

Depictions of Rural & Appalachian Culture(s) in Comics & Graphic Novels

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Abstract

In this article, a native of Appalachia who has worked in secondary and post-secondary literacy education examines the ways that comics depict life in the region. Particular attention is given to the exploration of the paranormal found in the work of Brian Level, and Level serves as a first-hand voice in this researched work. Additionally, the author explores comics that focus the Appalachian region in terms of masculinity, roles of women, and domestic life, alongside other social norms. In sum, the author wishes to push back on limited and problematic visions of the region, and to comment on the ways in which Appalachian life is rich, diverse, and profligate with literacy practices. The strength of female characters, mysticism in the region, and dialectical distinctions all emerge as patterns from the author's reading across visual literature, and the beauty of the region finds representation as well as juxtaposition with imagery in counterpoint through comics work.

Keywords: *comics, literacy, genre studies, Appalachia*

Introduction

When it comes to Appalachian life and culture, a number of problematic views persist, as do a number of counternarratives in various media. Perhaps one of the first images that might come to mind when thinking about this region is the reality television show approach, showcasing life in a mobile home, frequent sips of Mountain Dew, and questionable relationships and decisions among adults in the community. Or perhaps the image that comes to mind is the comedic crooning of George Clooney and fellow actors in the film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Still yet, the book and film *Deliverance* might be the impression that some people have when they hear the term “Appalachia,” a sordid tale of sexuality, incest, and violence. When it comes to Appalachian literature, *The Floatplane Project* defines this genre or mode of literature as, “The easiest way to define it is to say that Appalachian literature is a wide and diverse field encompassing many historical periods, ethnicities of people, and generations of traditions” (n.p.), while noting that this definition is not all-inclusive of what this term might be used to designate.

Rather than add onto and reify these limited views of what I would contend is not a singular culture, but an assemblage of multiple cultures that occur in a particular geographic area, I lean toward descriptions of the strengths, abilities, and vital literacy practices found in work that can be termed rural or Appalachian. I am also drawn to stories that present narratives that stretch beyond these viewpoints, and which do not present the region as one from which to escape. My positionality as a life-long resident of Appalachia, so far spending time in West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, as well as my role as an assistant professor of literacy education in an Appalachian community, no doubt informs my perspective. I was also a middle school teacher in

an Appalachian community for almost a decade, and still continue to discover narratives in popular culture that operate within the limited boundaries of assumptions about the region, as well as depictions that serve to foster conversation beyond these myopic visions.

In this article, I examine the ways in which life and literacy practices are explored in enriching ways in graphic novels and comics that feature elements of rural and Appalachian communities. I have found that authors and artists sometimes take assumptions and reposition them in new ways through comics narratives. I mention comics as a go-to term to describe the medium as a particular kind of text with a specific set of grammatical principles (McCloud, 1993), even though the term “comics” is sometimes used to refer to shorter serial works, while “graphic novels” is used as a term of privilege to denote a longer/condensed/collected comics text (Baetens, 2011). In each textual section, I present an interviewed account of initial reading response from one of two readers/viewers of the text who also identify as long-time residents of the region.

Framing the Problem, Question, and Place

Hayes (2017) noted, “The correlation of Appalachia with ignorance and illiteracy, rather than linguistic or cultural difference, has even made appearances among scholars of English and literacy studies, fields that are notable for their advocacy of multicultural inclusiveness” (p. 72). Hayes (2017) went on to recount some of the ways in which readers, writers, and makers within the Appalachian region have worked in print to debunk the myth of illiteracy as a prevalent feature of Appalachia, including the creation of the magazine, *Foxfire*.

Donehower (2003) and Catte (2018) have both commented on the limited ways that Appalachian culture has been represented in media in spite of the rich and varied literacy practices in the region, and Purcell-Gates (1997) has documented the ways in which families encounter boundaries between communities and schools and negotiate limited conceptualizations of literacy. These researchers and others like them have described the ideologies and practices of Appalachian communities not as singular or limited depictions, but as rich and varied spaces occurring in a particular geography, complete with traditions, histories, and variations in spoken, written, and composed language(s). Part of this work involves the role of music, while other examples focus on dialectical distinctions. Clark (2019) noted the range of textual work that residents of Appalachia engage in, including “recording prayers, travels, key life events” and the prominent role of the family Bible as a central text (n.p.).

