In 1922, Flora McKee was a fourteen-year old girl growing up in Vanceburg, Kentucky. Life in this small tobacco farming community, part of the Central Appalachian region, was difficult, and opportunities for women were especially limited. After Flora finished the eighth grade, she never returned to school. Girls in Lewis County didn’t go to high school; instead, they learned how to take care of a house and live as a farmwife. In 1924, at sixteen, Flora married, and she fled her abusive husband three years later. She went on to remarry and bear four children during the Depression. When times were especially difficult, she farmed with the men, tying a baby to her back as she cut and stripped tobacco—dirty, hot, and tiring work made all the more difficult by the added weight of a child. The only books kept in the home were some cookbooks and the family Bible; there was little money to buy books and little time to read them. Her two oldest sons also left school after the eighth grade; the farm where the family lived was too far from the high school to walk and too remote to be reached by the school bus.

Eventually, two of her sons died, as did her husband of sixty years, George “Honey” Lykins. Six months after Honey’s death, Flora was diagnosed with cancer. She then moved to a city outside of the Appalachian region to be cared for by her daughter and to live with her daughter’s family. This transition was very difficult for Flora, as she missed the hills of home, life on the farm, and, most of all, her independence, but she

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survived for eight more years. Finally, in 1998, at the age of 89, Flora McKee Lykins died, holding the hands of her daughter and her youngest granddaughter as she took her last breath.

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The preceding narrative is the type of story often told about Appalachian people, more generally, and Appalachian women, more specifically. In these stories, Appalachians are usually long-suffering victims of poverty, illiteracy, and violence who survive through a combination of pluck and down-home wisdom—“poverty goddesses,” to use J. W. Williamson’s phrase. These stories are what folklorist Ann K. Ferrell calls “tellable narratives,” public discourses that “reflect common, but often unquestioned, ideas and assumptions” about the topic at hand (128). Tellability is a lens for evaluating which narratives are worth telling and for further assessing who can tell which narratives in what context; it is similar in some ways to Kenneth Burke’s understanding of motive: “What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it” (xv). Ferrell further argues that “the concept of tellability can also help us to understand the interaction between public discourses and individual narratives” of particular subjects (132).1

The narrative I constructed about Flora has tellability, as it reflects common assumptions about, and stereotypes of, Appalachians through its emphasis on Flora’s poverty, lack of education, and limited ownership of books. According to the federal government, Flora’s economic status and education level would have identified her as illiterate at the time of her death, as the then-current census established a combination of poverty and a ninth-grade education level as the criteria for illiteracy. This designation is part of our government’s tellable narrative of literacy, which itself is part of our culture’s tellable literacy narrative, one that defines literacy as the ability to decode and encode text. In public discourse, literacy is an either/or possession: either one has it or one doesn’t.

Yet tellable narratives conceal many other facets of Appalachians’ lives and literacies. Folklorist Amy Shuman writes, “Narratives impose categories on experience, but people sometimes report that their experiences don’t fit the imposed category because the category unfairly judges them” (8), and these experiences make up what Shuman calls untellable narratives. In the earlier version, I omitted the untellable narratives of Flora’s life: the high value she placed on education and her love of reading and writing. She insisted her family make a costly move further down the mountain so the two youngest children could go to high school. She voraciously read the Bible, the newspaper, and “the trashies,” her name for the tabloids she read while sitting in her daughter’s TV room, whispering and cackling with relatives about some celebrity’s latest exploits.
She had a voluminous collection of cookbooks and recipes she had written by hand. She was a frequent letter writer who also wrote in her diary daily. Flora valued education and was very literate, albeit in ways that are untellable in public discourse about Appalachians.

