Look what they said about us: Social positioning work of adolescent Appalachians in English class

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ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the social positioning work three Appalachian adolescents engaged in during two literacy events drawn from a year-long critical teacher-researcher ethnographic study in a twelfth-grade English class in a rural Appalachian high school. Data analysis indicates that in these literacy events, the focal students positioned themselves and their communities in relation to discourses on Appalachia for different social and political purposes. This study suggests that attending to the negotiations Appalachian adolescents make in relation to cultural discourses can better support critical, culturally sustaining academic curricula.*

KEYWORDS: *Adolescent literacy practices, Appalachia, culturally sustaining pedagogy, identity, social positioning*

INTRODUCTION

For adolescents growing up within communities experiencing on-going cultural marginalisation, formal schooling contexts and the language arts classrooms within them, are often far from culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012). Classrooms are porous, heteroglossic spaces in which authoritative and resistant cultural discourses circulate in complex ways through the curriculum, teacher, and student interactions (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Wortham, 2004). As a non-Appalachian teacher in a rural Appalachian community, I participated in and observed my students, colleagues, and community members' complex negotiations of the marginalising and resisting cultural discourses. In the hallways, bathrooms, cafeterias, and classrooms of a rural Appalachian high school, I saw our social positioning work mirroring the academic arguments, doubts, and assertions that take place in the essays and books of Appalachian scholars. Significantly, this on-going social positioning is continued in the academic spaces of classrooms, whether it is formally invited or not.

Teachers who take up these cultural discourses as sources of critical academic exploration with students have the potential to create what Paris (2012) calls *culturally sustaining pedagogies*. He explains, "Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). This agentive and pro-active stance is well paired with a critical literacy pedagogy in which students learn "… not only to read and write but to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform them" (Morrell, 2007, p. 241). Designing literacy curricula that take seriously the need for the dialectic of access and dissent requires intimate local understanding of how adolescents in those communities are always and already engaged in navigating the complex and intersecting discourses surrounding their communities. Furthermore, such curricula can make more available for teachers the sophisticated and complex ways in which adolescents navigate these discourses and the potential implications of

these navigations on these adolescents' understanding of themselves in relation to these discourses.

This study took place in the rural central Appalachian region of the U.S., a mountainous region typically represented as a place of high poverty and low educational achievement and with a history of extractive industries (coal, lumber and natural gas) and religious, governmental, and service organisations in a paternalistic relationship with many communities in the region (Billings, Norman & Ledford, 1999; Reid, 2005; Shapiro, 1978). While there are problematic discourses that position cultural attributes as the cause of the low rates of educational achievement in the region, many Appalachian residents feel a tension between the middle-class educational institutions and their working-class communities (Sohn, 2006). This tension has supported a discourse of literacy as "perilous empowerment" in which social costs can be associated with educational achievement (Locklear, 2011).

In this study, the navigations of three adolescents are explored as they drew from the discourse of insider and outsider positions and made sense of a range of historical and current representations of Appalachia studied in their senior English class. Two of the focal students, Kevin and Chayla, are from the community in which the study is located. The third focal student, Tracy, is of Appalachian heritage, but at the time of the study, had only lived in Akers County for two years. All names of individuals, schools, and locations are pseudonyms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Built upon sociocultural theory, this study works upon an understanding that all human interaction is constructed through cultural, historical, and institutional systems, as well as made new through improvisation and agency (Holland, et al. 1998). Central to sociocultural theory is attention to the use of cultural tools such as language and literacy to construct and navigate cultural spaces and relations. Bakhtin (1981; 1986) calls attention to the historical nature of our language use that reveals how we draw the meaning and use of language from earlier interactions, and also infuse it with new meaning in an immediate interaction.

Like language, in this study identity is understood as contextual, socially mediated positionings (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986; Harré & van Langhove, 1999; McVee, Baldassarre Hopkins & Bailey, 2011). In this view, people engage simultaneously in multiple social worlds in which they must mediate the competing discourses circulating within and across contexts that, within relations of power, make available particular identity positions. Thus, in the process of the discursive mediation of available social positions or the construction of new ones, there is a tension between the agentive choices an individual can make within the situated moment, and the limited available discourses within the context and relations of power (Holland, et al., 1998; Ivanič, 1998; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007). Also evident in this view is the on-going nature of the process; there is no static identity that is a characteristic of an individual (Lewis & del Valle, 2009). In addition to being on-going, the process is intertextual, "relying on storylines that intermingle, overlap, and sometimes conflict" (Lewis & del Valle, 2009, p. 316). These intertextual storylines indicate the primary role of literacy practices as a mediating "part of a complex landscape that is both global and local, as well as

participatory and exclusionary" (Lewis & del Valle, 2009, p. 311). In other words, through language and literacy practices, we draw from discourses circulating broadly in and across groups and institutions, variously constraining and affording access to power, while at the same time we also draw from local practices that position ourselves and others in relation to each other (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000).