As researcher and resident, I seek to align myself with this counternarrative and push back on the limited framing of rural life and the Appalachian region. Such examination of comics has been employed in terms of rural life, but with attention to regions outside of the United States (Stenchly et al., 2019; Strömberg, 2016). In terms of Appalachia-specific considerations, very little has been published on this topic in relation to comics in recent years (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010; Relham, 1980).

In addition to my geographical affiliation, I am an avid comics reader and literacy advocate.

Methods

In order to accomplish this work, I first sought a range of comics that have been published and that depict life within or adjacent to Appalachia. I also looked for recent titles to add relevancy to the conversation and to serve a contemporary role in commenting on relatively current depictions. Considering these texts, I first read through them both to vet them as fruitful for conversation

and to assure their appropriateness for inclusion. I then engaged in a careful rereading, using multimodal content analysis (Serafini, 2022) to examine the ways that rural life is depicted. Comics are uniquely connected to this method as multimodal texts, working beyond one way of conveying meaning. In alignment with the method, I began an “area of interest,” developed an initial guiding research question, and located materials for analysis. This approach has allowed me to account for the grammar of comics (McCloud, 1993; Monnin, 2013), and has also allowed me to comment on the textual nature of these works, in terms of images, words, and overall design elements.

Additional responses from readers/viewers were conducted in two separate interviews with long-time residents of the region. Comments were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then checked with participants. This stage of the process allowed for first-hand experiences and accounts, ideally gathered in a qualitative interview setting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and included perspectives beyond my own.

Mysticism and the Appalachian Gothic in *Silk Hills*

Appalachia is a region that is steeped in mythic ideas and stories, including stories of the supernatural (Roberts, 2019). The Southern Gothic tradition, which I here reframe as Appalachian Gothic, has been a literary feature since the early 19th century (Bjerre, 2017). Bjerre (2017) further notes the genre includes “the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation” (n.p.). Many, if not all, of these elements are present in the graphic novel, *Silk Hills* (Level, Ferrier, Sherron, & Crank!, 2022). Supernatural elements and horror are, once more, woven in from the design and presentation of the cover of the book, with a pair of eyes open wide in fearful expression within the central axis of the cover. These eyes appear to belong to a character or creature whose exterior is devoid of skin, with muscle and sinew showing, and these symmetrical facial features are presented within the design of a winged butterfly, indicated by tufted wings and dark, oblong spots depicted diagonally at the top of each wing. A streak of butterfly silhouettes runs down the page in a central diagonal, shaded dark blue, and the title of the book appears in large typography in a ghostly bluish-white, with a spotted blue background. The effect of the cover is ethereal and haunting.

The title page, featuring the names and roles of the creative team, functions as a visual welcome to the reader/viewer, with a wooden road sign rising from tufts of grass or weeds. The message “Welcome to SILK HILLS” appears on the sign and the background of the image is a mingling of black and white, suggesting trees and other flora, as well as more butterflies or moths. The already-present motif of the butterfly or moth, for a resident of the Appalachian region, brings to mind the moth man legends of West Virginia (Clarke, 2022). Moth-like creatures are one of the malevolent forces in the graphic novel, and link back to this sense of body horror evoked by the figure presented on the book’s cover.

