

***Whistlin' and Crowin'*
Women of Appalachia:
Literacy Practices Since College
by Jill Parrott**

Katherine Kelleher Sohn
(Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006)
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“Whistlin’ women and crowin’ hens, always come to no good ends” is the proverb from which Katherine Kelleher Sohn takes the title of her recent publication (9). This adage serves Sohn’s purpose well because it lays the foundation for her main ideological viewpoint: literacy as a means to finding voice and self. She defines literacy as “the use of symbol systems in our culture, which [includes] traditionally understood reading and writing as well as literacy in context: grocery lists, recipes, catalogs, and so on” (16). She maintains this definition throughout her text, focusing on the various ways that Appalachian women communicate and analyzing their opinions about literacy after receiving their undergraduate degrees. In this way, *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia* presents a germane viewpoint for literacy studies to contemplate: how Appalachian women define literacy and its usefulness in their everyday lives. Sohn’s objective is to contribute to “other literacy studies that illustrate specific uses of literacy in many contexts and for many purposes” by focusing on Appalachian women who, she says, are “a population not often written about in composition literature” (4). Therefore, literacy studies must take note of *Whistlin’ and Crowin’* because of the study’s distinctive focus on the underrepresented group of Appalachian women and its impetus to further discussions about connections between women, multiculturalism, and composition as they affect and are affected by literacy.

Based on her dissertation, Sohn’s *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia* is an in-depth, qualitative study of several women who received their bachelor’s degrees from a small liberal-arts college (i.e. Preston College) in Eastern Kentucky. As an instructor of composition at this college, Sohn uses her previously established relationships with these students to begin the recruitment process to her study. She chooses the women for participation based on a set of four criteria: 1) “women who were Appalachian-born for two or more generations,” 2) “women who were married or divorced with children,” 3) women she had taught after receiving her Master’s

degree from North Arizona University, and 4) women who had graduated with their bachelor's degrees (10). Narrowing an original list of thirty-four women down to a final three—Lucy, Jean, and Sarah—Sohn provides the reader with a glimpse into how the lives of these women have been affected by their college experiences and how they use literacy on a day-to-day basis in both their professional and personal lives. Sohn collects her data by personal interviews with the participants, observations of the participants, and interviews with the participants' families. She emphasizes the participants' families and home lives along with their professional lives because of their desires to see their children go to college as well. They see themselves as models for their children and were motivated to finish their degrees for their children and grandchildren. Further, Sohn sees these familial relationships as important because these women did not seek education to escape from their circumstances as some might suggest, but rather "[took] their new literacy and [fit] it to their practical purposes and [remain] in the place they call home" (168).

Sohn situates herself firmly in the tradition of composition instructors as the arbiters of individuality and expressivism. She establishes herself in expressivist pedagogical theory by emphasizing the voices and senses of self that the participants have gained from their literacy practices within and outside of the college walls and by emphasizing their personal narratives as a research methodology. In her introductions to the women, she parallels them individually to different kinds of mountain flowers, highlighting their uniqueness alongside their collective resolve. She says in her conclusion, "The sense of self can be used to bridge the gap from personal to academic writing and eventually from there to workplace literacy, but beginning with the personal is a good first step, especially for nontraditional women" (155). Sohn also emphasizes the women as feminist figures: they are "feminist in the sense of having more opportunities and choices, which their college literacy gave them" (159). She stresses that these women did not gain literacy only when coming to college, but that they gained power as they gained literacy in different discourses through their educational experiences (155). Literacy studies is enhanced by Sohn's look at the literacy practices and attitudes of this very specific population in American culture; yet, her research has the potential to affect women's studies, Appalachian studies, multiculturalism, composition theory, and other disciplines because her questions about how social or physical isolation affects literacy are pertinent to many broad educational issues.