Despite the academic critiques of the constructs of insider/outsider positions and a regional Appalachian identity (Reid, 2005), there remains a perpetual issue of responding to representations of Appalachia as an Othered region, for which the discourse of insider/outsider positions has continued to have social currency and meaning for many people in Appalachian communities. Drawing from Bakhtin's (1981) concept of addressivity, these representations of Appalachia must be understood as having multiple addressees, each constructing his/her own meaning. For example, when witnessing yet another documentary on Appalachia founded upon cultural deficiency discourses, many people connected to Appalachia know that the text was created to perpetuate shock and awe images of poverty for a non-Appalachian audience, yet, as a viewer, they also feel addressed by the text. At this point, the discourse of insider/outsider is often taken up as explanation for the text. Yet, as the broad insider/outsider discourse remains available, the particular use of the discourse of insider/outsider positionality is often quite fluid and situated, and defies the need the specify firm boundaries of what counts as "in" or "out". How individuals draw from this discourse in particular ways for particular purposes in particular situations is important in our understanding of identity in action and the dynamics of power within and around marginalised communities (Gee, 1990; Obermiller, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Research context

This study took place in Hilltop High School, a high school of approximately 400 students and twenty-five teachers. All but three of the teachers were from the county. The school is located in Akers County, which is situated in the heart of the rural coalfields of the Appalachian region of the United States. Akers County has approximately 40,000 residents, the majority of whom (97.9%) are Caucasian (U.S. Census, 2010). All participants in the study were Caucasian. The coal industry and school system were the major employers in the county. In the county, approximately 43% of the children were living below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census, 2010) and 77% of the students at Hilltop High School participating in the federal free/reduced price lunch program (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

The focal course was unique in the school in that it was initially designed by the school and the local community college to increase student access to higher education by offering both high school and college English credit for the course. An instructor at the community college designed the course that I facilitated; however, it was extremely unpopular due to a lack of connection between the college instructor, his goals, and the students, and the level of difficulty and disconnection in the selected texts. Only Tracy enrolled for the second level course in the spring semester. In the absence of the traditional rhetoric and composition curriculum, I designed the curriculum to address issues pertaining to Appalachia and integrated rhetorical and

composition studies content. To guide our examination of representations of Appalachia in a range of texts, I designed a structure in which we read a range of historical, fictional, and academic media texts offering historical and current representations of central Appalachia[1]. Texts included an academic article, historical novel, feature film, documentary film, television documentary, poetry, and students' research and writing (see Appendices C and D for a complete list). Students wrote in traditional academic genres including an extended summary essay, character analysis essay, and research paper, as well as literary and personal genres such as poetry and journaling. Even as we engaged in traditional academic genres, we did so while asking critical questions about representation, language and identity, silences and voice of characters, authors, and audience. The objective was for students to develop the rhetorical dexterity (Carter, 2008) of articulating critical analysis and draw meaningfully from their personal experience within the "codes of power" (Delpit, 1995).

Participants: Teacher-researcher

As the teacher-researcher of this study of identity as social positioning, I have a responsibility to locate myself in relation to the research context and to my students. While I am not from central Appalachia, I was an English teacher at the school in this study for five years prior to the study[2]. During my initial time as a teacher at Hilltop High School, I had taught older siblings and cousins of many of the participants in the study. These established relationships, maintained during my absence through social media, allowed me to maintain a reputation as a rigorous, caring, and creative teacher who was "different, but cool" (teacher reflective notes, 8.10.09). This reputation also helped me to form connections with the students of in the study's class. My status as an outsider was a repeated topic of conversation in all of my classes and in the school more broadly. Most often, my social position as an outsider was a source of good-natured joking (teacher reflective notes 3.10.10) or discussion of cultural differences (teacher reflective notes 8.10.09).

This study was predicated on my different location culturally, historically, linguistically, and economically in comparison to most of my students and colleagues. It is also key to acknowledge that while I had built significant cross-cultural relationships and, as an ethnographer, worked to construct an emic perspective, my teaching and my data analysis are informed not only by my social location, but also my theoretical perspectives. I recognize that there are limitations on my analysis and claims.

Participants: Focal student selection and description

The method of focal student selection is purposeful intensity sampling (Patton, 1990), that is, "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely

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[1] Appalachian-centered literature or issues were not a part of the formal curriculum in the local schools, except for a state history unit during fourth grade (student ages 9-10 years). No participants had ever read any Appalachian-centered literature prior to this study.

[2] I had left for three years for my doctoral studies. The year of this study was my first year back in the school.

(but not extremely)" (p. 171). The three focal students were selected based on their active engagement in class discussion and in their written texts (Merriam, 1991). Their own positions were in ways both unique and representative in that they vocalized a range of opinions shared by different peers in the class, yet always from their particular experiences. In the following section, the profiles of three focal students are outlined.