As the reader/viewer encounters the rural world of the book, the first page is rendered in five panels, vertically arranged, and increasingly thinner in size. The brownish-yellow and black coloration of the page’s settings contrast with the white-wooded setting in Panel A, as well as the pale character who is introduced in Panels B through E. The figure is depicted in detail as perspiring, mostly naked except for undershorts, and fearful. A sound in Panel C (“Klnk knk,” p. 7) indicates a presence out of frame, and the figure rises from a seated position, turns, and casts attention toward the source of noise. In response, Panel D depicts the characters as seated once more, intently scribbling on a page. The two lines of dialogue that occur on the page are: “D-Dad...” (Panel

B, p. 7), indicating the halted locution of the character, and "...H-Help" (Panel E, p. 7), completing the sentence. The last line of dialogue is spoken from the character out of frame as the reader/viewer encounters an image of the floorboards and the character's bare feet in a position that would appear to indicate restlessness, nervousness, or tension, with the big toe of the right foot overlapping the left big toe.

Once indicated a blur between the real and imagined, a feature of the Southern Gothic genre, the next page features a thin panel increasing in size and then decreasing once more, again arranged in a similar, vertical design of five-panel structure. The color scheme is the same, and the reader/viewer encounters the character depicted from slightly above and to the left. In Panel A, the character extends his arm and open hand, palm down and fingers outstretched, in wonder, eyes wide with a tremulous curiosity, while floor boards that appear to be broken provide a border on the left and right in Panel B. The reader/viewer is behind the character in Panel B, seeing what he sees, with his back to us, his arm outreached, and a central swirl of brownish-yellow, indicated the source of the noise (again, rendered as "Klnk Knk," p. 8). In a succession of images, the reader is presented with a chained arm wrapped in bandages reaching out from the portal (Panel C); a dangling bandaged figure emerging, fully wrapped as in a cocoon (Panel D); and a wide shot finishing the page, both the character and wrapped figure face to face, broken floor boards forming the background, as the wrapped figure saying, "Abel" (p. 8).

Here, within the first two pages and ten panels of the book, I trace the elements of Southern Gothic as outlined by Bjerre (2017) and seek initial alignment with the genre (Table 1).

Table 1: *Elements of Southern Gothic*

Element of Design/Genre from Bjerre (2017)	Presence in the Graphic Novel Text
"the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses" (n.p.)	While presented as a realized depiction on these pages, the first panels in the text demonstrate an irrational sensibility, with the disappearance of traditional boundaries of physical space blending with metaphysical (re)presentation in the swirling configuration presented in the text and the breaking up the floor boards into a shattered border, perhaps indicating a break in reality. The reader's viewpoint over the shoulders of the character perhaps indicate an entrance into the character's mind/perspective, and the reality of the images presented therein cannot be verified.
"grotesque characters" (n.p.)	Grotesque characters are (re)presented in three ways at the outset of the story and each character that is present is rendered in a grotesque manner, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The figure who decorates the book's cover, with muscle and sinew showing.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The character who is (re)presented as alone, emaciated, and mostly nude in the first panels. - The supernatural figure, wrapped in bandages and hanging upside down, who enters the last panels in this section of the text.
<p>“dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation” (n.p.)</p>	<p>While humor has not yet (re)presented, alienation is evident in the solitary and secluded nature of the setting in the first panel on the first page; this alienation is then felt once more when the reader encounters the character, existing alone and communicating only through letters, in the panels that follow.</p>

It is worth noting, once more, that the creators of this graphic novel accomplished each of these elements at the outset of the story. As the narrative unfolds, more astral elements and body horror are included that further position the book within this mode of Appalachian Gothic storytelling. Reader Two responded to the book and noted, “I grew up with ghost stories in West Virginia. Those were some of my favorite shows, you know, growing up. I remember book orders at school, which was one of the only ways we could get a lot of books, and I would dig into those, kind of, supernatural stories. This book took me back there, and it reminded me a lot of the legends and stories I would hear about places I grew up near” (personal communication, August 2022).

The sense of mysticism, mystery, and even horror are alive and well in stories like this one, and the continued unfolding of legend-focused storytelling is a literacy practice that has made its way to the comics field.