I begin with Flora’s narratives to establish, in the tradition of reflexive ethnography, my own positionality. Flora McKee Lykins was my grandmother. I was the granddaughter who held her hand as she died. She lived with my parents and me the last eight years of her life. It is my family connection to Appalachia that inspires this essay, which examines Appalachian students’ performances of identity via their use of tellable narratives inside and outside two college composition classrooms. During the summer that I participated in and observed these two classes, took notes, conducted surveys, and interviewed students and teachers, I learned how students’ perceptions of audience shaped their own performances of identity and the narratives they deemed tellable. The students’ tellable narratives of Appalachian identity were sometimes limited by public discourses of Appalachianness, yet at other times, the students used untellable narratives as a means of performing a range of Appalachian identities. Debra Journet reminds us that “narratives are complex, mediated, and rhetorical” (20), and the students in my study illustrated this complexity as they skillfully and creatively mediated the rhetorical situations they faced, crafting tellable and untellable narratives of Appalachian identity in response to their audience’s needs.

**Appalachia as Rhetorical Space**

In this essay I will share the narratives and identity performances of six students who agreed to be interviewed as part of my ethnographic case study research at their universities; these students offer a range of narrative performances of Appalachian identity and represent a variety of attitudes about Appalachia. Julie, Katie May, and Schueler were students in a first-year writing course at State University-Sciotoville,² a regional campus of a large state university in Central Appalachia. Roughly 1,800 students attended classes at this campus; fourteen students were enrolled in the course, and twelve participated in my research. Mike, Gladys, and Michelle were enrolled in a literature-based composition course, the third and final course of a required sequence of writing courses, at Riverton University, a state university of about 3,500 students that is also in Central Appalachia.³ ⁴

I began my fieldwork with some familiarity with both universities and their surrounding communities, as several of my extended family members live just miles from Riverton University. I had always intended on disclosing to the students my own status as an Urban Appalachian;² it would have felt dishonest
not to do so, given that my Appalachian identity is an important part of my personal and professional lives, and I agree with Cheri L. Williams when she writes, “Establishing rapport with informants is of paramount importance in the conduct of qualitative inquiry” (43). Our shared cultural heritage was one way I could establish rapport with my participants. But as I introduced myself to both classes on their respective first days, my accent—which carries many markers of Central Appalachian dialect—spoke on this subject before I could. When I asked for their questions, students in both classes immediately asked where I was from, adding such comments as, “You sound like us!” For good or for ill, my voice marked me as someone like them, to some extent. Even if I had not intended on disclosing my background, my voice disclosed it for me.

While I have identified the universities’ locations as Central Appalachia and shared my own identity as an Urban Appalachian, defining where Appalachia is and who Appalachians are is no easy task. As Kim Donehower and I have written, “Issues of Appalachian identity are frequently debated within academic disciplines and Appalachian communities because they point to the rhetorical spaces in which Appalachian identity is composed” (3). Appalachia is, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, an “imagined community,” one created for particular political and social purposes. Appalachian Studies scholar Allen Batteau furthers this argument in *The Invention of Appalachia*, describing Appalachia as “a creature of the urban imagination” and suggesting “the making of Appalachia was a literary and a political invention rather than a geographical discovery” (1).

The creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), commissioned under an act of Congress in 1965, and its attempts to map Appalachia are illustrative of this point. The ARC currently defines Appalachia as “a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi,” but as Kathryn Trauth Taylor has demonstrated, the ARC’s boundaries have shifted over time. Nedra Reynolds has argued that “map-making is a political and interpretative act,” and the ARC map exemplifies what Reynolds calls the “rhetoricality of map-making” (79). A look at ARC’s map of the five subregions of Appalachia reveals boundaries that at times veer from the mountains and seem confusing. According to the ARC, the Central Appalachian region consists of select counties in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, but other groups working in or on behalf of Central Appalachia map the subregion differently. The website of the Central Appalachian Network (CAN), a nonprofit network focused on economic and environmental sustainability, states that it works “in the Central Appalachian states of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.” While these definitions are limited, for practical purposes I will use CAN’s boundaries in this essay.
Yet it must be noted that Appalachians are not a monolithic group of rural people living in the hills and hollers of their respective states. Appalachians may live in large cities, cozy suburbs, small towns, or rural communities in the region, or outside of the region. The ARC’s definition suggests those who move out of the region are no longer Appalachian, but there is more to Appalachian identity than where one lives. Taylor writes that definitions such as the ARC’s “exist as mythical boundaries that don’t accommodate the nuances of self- and regional-identification with Appalachian culture or the region’s vast history of out-migration,” and this is the central problem with attempts to define where Appalachia is and who Appalachians are—questions of individual agency and self-identification, and the terministic screens that accompany these identifications, are ignored in favor of government-sponsored definitions. Jackie Royster
argues that Burke’s concept of terministic screens “suggests that we all live with filters, which screen our experiences so that we envision the world in a particular way” (55). Appalachianness is a cultural identity associated with a particular place, an identity with its own terministic screen. While Appalachian identity is a regional identity, it is also a cultural identity, rooted in the place of the Appalachian Mountains, but not necessarily restricted to this place alone.