Kevin. Kevin was an engaging young man who lived within the tensions of being intellectually curious while also being responsive to the working-class discourses of masculinity that circulated in his community. While Appalachian working-class discourses of masculinity did not often foreground intellectuality as a valued trait, displays of confidence and authority were (Mann, 2005; Puckett, 1992; Tallichet, 2011). He worked towards this positioning by being a vocal participant in class discussions, both in the focal class and his other classes (Reflective notes, 3.05.10). One of Kevin's frequent social practices was to seek out discussion with his teachers and peers in and out of class, often posing questions to open a discussion. Despite Kevin's love of history in general and of the region specifically, he was not familiar with the regional history shared in the texts (e.g. films, novels, and essays) of this class. He expressed interest and appreciation for learning about how he and the Appalachian region fit in a broader historical and political context and for learning academic literacy practices with these issues at the foreground (Interview, 5.20.10).

Chayla. Like the working-class girls with attitude (Hicks, 2005; Jones, 2006; Schwartz, 2006), Chayla presented herself as a young woman unafraid to speak her mind and took on complex social positions. When it came to calling out a friend's rude remark, announcing her own lack of preparation, or her view on the state of a teacher's outdated fashion or a recent political event, Chayla had not been a person to shy from sharing her thoughts. Her family was considered middle class in the community, and were connected to the coal industry. Chayla's family embraced many traditional cultural practices like hunting alongside of achieving higher education degrees. Her mother was an active champion of her children's academic performance, and Chayla had been academically successful through her entire school career. However, in the fall of the year, she had struggled in the English 101 dual credit course to earn an A. This struggle was painful and she started the spring semester determined to be successful, yet also expressed apprehension as to her capability (Reflective notes, 1.20.10). She was also involved in extracurricular activities, participating in the science club, school yearbook and newspaper staff, and art contests. After school she worked as a cashier at a chain department store.

It was common for many middle-class and aspirationally middle-class students who were academically successful to speak of their desires to leave the region in hopes of more academic and economic success (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Chayla, on the other hand, passionately affirmed her commitment to staying. One way Chayla lived out this commitment was through celebrating her strong regional accent. This was a strategic decision for Chayla and came out of her careful attention to the ways in which people around her spoke. Chayla teased both those who sounded more "country" and those who sounded more "proper" or "city" than herself[3]. She teased

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[3] It was a local cultural practice to describe the speech patterns of those in the region as "country", whereas the speech patterns of those in or from more urban areas were commonly labeled as "city" or "talking proper". My students frequently referred to my speech as "proper".

others knowing the consequences for social pressure on language; she had been harshly teased at a prestigious summer art program in an urban area of her state the previous year.

Tracy. Tracy was an academically high-achieving woman who was in her second year at Hilltop High School. Prior to her junior year, Tracy had grown up in a working-class city in a northern state with her mother and only visited Akers County during summer vacation. Her mother's family is from Akers County, and Tracy moved to Akers County with her mother to care for her aging grandparents. Of the three participants, Tracy was from the most economically vulnerable family. She and her mother worked nearly 40 hours a week at a local Laundromat to provide for her extended family. Like Chayla, Tracy was active in school activities, like the school yearbook and newspaper and took on leadership roles in these activities. Socially, Tracy spent her time with the working-class students who attended the technical high school in the afternoon. Yet academically, Tracy was in all of the advanced courses she could take. She was the only student in the class to enroll for the second level of college English.

As a newcomer with speech patterns differing from typical patterns in her peer group, Tracy helped to make explicit views on language and difference from multiple "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. While Tracy may have felt addressed by many of the same working-class discourses as some of her peers, she also recognized that she was not addressed by the discourses of Appalachian cultural deficiency in the same way as her peers at Hilltop. From her position as an insider-outsider, Tracy had the advantage of observing her peers carefully, without being fully implicated by the same discourses.

Together, these students make evident the sophisticated ways in which adolescents in Appalachian negotiate the complicated discursive terrain of their lives in the mountains and beyond.

Ethical issues

As the participants' teacher and as a researcher committed to ethical scholarship, I made assurances to my students regarding their rights as my students and participants in the study. There is a legitimate concern regarding the power the teacher has in assigning grades. I assured the students that when I read their work as their teacher, it was according to assignment criteria, whereas as the researcher, I was examining the nature of how they chose to describe themselves, and others in light of the research questions; the purpose of the study was a descriptive not evaluative one. There were no different tasks assigned to the students who chose to or not to participate in the study, excluding the focal students who had the tasks of choosing to participate in the interviews and the member checking process.

There are also concerns of consent and representation. Not to be taken for granted, I took several measures to ensure that students were informed of their rights as participants, including the right to retract consent at any point in the data collection process. The principal, participants' parents, and participants all signed consent forms prior to the beginning of the study. The consent forms included contact information for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the presiding institution, my doctoral

advisor, and the students' principal who had the IRB contact information. It was important for my students to have a local contact person who could advocate on behalf of the students, if needed. To account for student agency in their self-representation, during data collection the audio recorder was visibly in my hand or on a desk so that students were aware that that class session was being recorded and frequently reminded students that I would not include their portions of the data (e.g. not transcribe their statements from audio recordings, etc.) if they informed me of their decision for that day or segment of class. Finally, I invited the focal students to engage in member checks of the participant descriptions through email and social media communications.