Considering the Role of Women in *Appalachian Assassin*

In *Appalachian Assassin*, Petty (2020) et al. tell the story of a former soldier, wounded and left for dead, who returns to Appalachia and engages in training a young woman – albeit, in problematic ways. The woman, a Tennessean who has escaped an abusive relationship, begins to break the stereotypes of the female victim/domestic worker/at-home figure. The book’s cover features the tagline: “Silly boys...Military Black Ops are for GIRLS!” (n.p.), demonstrating the intent of repositioning gender roles from the beginning. At its best, the narrative shows a woman who emerges as strong and victorious. That journey is yet one of troubled representation.

Rezek (2010) has examined the dynamics of gender roles in Appalachia, specifically in West Virginia, and presented a study based on the lived experiences of eight young Appalachian women, first identified as mothers. Each woman in the study became a mother before the age of 18. Rezek (2010) examined the amount of support the women experienced, the notion of a “kin network” (p. 134). In *Appalachian Assassin*, the first image we encounter is on the cover, once more, with the young female character sitting between two male-presenting characters, holding an assault rifle aloft. A photographic image is the next (re)presentation of a female character, leaning against a pickup truck and holding a similar rifle aloft. The first page/splash page features a full-grown woman in embryonic depiction, surrounding by a pink circle, naked, and curled in the fetal position. A green border decorates this image with a heart monitor banner at the bottom of the

page. This image immediately brings to mind the centrality of motherhood in the woman's role in Appalachian culture and promises to reposition/rework the idea of birth and rebirth.

The contrast of the adult woman, not infantilized in the embryonic position but fully in adulthood, aligns with similar contrasts on the page. A quote from Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* (2007, reprinted) hovered in centered position above the topic of the image, and the quote speaks of the role of simulation in terms of order, fear, and weakness. Notably, the role of the woman in Appalachia in a traditional framing might be seen as one who keeps domestic order, one who exists in the shadow of a male figure, and one who represents an uncertain balance of strength and fortitude, as well as a Protestant-influenced focus on submission and weakness.

Petty et al. (2020) make clear the intention to reorder and reposition this limiting configuration from the cover, end pages, and initial image/quote – yet fails to do so in particularly striking ways. A floating line of dialogue that hovers above the lifeline image shares the name of the female main character (Jo Betty), with the message, “Come back, Jo Betty. Ya got work to do. It ain't ya time yet” (Petty et al, 2020, p. 6). This image, then, might be considered a kind of rebirth for both the female character and a hint of a similar, juxtaposed experience for Jesse, the main male character. Page two features three slender panels of darkness with floating dialogue on the first tier. The absence of images serves to illustrate the darkness, the experience of unconsciousness/borders of consciousness experienced by Jo, and the darkness continues through the first panel of tier two on page two before an illustrated panel depicts Jesse, not Jo, from a distance, wounded, followed by a close-up of his face.

The first reader/viewer's first impression of Appalachia is demonstrated through an inset narrative box, locating the story in Hancock County, Tennessee, with Jesse in the foreground and the depiction of a bar setting in the background. In four successive panels that are told in vertical arrangement on the right side of the page, Jesse encounters local residents and, from top to bottom, a conflict quickly escalates among the male characters in the setting, emerging from a conversation about manhood, again speaking to gender roles. In the exchange of dialogue, one male character comments on the order that Jo has placed: “Diet soda? What kinda **man** orders diet soda?” (Petty et al., 2020, p. 10). The author/creators of the book draw attention with additional weight to the word “man,” while a second character says, “Ah don't think he's a man at all!” (p. 10).

This exchange calls into question in direct fashion the “manhood,” or masculine gender role of the main character, based on the decision to order a beverage that is denoted as weaker in the scene. The dialogue contains facets of Appalachian dialect (“kinda;” “Ah”). When the reader/viewer encounters Jo, she is presented as a destitute solitary figure trudging through snow, and a narrative inset box informs the reader this is also taking place in Tennessee. At this point, we are well into the narrative and our hint of who Jo is or will become has only been relayed through the initial fetal image and panels of darkness. Her position in these panels and clearly one of victimization as evidenced by her solitude (Panel A) and weariness (Panel C). When a school bus speeds by, a wave of dirty slush strikes her in the face, with a final inset panel (Panel E) demonstrating a further sense of pain and weariness.