Because of *Whistlin' and Crowin'* potential for broad implications, the engaging and entertaining Foreword by Victor Villanueva situates Sohn decisively in the popular vein of multicultural studies. He calls *Whistlin' and Crowin' Women in Appalachia*, and stories of other individuals similar to those found in this particular research, "a tale of colors within whiteness" (xiii). By relating his own experiences as a Latino man with those of his wife discovering her heritage as a "hillbilly" from Eastern Kentucky, he briefly explores how the stereotyping of Appalachian people parallels racialization in other parts of the country. He emphasizes the scarcity of a dialogue between Appalachian studies and composition studies and commends Sohn for "[breaking] through stereotypes, managing sympathy and the rigors of ethnographic distance simultaneously" (xv). Villanueva's analysis creates a lens through which the reader can view the rest of the text: theorists should see this research both as an extension of the continuing discussion of diversity in composition and literacy studies as well as a fresh viewpoint and angle for consideration. Yet, Villanueva's Foreword—although it introduces a potentially stimulating discussion—proves to create expectations for the book that are not met. Because his multicultural emphasis undertakes an inherently social theoretical outlook, it does not coincide with the author's view of literacy as

a reflection of the individual. Sohn refers briefly in the Introduction to her dislike of redneck jokes and attempts to draw parallels between Appalachian and other marginalized women, but a thorough discussion of the effects of greater societal and cultural pressures on Appalachian women is markedly absent. This absence leaves *Whistlin' and Crowin' Women in Appalachia* disappointing if only because Sohn does not adequately execute the expectations established by Villanueva.

However, because of her emphasis on the individuality of these women, Sohn's methods of analysis and presentation are particularly appropriate. Sohn gives us examples of women whose lives have been affected and who have become more literate in different discourse communities through their experiences as college undergraduates. Because the stories of these women are so real and interesting, this text is a quick and easy read. However, despite the fact that the lives of these women are demonstrative of the undeniable personal effects of education, if the reader desires a great deal of data in the form of facts and statistics, she may find this text lacking. Because of the insular nature of the community from which Sohn's sample was taken, her research may seem to apply only very particularly to non-traditional female students with children who complete their bachelor degrees despite hardships in the Eastern Kentucky mountains. Sohn responds to this potential counterargument, saying: "the literacy stories of the Preston County women resemble those of other underrepresented groups everywhere who, when given the chance, overcome odds and build confidence to lift up themselves and their families" (168). With this statement, she attempts to provide evidence of the parallels between Appalachian women and persons of other various stereotyped groups, but still leaves meaningful exploration of these connections out, possibly because of their contradiction with her foundation of individual expressivism.

Further, Sohn creates a flaw in her research and hinders correlation between multiculturalism and literacy studies by sanitizing the Appalachian dialect and by choosing to present the interviews and experiences of the women as generic narration rather than through their own words. She explains this choice by saying, "I believe that I have represented them accurately and made the reading more cohesive and enjoyable" (21). Appalachian dialect is an integral part of the literacy practices of these women, in both written and spoken forms. By making the narratives "more cohesive and enjoyable," Sohn also presents these women in light of her more academically acceptable language to academics, enabling the fears that the subjects had that they would seem ignorant. The contradiction between presenting the women as literate selves and yet editing this fundamental part of their literate selves weighs heavily on the entirety of the text. Sohn firmly addresses this early in her text by saying that she wants the "audience to hear these women as intelligent beings who had something to whistle and crow about" rather than as comic figures; and, her point is well taken (18). Yet, these changes are significant, such as replacing "she doesn't" for "she don't" or "it wasn't anything" for "it wasn't nothing." Language usage that might be considered incorrect or not cohesive by some people is widely used and accepted in Appalachia, and the alteration of the local dialect of these women actually does them a disservice because it misrepresents the women's literacy, despite Sohn's intentions of expanding discussion of Appalachian women in literacy studies.

Sohn does these women a great service, however, by providing an outlet for their stories; they seem to be hard-working, genuine, honest, loving individuals. Yet, the author rightly makes it clear through her discussion and particularly the texts found in the appendix that these women were not searching for an academically sanctioned channel for literacy. Rather, they had been writing and empowering themselves through their writing all along. The appendix provides examples of the interview

questions along with examples of creative writing, personal essays, and editorials to the local papers written by the women. These works—in Lucy, Jean, and Sarah’s own words—perhaps exemplify Sohn’s interests more than any other part of the text. Sohn concludes that they “learned that they were more intelligent than they thought and that they had something to offer the world beyond the divided roles of spouses, mothers, and workers” (151). This study concentrates less on literacy in an academic setting and more on how literacy functions beyond the academic setting. With or without the eye of the nation or academia upon them, the women are actively asserting themselves through their literacy for the betterment of their families and their communities.