Data collection

The data reported here comes from the spring semester of a year-long ethnographic study in one senior English class. In this semester, the primary data sources included approximately sixty hours of audio recordings of classroom dialogue, audio recordings of daily teacher-researcher reflective notes, and all student writing from class assignments. As student and teacher positioning is constantly occurring, every interaction has potential analytical opportunities. Recordings of classroom dialogue were at least twice a week, but often were recorded more frequently so as to follow a topic of discussion that occurred across several days. There were interruptions to the flow across days, however, as school was cancelled due to inclement weather for twenty days in total across the months of January, February and March. After school, I audio recorded my teacher researcher reflections, making note of my perceptions of the interactions of the focal students with each other, their peers, the material, and me. I also described my perceptions of the class session from a pedagogical standpoint and made a note of reminders of lines of inquiry to follow up on the subsequent days. Inconsistencies in the frequency of class sessions and reflective notes recordings are due to human error rather than intention; furthermore, these small inconsistencies are mediated by the fact that I was deeply immersed in the field as the teacher.

With each focal student I recorded twenty-minute semi-structured individual interviews at the beginning and end of the spring semester. Interview questions are reported in Appendices A and B. As these were semi-structured interviews, I asked several follow up questions specific to each student's responses. As stated earlier, the texts and formal written assignments are listed in Appendices C and D, respectively. Student work from all participants was collected at the time it was turned in for an assignment, de-identified and assigned pseudonyms, and digitally scanned prior to analysis.

Data analysis

Analysis was a recursive process driven first by open coding and then by multiple rounds of theoretically informed coding (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). During the first round of open coding of transcripts and student writing, conducted in an on-going manner during data collection, I coded for relevant topics (e.g. language, culture, identity, etc.), and in the second round, I used my teacher-researcher reflective notes to identify moments of rich and explicit conversations about identity, language, school, and culture.

The primary theoretical coding came from social positioning theory, in particular the use of first-order and second-order self-other positioning framework that McVee, Baldassarre Hopkins, & Bailey (2011) developed as an expansion upon Harré & van Langenhove's (1991) work. While acknowledging that all discourse is a continuous chain (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002), the concepts of first and second order positioning refer to a speech event in which the interlocutors "locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space by using several categories and storylines" (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999, p. 20). For instance, a student might use the category of "student" and its storyline to say to a teacher, "What's the criteria for the assignment?" In this way, the student has located himself as not in a position to assign the assessment criteria and the teacher as the appropriate person. In response, a teacher might use second order positioning, or "when the first order positioning is questioned and has to be negotiated" may explain that the criteria will be set through class discussion (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 20). The four types of self-other positioning used in this study are listed in Table 1 below.

1. Self *as* other: Participant positions him or herself in the place of the other. I am you.
2. Self *in* other: Participant positions him or herself in similar fashion to the other. I am like you.
3. Self *opposed* to others: Participant positions him or herself in opposition to the other. I am not like you.
4. Self *aligned* with other: Participant aligns him or herself with another. I am sympathetic to you/your ideas.

Table 1. Types of self-other positioning
(McVee, Baldassarre Hopkins, & Bailey, 2011, p. 113)

Using this framework, transcripts of classroom discussion and student writing samples were coded for first and second order positioning. Themes from the analysis of the focal students' positioning were compared with the analysis of the rest of the participants' positioning in order to examine their positioning as a unique or representative case of the group. Then, I conducted cross-case readings of the themes from the data of the three focal students. To explore alternative theoretically based explanations, I sought feedback on analytical memos I shared with colleagues who were familiar with the theoretical and analytical framework.

FINDINGS

Discussions of class texts and students' written assignments provided a range of forums in which participants engaged in critical examination of the cultural discourses that they experienced personally and perceived in the texts. The findings are organised into two categories using three different literacy events. First, I share how the focal students asserted different forms of an insider position while discussing and writing about a text on historical representations of the region. Second, using student writing on the "story" of Appalachia, I describe how they critiqued what they termed "outsider" or marginalising discourses.

Constructing an insider Appalachian cultural community discourse

For many adolescents living in rural Appalachia, there is a general sense of historical connection, as many families have dense kinship networks across generational lines in close proximity; however, at Hilltop High School, the region's history as a topic for academic exploration and discussion was absent. As their teacher, it seemed to me that students had a strong sense of personal heritage and direct experience with cultural marginalisation, but a limited understanding of the historical context for their cultural experiences, and minimal knowledge of the academic and literary conversations about the region.