Jo is next seen entering a classroom. While other children have sped by on the bus, it is clear that she is an outsider, walking in the snow. The first panel presenting Jo at school features dialogue from a teacher who is unseen and remains so until the bottom of the page in the last panel. The reader/viewer is informed that Jo is a frequently tardy student through this exchange, and there is a parallelism that occurs on the page as another student, a male-presenting character, hurls a stick pin-laden wad of paper of Jo, striking her in the neck, resulting in a “*nasty* puncture” (Petty et al., 2020, p. 15). Images of homelife, then, do little to present Jo as a strong character, and depict

the male figure in the home as an abusive character. The father figure notes that Jo is an unwanted character in the home and the narrative directly hints at a series of incestuous abuses that have taken place in the home, with the indication that this is a normal feature of life for Jo.

While these initial (re)presentations of Jo do little to reposition her as a character of agency, this dynamic works different by the end of the book. The beginning of this change is sparked when Jesse meets Jo. In what could have been an affirming partnership, their relationship instead is (re)presented as one in which he essentially purchases her from her father. Jo calls Jesse “sir,” the two have a strange relationship that is a blend of submission and romance. The aesthetic of the character and storyline again shifts to a militaristic/agentive tone, mirroring the initial panels (re)presenting Jesse’s experience by the time the reader/viewer encounters act three.

Jo’s affiliation with Jesse eventually becomes a passing on/embracing of gender roles beyond those assigned to problematic and limiting depictions of Jo as a victim/sexualized character, and yet does so by drawing upon those qualities as an aspect of her training (for example, when Jo fails to best a group of men in combat, she is offered up as a sexual object for the men). Act two of the book, in particular, features this movement from object/victim to character with a growing yet limited agency in an apprenticeship kind of format and leads into further working in this manner in act three. Act three also begins with dialogue that includes the notion a reconfiguring of domestic roles for men and women (the narrative does not address roles for members of the region who identify as nonbinary), while also reinforcing gender dynamics as the speaker informs Jesse that he should not share his thoughts about sharing domestic duties, as Jo will hear him.

By the time the end of the book arrives, Jo has transformed to a more independent figure, and yet her newfound role has come at a cost as an extension of abuse. The text makes attempts at becoming more, and yet fails to do so in a number of ways, including the hint of expanding roles without appropriate follow-through, the continued sexualization of the main female character, and the continued (re)presentation of the male as a dominant character who passes agency onto the female in a bizarre and sexualized apprenticeship.

Reader One responded to this text and noted, “As a woman who comes from this area, I first want to say that I appreciate what the comic tried to do. There were moments where I saw that this book could be more, but then I saw where the writers went with it. I liked where the character eventually got to, but there’s too much in the early part and the journey that needs to be reworked” (personal communication, August 2022).

Affiliation, Conflict, and Political Identities in *Warlords of Appalachia*

Of final consideration, the four-issue series, *Warlords of Appalachia* (Johnson et al., 2017) presents a stark look at the region as an isolated space and one in which characters stand up in self-reliant opposition to dynamics of despotism. In constructing the book, Johnson noted in a 2016 interview, “My research took me from the Civil War to the Old West to Robert Heinlein to Appalachian Studies college textbooks to CNN to church hymnals” (n.p.), and noted that he and the rest of the creative team behind the book had done a lot of work focused on world building, including the creation of a group called the Waterborn, intended as a reference to Baptist denominations, as well as dialectical and colloquial distinctions in the dialogue.