**Tellability and Performances of Appalachian Identity**

Appalachian Studies represents a young space of scholarship within composition and rhetoric, one that is still experiencing significant growth. During the mid to late 1990s, Peter Mortensen and Kim Donehower first introduced our field to this research through their rhetorical analyses of representations of Appalachians’ literacy (Mortensen) and qualitative research on Appalachians’ literacy beliefs (Donehower). Since then, a body of research on Appalachian literacies and identities has emerged that builds on this earlier work, including archival (Bryson; Greer; NeCamp; Powell; Shepley) and qualitative literacy research (Snyder; Sohn; Webb-Sunderhaus), as well as literary analysis of fictional representations of literacy (Locklear). This article builds on and extends the work of these scholars through its focus on how students use tellable narratives of Appalachian identity inside and outside English composition classrooms. Some of the previously cited scholars have focused on Appalachians’ performance of identity, but none of these scholars have examined the interplay among tellability, narrative, and identity performance.

This dearth of scholarship is unsurprising, because while the concepts of tellability and tellable narratives are well established in folklore, sociolinguistics, and narrative studies, they are not familiar terms in composition and rhetoric research. Sociolinguist William Labov is thought to have coined the term *tellability*, and he referred to tellable narratives as those that describe “truly dangerous and unusual” events (371). The “weirdness” of a story is what makes it tellable, according to Labov, but over time this understanding of tellability has broadened to include considerations of discourse and audience. Narrative scholars Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck cite the work of Meir Sternberg when they write, “Any narrative is tellable, depending upon the way it is told (i.e., its discourse) and the way it is perceived (by its readers)” (114), and this emphasis on audience has been central in rhetorical understandings of tellability. In *Rhetorical Narratology*, Michael Kearns briefly touches on tellability and audience, arguing that when narratives are shared, “A speaker or a text is actively asserting that a state of affairs is tellable, attempting to create a context that will result in the audience’s active validation of and participation in the display. . . . The
“Keep the Appalachian, Drop the Redneck”

speaker has a purpose: to elicit a particular response in the audience” (15). Thus, speakers must consider their audience when deciding which narratives to tell and must craft their narratives in ways that make them appealing and compelling—that is, tellable.

Tellability complements theories of identity performance, as seen in the words of Judith Butler, who writes in *Gender Trouble* that any particular identity “requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already established” (140). Tellable narratives are one means of “[reenact[ing] and reexperiencing . . . a set of meanings already established,” and through the performance of particular identities—including the use of tellable narratives—one reinforces the standards that govern these performances and narratives. Yet the possibility of resistance is also contained within performance, as Butler further writes in *Undoing Gender* that “through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction” (218). In other words, as ideas of tellability are challenged, the norms of tellability are changed.

The question of tellability is relevant to the composition classroom, or any classroom, since the expectations of teachers and peers play a role in the identities students perform and the narratives they tell. Concerning the use of personal narratives in composition research, Journet writes that “such narratives are, at least in part, conventionalized ways of representing disciplinary knowledge” (13), and here we see the importance of Ferrell’s application of tellability—which had primarily been used in reference to individual, personal narratives—to public discourses, particularly in terms of understanding performances of identity and the interplay between public discourses and individual narratives. Ferrell writes that “the shifting public discourses about tobacco products and the tobacco industry influence talk about tobacco farming, and this interaction helps to determine what is and is not tellable” (128) by individuals. Likewise, for the students I studied, public and classroom discourses of Appalachian identity helped shape which narrative performances of Appalachian identity were and were not tellable.