Building on my understanding of how my students and colleagues articulated aspects of how they are positioned as "backwards" in relation to those outside of the region, I selected an academic text for us to analyse, that interrogated this construct. In one of the first academic literacy tasks of the focal unit, the students read and analysed Lewis' chapter critiquing the "myth of homogeneity and isolation" – the notion that Appalachia has always been a region both culturally and economically separate from the rest of the country (Lewis, 1999). Students were engaged in what was designed to be a continuation of our autumn's work on understanding and building clearly evidenced and warranted arguments. Their task was to first collaboratively analyse and then individually summarise in essay form how Lewis (1999) established and development his arguments.

During the time to share his group's analysis, Kevin discursively constructed a unified cultural community built on the shared experience of marginalisation for his peers and the nineteenth-century residents of Appalachia, a sense of a politicised identity grew. He stated:

> What everybody thought of us, that we were stuck in the old time. We weren't revolutionised with the time. The industrial revolution, and everything. People thought we were still stuck in the sixteen, seventeen hundreds. We were, you know, *hillbillies*. It wasn't to get out of this, you know, it just kinda happened that they found all the coal in this area. You know that led to all the railroads. And with all the railroads, the coal, you had to have workers, so you had all those people immigrating. You have so many different ethnic groups. (Transcript, 1.25.10)

Kevin began by explaining his interpretation of the first-order positioning he read in the text. This self-opposed-to-other positioning described his cultural community as a deficient, undeveloped region: "What everybody thought of us, that we were stuck in the old time." Then he provided warrants for the claims made by "everybody" by explaining, "We weren't revolutionized with the time. The Industrial Revolution and everything. People thought we were stuck in the sixteen, seventeen hundreds." From here, he rhetorically built the connection between the perceived outdated living conditions of the region and the position of "hillbillies": "We were, you know, hillbillies." With this remark, Kevin positioned his audience of peers and teacher as insiders, "*you know*", being addressed by the tired claim that his audience's ancestors, and by implication, his audience, were hillbillies.

At the same time that Kevin was building the position of "everybody" as an outsider, he was also engaged in his second order positioning, as Kevin used the plural pronoun "we" to position himself, his classmates, and the larger community as a part of a

nearly timeless regional community. In doing so, Kevin took up a *self-as-other* position in relation to the communities discussed in Lewis' text (1999). By using the plural pronoun "we", Kevin constructed a coherent cultural community across time and region. That is, the original historical texts Lewis (1999) quoted addressed a regional population that is no longer alive; all the same, Kevin repositioned a current Appalachian regional community to be addressed by the original texts because of the communities' similar experience in being problematically positioned by outsiders' discourse. By maintaining a focus on the past *yet also* including the present Appalachian community through his use of the plural pronoun "we", Kevin asserted an identity position for a cultural community in which he and his peers were members.

Kevin's construction of a *self-as-other* cultural community position offered a socially compelling discourse for Tracy that she took up when speaking for her group, "…[T]hey were saying *we* were isolated. With the railroads and the jobs, and different stuff, where they come through where *we* were located, and the different people coming with that, *we* weren't really isolated. *We* were sending stuff out" (Transcript, 1.25.10). In this episode, Tracy stepped into the position of being a member of the cultural community position Kevin constructed for himself and his peers. Based on Tracy's own family history, her position in a historical cultural community is not inaccurate; while she and her mother both were born in Michigan, her grandparents and familial roots were in Akers County. While this familial connection provides some logical explanation for Tracy's participation in Kevin's discourse, her self-positioning also has immediate social purposes. Kevin is a socially powerful male in the class. Tracy, on the other hand, had been working hard for a year and a half to be recognised as a peer in her class. To be accepted as a participant in a shared community, she claimed the social position of an insider. No one verbally questioned Tracy's discursive move to position herself as a part of the Appalachian community.

In a very different move, Chayla did not participate in the discourse Kevin made available to his peers in either her oral report in class or in her individual summary text. During her oral report, Chayla read directly from her notes in a depersonalised voice – a voice uncharacteristically disconnected from the content. In her written summary, Chayla was similarly disconnected, and made only one small reference to a discourse of insider cultural community in her written summary. When summarising Lewis' (1999) reported facts of the coal industry's role in the economic landscape of nineteenth century, she described, "our coal" as the source of economic and population growth (Backtalk, Chayla, 1.26.10). In so doing, she positioned the coal industry as a thread of continuity across time.

Additionally, like her peers, she directly referred to the phrase "time warp", a remark Lewis (1999) reported on which had been used to characterise the lack of development Appalachia was perceived to have in comparison with the eastern urban centres in the late Nineteenth Century. She named Lewis as trying to "disprove all of the stereotypes of the Appalachian region" being in a "time warp" (Backtalk, Chayla, 1.26.10). Yet, whereas fourteen of her seventeen peers had used the plural pronoun "we" to position themselves as addressees of this marginalising discourse, Chalya did not; rather, she allowed Lewis (1999) to do it. That is, she relied on *his* second order positioning to defend the region. In a sense, that is exactly what the literacy task asked her to do: summarise the author's arguments, warrants and claims. It might be that

she did not seem to be addressed so powerfully by the discourse Lewis was critiquing that she felt the need to supply her own second order positioning. The text may have provided sufficient voicing of critique to satisfy Chalya.