The opening pages of the book depict a setting in Kentucky with an inset panel showcasing a radio show host name (“Oren Roth is...,” p. 3), and the all capital words “ON THE AIR,” with dialogue stemming from outside the panel: “Who do you trust, America?” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 3). The presence of the word “trust” immediately evokes as sense of outsider status, and the

dynamic of trust and distrust, as well as independence and isolationism that is sometimes associated with Appalachian culture (Coyne et al., 2006; Lewis & Billings, 1997) in both economic and health-related factors. Providing a counterpoint, Gamson suggested that the emergence of celebrity culture and popular culture as a nationwide reality and social practice presents contemporary residents with a restructured approach, where such barriers and sense of isolationism have been broken down or dispelled (Hoopes & Heverin, 2010). Previous work I have done (DeHart, 2019) has examined the dynamics of filmic and digital work in Appalachian school settings, and educators in this study indicated similar results of digital and cultural connections fostered through multimodal texts. Adams (2015) has spoken of similar trends in connections made possible in Appalachian regions by digital connections.

A series of diagonally stacked narrative boxes on the first page of *Warlords of Appalachia* provide the background for the story, which takes place in an alternative future in the midst of a second Civil War. Religious extremism is noted as a central element of this new Civil War (Johnson et al., issue 1, 2017), and the United States have now been retitled “Affiliated States of America” (p. 3). Oren Roth then comments in a narrative box near the final panel of the page that residents of the region are “better off than they’ve even been,” illustrating the notion of flourishing in a resilient ability to stand on one’s own (Johnson et al., 2017, issue 1, p. 3). The background image on this first page, which stands behind three floating panels and the narrative boxes, shows a mountain-bounded area with dilapidated structures, including a gas station, and a skull resting in a crevice behind a roll of barbed wire.

Reader Two noted, “I immediately thought of a coal town when I saw this. When you’ve been in the places I’ve been in, you know what a coal town looks like, and how it feels abandoned by everything and everybody” (personal communication, August 2022). Linking with this takeaway, Johnson (2016) stated, “The story starts in Red Rock, a town that was built on coal mining, but where the coal has long since dried up. Even in real life, these towns can look pretty impoverished, and in *Warlords*, a war has also been fought here” (n.p.).

This stark image is juxtaposed with the beauty that is found in the Appalachian region as the vantage is pulled back to a view of the town from the mountains above, with more foggy mountains in the background. Providing another element of juxtaposition with this beauty, the pattern of diagonally arranged narrative boxes continues on this page in Panel A, with dialogue that notes that residents of Kentucky have now been considered terrorists and that residents continue to be seen by some as “Inbred, toothless illiterates who make drugs in the same barrels they bathe in” (Johnson et al., 2017, issue 1, p. 4), with further commentary about the role of religion in the area and the curious linking of guns with this sensibility. Page five begins with Roth’s continued commentary: “So *don’t listen* to the media that paints a picture of Kentucky as the poor, downtrodden, righteous victim” (Johnson et al., issue 1, 2017), again reconfiguring the narrative of poverty and victimization that sometimes is applied to the region. From this peaceful and idyllic scene, the tension present in the dialogue escalates into militaristic conflict.

Throughout the narrative, the main character, Kade Mercer, survives and exists as a kind of messiah figure. Elements of religion are woven into the commentary that surrounds this character, and much of the story acts as a kind of action-oriented plot in which the identity of the region is engaged with a struggle with outside forces. Catte (2018) has commented on the political diversity of the Appalachian region, and the story of *Warlords of Appalachia* seems to take the view of residents of this region as zealots as one within a counternarrative in which characters exist in opposition to zealotry. The final image of the leader of this despotic landscape, the President, includes the dialogue: “Only I can fix our divided nation,” linking to similar statements from former

President Donald Trump. This sense of leader and solitary figure/savior is juxtaposed to Kade's affiliation with a network of individuals, a grassroots group of rebels who are seeking agency for the region. The President's dialogue is presented above a notepad on which he has scribbled words like "Kentucky," "Mercer," and "Die" (Johnson et al. 2017, issue 4, page 24). In terms of the political message, Johnson noted, "I think any artist has an obligation to create work that matters to them, especially when that means dealing with current events...I just want to tell stories that I've poured my blood into, and make that connection with the reader" (2016, n.p.).

