalachian scholar Phillip Obermiller communicated to contributor Kathryn Trauth Taylor for her chapter, “more rhetoric and composition scholars [should] attend the annual Appalachian Studies Association conference, publish in Appalachian studies journals, and explore or contribute to projects at Appalshop.org” (p. 132). Indeed, apparent little interaction or cross-pollination exists among these scholars. Sunderhaus and Donehower's collection takes a step to bridge this artificial divide.

From the start of the collection, the contributors contextualize the various literacy issues they address. With deep sensitivity and awareness, they bring attention to the region's long-lived stereotypes, as well as how and why they were created; they refuse homogenization of the region's residents while also eschewing overly romantic characterizations. Moreover, the authors acknowledge many tensions that exist in Appalachian studies, some more theoretical and philosophical than others, but all necessary in an honest discussion of the region. One found throughout the collection is the notion of Appalachian identity, for as the editors explain, “Each contributor to this collection is either of Appalachian heritage or strongly Appalachian identified, or both. Each interrogates how Appalachian literacies function and are represented in specific sites, and how many reflect on the ways in which doing this kind of scholarly work intersects and interacts with their own Appalachian identities” (p. 3). Importantly, though, the editors do not stop there and go on to concede that “Appalachianess is largely a social construction that has been used for good and ill purposes” (p. 4).

Both Krista Bryson's chapter, “Conflicted Rhetorics of Appalachian Identity in the Kentucky...”
Moonlight Schools,” and Emma M. Howes’s “Appalachian Identities and the Difficulties of Archival Literacy Research” provide readers historical perspectives of literacy efforts and research in the region, work that dates back to the early twentieth century. While Bryson points out the victim-blaming and shaming inherent in Cora Wilson Stewart’s Progressive-Era Kentucky moonlight schools and her accompanying lessons and publications, Howes documents her Marxist-feminist archival research on North Carolina female mill workers’ literacies, as well as her unexpected encounters and conflicts with a gentleman very protective of his notion of life lived in a mill town. Each of the authors concludes with advice learned in the process of their writing and research. Bryson asserts, “To encourage a critical, benevolent rhetoric that does not reify stereotypes of Appalachian and literate identities, I advocate approaching literacy as a rhetorical construction and an enactment of identity” (p. 50). Employing a balanced critique of literacy reform in capitalist economies, Howes draws on New Literacy Studies to posit that “literacies and how they circulate are never apolitical” (p. 70, emphasis original). To adequately assess oft-silenced voices, she advocates utilizing a materialist feminist lens “to unearth bits and pieces of the relationships that have developed historically between women and literacy sponsors in an effort to historicize and contextualize literacies in the lives of working women” (p. 71).

The next several chapters are heavily influenced by the authors’ own lives. Todd Snyder’s chapter, “The Transition to College for First-Generation Students from Extractive Industry Appalachia,” serves as microcosm of his own book, The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity (2014). Gregory E. Griffey offers a deeply personal and welcome, perhaps unorthodox to some, approach to literacy with his chapter, “How Reading and Writing Saved a Gay Preacher in Central Appalachia.” In “Diverse Rhetorical Scenes of Urban Appalachian Literacies,” Kathryn Trauth Taylor discusses literacy performances as they shape identities, in particular Appalachians and Affrilachians in urban environments.

Nathan Shepley takes an historical approach in “Place-Conscious Literacy Practices in One Appalachian College Town” as he analyzes Ohio University students’ writing at the turn of the twentieth century about Athens, OH, and how their writing “resisted the marginalization of the region” (p. 152). His research leads to suggestions for current educators in the region as they help their students navigate issues of association and identity. Additionally, in their chapter, “A Functional Linguistics Approach to Appalachian Literacy,” Joshua Iddings and Ryan Angus provide instructors culturally sensitive and appropriate ideas as the authors very intentionally combine rhetoric and composition, Appalachian studies, and linguistics, as this merger “fosters a critical understanding of the culture of the region, raises up critical readers of texts, and promotes democratic educational praxis both in the classroom and the greater society” (p. 159).

Both editors’ chapters, which start and conclude the collection, also contain powerful personal stories illustrating the deep hurt that accompanies internalized oppression. Simultaneously, both Donehower and Webb-Sunderhaus demonstrate that solid scholarship is not sacrificed by including the personal as they offer readers sophisticated ideas to consider, no matter the readers’ personal or professional interests or backgrounds. The two authors/editors dispel easy categorization of what it means to be Appalachian and honor their own admonitions.

Peter Mortensen’s afterword is a fitting close to the collection as he poses provocative questions to himself and consequently, the reader. Admitting his initial simplistic questioning, he goes on to suggest that it is “better to ask who defines literacy, why, and what happens when that definition is applied to a place or a population, regardless of the application’s move” (p. 201). After ref-
erencing Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region (1999), a critical text in Appalachian studies and one that other contributors also include, Mortenson contextualizes Rereading Appalachia and offers ways the contributors’ chapters tie into existing literacy studies and how they lead to additional work yet to be achieved. In a poignant concluding paragraph, he notes, “As much as its chapters enrich the scholarship of writing studies, so too do they enable us to look beyond that scholarship into a world where impoverished ideas about Appalachia always and everywhere collide with myths about literacy” (p. 208). Webb-Sunderhaus and Donehower have assembled a strong collection in Rereading Appalachia as all the authors contribute important work and ideas to various fields of study, not only literacy studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-south


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47620

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.