Denouncing marginalising discourses

Across the literacy events in the units of this class, the focal students and their peers engaged in critique of dominant Appalachian discourses so as to refute the positioning of these discourses as authoritative (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002). Central to the focal students' refutations was the assertion that from the outsiders' positions, they were unable to see the Appalachian communities in the same way insiders could, and thus could not assert the epistemic privilege they claimed. Furthermore, by the perspective afforded from their position, outsiders could not see either the similarities across Appalachian and non-Appalachian communities or the heterogeneity within Appalachian communities. Because of this limited perspective, the focal students considered outsiders' discourses as inaccurate and ignorant, often intentionally so.

In being aware of the self-other relations between Appalachian and non-Appalachian communities, my students challenged the imbalance within the relationship as it is constructed by non-Appalachians. For those who participate in and accept the authoritative discourses on Appalachia, the position of non-Appalachians as the centre is understood not as a relative one, but an absolute one (Holquist, 2002). In contrast, for those who engage dialogically with those discourses, there is a sense of shifting relations and relativity. In understanding the dialectical existence of rural Appalachian residents and non-Appalachians, the focal students also had a strong awareness of how these different locations shaped strongly different perspectives of life in rural Appalachia. This matter of perspective is one of the largest sources of critique within students' discussion of authoritative Appalachian discourses.

In the students' writings, the description of themselves and their communities and their critique of authoritative Appalachian discourses almost always involved a description of their interpretation of the first order positioning from outsiders and then their second order positioning. The intertwined nature of these discursive moves reveals how the relations are experienced for many Appalachian adolescents.

The worlds of rural Appalachian adolescents have been discursively constructed as different from the "centre" of a self-other relationship in which non-Appalachia is understood as the objective center. It is from this authoritatively defined relationship that non-Appalachians engage in *self-opposed-to-other* positioning (McVee, Baldassarre Hopkins, & Bailey, 2011). The focal students demonstrated their understanding of this monologic, non-Appalachian-centred, self-other positioning and its relationship with the external discourses defining their communities. To de-centre and re-position non-Appalachia is a significant task, even at the local level within each other's lives.

At the conclusion of the focal unit, based on the multiple readings of texts, students wrote their version of "the story of Appalachia's history" where they were invited to look across the texts and the discourses represented in the texts and summarise how they perceived the construction of Appalachia's "story". To respond to these wilfully ignorant efforts to maintain Appalachia's position as a *self-opposed-to-other*s, many

students drew upon a discourse of similarity – that Appalachia is like any other place in the country, to second order position themselves as *self-in-other*.

Kevin, at this point in the unit, had developed a perspective on the relationship between insiders and outsiders as one of an ideological relationship that was often informed by the understanding gained from living within region. He wrote that "insiders", "mainly focus on the hardship of the miners and how living here is….People who were born in the Appalachian [region], or have lived here for quite some time, tend to *relate* to the struggles we have in this area" (Story, Kevin, 3.30.10). Outsiders, on the other hand, "tend to think more of the negative aspects such as lack of education and [presence of] drugs….and the amount of welfare that we are on" (Story, Kevin, 3.30.10). Kevin outlined the two positions based on their subscription to the discourses of working-class struggle or cultural deficit. If one participates in the discourses of working-class struggle, one stands in *relationship* with struggle and with others in struggle; if one participates in the discourses of deficit, then all one can see is the failures.

Chayla expressed investment in the discourse of insider/outsider and the discourse of Appalachian deficiency as one constructed by outsiders. She described the first order positioning she saw outsiders engaging when she wrote, "When the Appalachian Region is brought up, the first thing people usually think of is 'dumb rednecks', 'toothless hillbillies' and things of that nature." The people holding these notions, according to Chayla, are, regardless of the source of their information or physical location, outsiders: "Whether they actually know what they are talking about or not, 'outsiders', as I like to call them, see us as uneducated" (Story, Chayla, 3.29.10). Displaying her scepticism for 'outsiders'' knowledge, Chayla discredited the *20/20* television special, "Children of the Mountains" for providing confirming evidence of outsiders' uninformed stereotypes of the region. More specifically, she argued that the show's director actively sought to "make everything to appear bad" (Story, Chayla, 3.29.10). "Shows like that do not show the real Appalachia. They just focus on the bad, which can be found anywhere. This further worsens the stereotypes of the area" (Story, Chayla, 3.29.10). Here, Chayla returns to the *self-in-other* positioning between the region and "anywhere" that she had engaged in her earlier writings. For Chayla, the struggles of the region are not unique to the region; they are in line with the challenges experienced across many regions. The difference is situated in the position for Appalachia that shows like *20/20* have constructed. By drawing from common stereotypes, this type of journalism reinforces the position of Appalachia in the national discourse as *the* site of poverty and depravity: "We just seem to be frowned upon" (Story, Chayla, 3.29.10). Chayla did not deny the challenges of the region, but sees them existing, "just like any other place".