There is a dynamic of independence and, once more, isolation that is sometimes tied to the Appalachian region; yet, this sense is presented as an affiliation with a leader who is in opposition to members of the region, while kinship and community are more closely aligned with the presentation of Kade and his network of allies. This (re)presentation calls into question assumptions about the region as one that is fiercely independent for the sheer sake of independence, rather than as an element of questioning what it means to be a member of community. By creating the story as he has, Johnson allows for a narrative that engages a genre-related sensibility with appeal for readers/viewers who enjoy action-oriented stories, and yet has provided a text that can invite further discussion about the values of independence, community, freedom, and responsibility.

Conclusions and Linking Themes

In each of these stories, Appalachia has been presented within a dynamic of one kind or another. The creators of these comics and graphic novels acknowledge the stereotypes of the region in a variety of ways – either by presenting as a cycle of experiences from characters, elements of regional mythology, or as despotic messaging shared in contrast to the realities of the region. Each creator then attempts to push back or expand on this set of assumptions through narrative exploration and multimodal presentation.

In *Silk Hills*, the mythology and isolation of rural life is drawn upon and celebrated for narrative effect in a contemporary story. In *Appalachian Assassin*, the central female character promises to embryonically transform from the traditional and stereotypical female victim/mother figure/object of sexuality to a character with greater agency. Some of this agency is eventually accomplished, but at a narrative cost that is too steep, and in ways which further sexualize and objectify the female character. There is work yet to do in comics to more widely and thoughtfully (re)present the roles that women and nonbinary folx play in Appalachian culture. Finally, in *Warlords of Appalachia*, the questions of isolation and individualism are contrasted with a national despot who frames himself as a solitary savior.

I now arrive at the question of what makes a story "Appalachian," and what qualifies a story as a marker of thoughtful reflection. While a range of features might be included, I have chosen three which serve as links to the texts that have been part of this discussion. Reader One noted, "There's the place, the setting, but there is also a feeling of the place that is harder to pin down" (personal communication, August 2022). This feeling that the reader describes might be summed up through an examination of characteristics that have been shared by researchers in a variety of areas of interest in the region. Namely:

1. A sense of spirituality or mysticism. While not always the case and while not always even a positive experience, a sense of spirituality or questions of faith mark experiences in the region, from the roles of women (Burkhardt, 1993) to comics-based memoirs of life growing up in the region (Massie, 2019). This sense of the mystic is present in *Silk*

Hills, albeit in frightening ways, while Johnson explored Appalachian culture's inclusion of religion and reworked it for a dystopian context. To maintain a sense of quality within Appalachian literature, the graphic novel works as an example of a text that does not draw upon this spirituality or mysticism as a function of ignorance or fear, but as a working component of the story.

2. A style of literature that “preserves and promotes traditions, vernacular speech patterns, folklore” (Clark, 2019, p. 1). The dialectical distinctions of the region make their way into dialogue, particularly noted in *Appalachian Assassin* and *Warlords of Appalachia*. The notion of tradition is explored in the dynamic of fealty and independence in *Warlords*, as well as the (re)presentation of features like coal towns in this text. Work that captures tradition within the Appalachian region, particularly in comics, uses words and images in a manner that depicts rather than criticizes modes of discourse, including spoken and written language, as well as literacy engagements and depictions of community practices.
3. Women as strong and central characters. Scholars have noted for some time that the depiction of women in Appalachian stories can be framed from a strengths-based and asset-based perspective (Ganim, 1986; Hanlon, 2000; Helton & Keller, 2010). While *Appalachian Assassin* bears the markers of making this comics-narrative argument, the (re)presentation of women in comics is historically problematic (O'Brien, 2014). Further work can be done to position this movement in roles in Appalachian comics.

Accounts of the Appalachian region are varied in terms of literacy practices, and this variance can be seen in the structure that comics narratives linked to the region take on. Let us consider yet more stories to be told, and the critical need to move beyond deficit narratives for Appalachia, comics, and beyond.

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