In her examination across the focal unit's texts, Tracy's approach to taking up the discourse of likeness more clearly acknowledged the role of position supporting a particular perspective, and that these could be limited on either side of the dividing line. As well, she acknowledged more clearly the challenges the region does face, yet within a context of greater diversity than typically assigned to the region in the authoritative discourses. She wrote:

> When it comes down to it, though, no matter what, when talking about the history of Appalachia – it is going to have many smaller points – but the main thing people talk

about is either the bad side or the good. They might brush a little on the other, but they'll mainly stick to just one. It doesn't help that this is like that everywhere and outsiders are just like that too. It is just like in movies – you have a good side and evil side – no in between. People just ignore the fact that you need both – you wouldn't know good without knowing bad and vice versa. (Story, Tracy, 3.29.10).

Tracy concluded her reflection with the observation that "this is like that everywhere, and outsiders are like that, too" (Story, Tracy, 3.29.10). There are good and bad sides to outsiders, she pointed out. This move subtly repositioned the focus on Appalachia's good and bad sides to fit within the context of "every" region's good and bad sides. Not only did Tracy use that argument to apply to the discourses of the region, but she also used it to apply to people. This application is suggested through her use of "and outsiders are like that, too." That is, both regions and people have good and bad sides, and these sides are typically discussed in isolation. Tracy argued, however, that both the good and the bad are needed. We need them, Tracy continued, in order to know of the other, and in order to understand the whole picture. Like Chayla, then, Tracy used *self-in-other* to reposition the region as a community sharing the heterogeneous range of ideological perspectives as any other place in the country. This argument for Appalachia's "non-exceptionalism" is built upon these young people's understanding of their community as complex and diverse.

DISCUSSION

This is not a study of how a pedagogical approach taught students how to respond to marginalisation. Rather, it is a study of how these students drew upon their identity positioning work while engaged in a critical place-based literacy curriculum. Built upon an understanding of the cultural world in which the participants live, the curriculum included texts that made explicit the discourses that have historically and still currently position the region's residents and the cultural practices associated with them as "backwards" and societal problems (Lewis, 1999). The immediacy of this cultural positioning's addressivity, that sense that the positioning is addressing a particular person, may vary within a momentary interaction and across a life span, but the positioning is always actively "socially producing particular individuals and groups as culturally imagined types such that others and, even the person herself, at least temporarily, treat her as though she were such a person" (Holland & Leander, 2004, p. 130).

Within the field of Appalachian Studies, scholars have long questioned the concept of a regional "Appalachian identity" (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999; Reid, 2005; Shapiro, 1978; Smith et al., 2010). Additionally, Smith, et al, (2010) have interrogated the utility of the concept of "insider" and "outsider" positions. These identity positions are built on the implication of a clearly defined "Appalachian" distinct from non-Appalachians, and they have served as a part of the problematic storyline of the region's discursive separation from the "rest of the nation" (Shapiro, 1978; Smith, et al, 2010). Challenging this storyline, a core assumption of this study is the reality of multiple Appalachian experiences rather than a singular one (Fisher, 2010). And, like Obermiller (2010), the intention of this study was not to identify characteristics of an Appalachian identity; instead, it was to explore how the available discourses on

Appalachia and identity were taken up by adolescents in Appalachia within an academic context (Obermiller, 2010).

Knowing that position matters in shaping perspective, the focal students questioned their own, their communities', and non-Appalachian communities' positioning by authoritative discourses. Central to each of their arguments is Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002). Like Bakhtin, they see themselves and non-residents "occupying simultaneous but different space" geographically and ideologically (Holquist, 2002, p. 21). Thus, the focal students recognised their ability to see their own communities from their insider position with a perspective that non-residents and people who participate in problematic discourses of the region did not share. This self-awareness of power relations undergirds discourses of dissent (Morrell, 2007), and when intentionally invited into the content of the course, can help create a culturally sustaining learning environment (Paris, 2012).

Growing up aware of their otherness in the eyes of non-Appalachians, the adolescents in this study used an array of second order, or counter, positioning that highlights the diversity of their social goals. *Self-as-other* positioning demands connection beyond *self-in-other*, as it claims that we are more than similar, we are the same. In this powerful claim, the focal students called into focus historical and social dynamics that might have been implied or desired. For example, Kevin, and almost all of the students, positioned themselves as addressed by the language from Lewis (1999) as members of an Appalachian community unified across time by problematic representations. The students could have differentiated themselves from the historical subjects, but in that moment, they chose not to. Tracy, socially positioned as different from the rest of her classmates because of being from a northern state, desired a new social position as a member of her peer group and asserted this desire by claiming membership into the position that Kevin had made available. Chayla, in contrast to her peers, did not express the same addressivity by the pejorative discourses; rather, she named the unifying element as "our coal", signifying a shared political and economic issue more than a cultural one.

In their "Story of Appalachia" essays, Kevin, Tracy, and Chayla, along with many of their peers, used *self-in-other* positioning to describe how they see the relationship of shared and divergent characteristics and cultural practices between Appalachians and non-Appalachians. This move rejects the way that Appalachian residents have been culturally imagined and socially produced as different from those living outside the region (Holland & Leander, 2004). They explicitly name the epistemic insufficiency from those coming from an ideological and geographical location relying on simplistic and pejorative discourses to understand the diversity of cultural and social ways of living within the region.

CONCLUSION

Constructing a curriculum that takes up relevant sociocultural issues while also supporting students' rhetorical dexterity (Carter, 2008) with academic literacy practices requires careful attention to the students' communities from multiple lenses (i.e. historical, socio-political, economical, ecological, literary perspectives), as well as knowledge of students' engagement with sociocultural discourses, a careful

selection of texts, and intentional design in the engagement of the texts (Carter, 2008; Corbett, 2013; Kinloch, 2009; Morrell, 2007; Paris, 2012). More specifically, the texts should provide opportunities to reflect on self-other relations; name the dissonances across the discourses of their lives; and provide information students can use to intertextually position themselves in ways that challenge authoritative discourses on marginalised identities (Fecho, 1998; Kinloch, 2009; Paris, 2012). By positioning the examination of sociocultural discourses as an academic endeavour informed by their lived experiences and popular media texts, this type of curriculum supports the legitimacy and value of students' intellectual work as critical scholars. The curriculum underlying this study is a step towards "literacy pedagogy of access and dissent" (Morrell, 2007).

Self-other relations were the particular focus in the curriculum and in the students' discursive work. The virulent discourse of literacy's "perilous empowerment" was not a direct subject of exploration in this study, although it was present (Locklear, 2011). In light of the many federal, regional, and state initiatives to raise educational achievements and to promote access and success in post-secondary educational options, it is important to deepen our understanding of how young Appalachian residents understand themselves in relation to academic literacies through continued and expanded classroom-based research.

It is important to note that this portion of the larger study positioned the students as critical consumers and not as producers. While attending to and supporting critical consumption of texts is significant, so too is the agentive and creative work of students as producers for authentic audiences. Future classroom research, whether it is teacher-research or a partnership between researchers, teachers and students, should explore supporting students' production of critically informed representations of Appalachian communities. Likewise, while this study did not include the rich online discussions of Appalachian and rural representations as a subject of study, future research should. In addition to classroom-based research, there is also need for research that examines Appalachian and rural adolescents' out-of-school and digital literacy practices. Undoubtedly, it is across all spaces and relations in these young people's lives that they encounter, negotiate and reshape cultural discourses.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Describe yourself as a student.
2. Describe your experiences in English classes in high school.
3. Describe how you see the connection between your school experiences and your experiences outside of school.
4. Describe how you see the connection between what you read and write in your English classes and your life outside of school.
5. Describe how you see the connection between what you're doing in school and what you hope to do after high school.
6. When in school have you ever read a book or watched a film about Appalachia or eastern Kentucky? What was the purpose in reading/watching it?
7. Describe how you see the Appalachian region or eastern Kentucky represented in the media. What are some examples that you've seen?

APPENDIX B. FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What did you see as the purpose for the focus in the spring semester?
2. How would you describe the usefulness of the first semester compared to the second semester?
3. Describe how you see the texts we read as relating to your own experience.
4. With which text did you have the strongest response and why?
5. Describe how you see the purpose for each of the texts that we read.
6. Describe which writing assignments you felt were most interesting to you and which were least interesting.
7. If one of the goals of the class was to prepare you academically for college or to pursue other career goals, describe how you see the texts and assignments helping or not helping you prepare.
8. Describe how you think you've grown as a reader and a writer in this class.
9. As you know, this audience for this study will be mostly people not from here. What is something you want to make sure these people will understand about you, your peers, and your community?

APPENDIX C: HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS UNIT COURSE TEXTS

Giardina, D. (1988). *Storming heaven: A novel*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
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Sayles, J. (Director). (1999). *Matewan* [Motion picture]. Santa Monica, CA: Artisan Home Entertainment.

APPENDIX D: FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS UNIT

1. "Backtalk": Essay on Lewis' (1999) use of argumentation in his article, "Myths of Homogeneity and Isolation". January 2010.
2. Character analysis essay examining a character's representation of Appalachian discourse based on a character from Giardina's *Storming Heaven.* February 2010.
3. "Story of Appalachia" analysis essay discussing how the student perceives the story of Appalachia being told across the texts under study and in their own experience. March 2010