In this way, the students in my study are reminiscent of those of Zan Meyer Gonçalves, who examined how LGBT students “had learned that composing—either for speaking of writing—is a series of choices, creating rhetorical constructions of themselves in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes and audiences” (2). My research extends Gonçalves’s findings about identity performance and offers the concept of tellability as a frame for understanding students’ rhetorical choices. At times, some of the choices our students make in their speaking and writing—such as quoting the Bible as a scholarly source, relying on stereotypical understandings of their own cultural group, or using
aphorisms and appeals to “common sense”—may seem incomprehensible to us, their instructors. Tellability can help us process how and why students make these choices and the cultural forces they face while doing so, enabling us to come to a deeper understanding of our students and their needs.

Tellable Narratives of Appalachian Identity

For the students I studied, some of the narratives they deemed tellable relied on “conventional ways of representing” Appalachian identity (Journet 13). Folklorist Pat Mullen writes that “the Anglo Appalachian is a complex construction containing both romantic and rational scientific elements; hidden beneath a romantic view is a pathological one” (129), and public discourses of Appalachianness rely on these conceptualizations. Media coverage of Appalachia fixates on the region’s alleged poverty, illiteracy, drug use, and obesity while remarking on its spirit of independence and religiousness. Pop culture depictions are similar, as they veer between venerations of families’ closeness (The Waltons) and incest jokes that depict families as “too close,” such as a quip about a room being decorated like “the reception for an Appalachian incest wedding” on Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt. The History Channel’s Appalachian Outlaws emphasizes Appalachian criminality, featuring moonshiners and ginseng hunters who defend their “turf” with guns; the show is one of many recent reality shows—including Hatfields and McCoy’s White Lightning, Moonshiners, and Smoky Mountain Money—that depict Appalachians as people whose only work is making moonshine or hunting for ginseng. According to popular culture, Appalachia is frightening, filled with mythical creatures featured on the reality show Mountain Monsters and the all-too-real monsters in films like Deliverance and scripted shows such as Justified. Yet other films such as Coal Miner’s Daughter, Nell, and The Hunger Games depict Appalachians as a proud people who love their families and their land, drawing strength from the hills they call home.

These are the narratives of Appalachian identity that circulate in American culture and that inform students’ decisions as to the identity narratives they can—and can’t—tell. Journet writes:

The stories we tell about ourselves, that is, are at least partly stories we have been acculturated to tell. . . . Though we can conform to or rebel against those scripts, we nevertheless construct our stories in some relation—conforming or transgressive—to other stories we have heard or read. (16–17)

In the narratives the students in my study used to perform Appalachian identity, we see how they negotiate these cultural scripts. Though initially students relied on geographic and somewhat stereotypical conceptions of the region, aligning
themselves with tellable narratives of Appalachianness, over time some students moved to more complex identity performances that utilized untellable narratives and revealed more nuanced understandings of Appalachian identity.

Early in my study, the Sciotoville and Riverton students’ views of Appalachian identity were shaped by place—specifically, what Taylor calls the “mythical boundaries” of Appalachia. When I asked students what being Appalachian meant to them, all of them initially focused on geography as a marker of Appalachian identity and insinuated—or outright stated—that “Appalachianness” was not a topic they had thought much about. Initially, the students did not conceive of Appalachianness as an identity that one performed in any recognizable way; one was Appalachian simply because one was from Appalachia, a conceptualization that echoed the Appalachian Regional Commission. Julie, who had recently moved to Sciotoville, explained that she was Appalachian “because I’m from [a neighboring state].” Katie May said that she was Appalachian because she was born and grew up in the county in which Sciotoville is located. Schueler, another Sciotoville student, similarly stated that he was Appalachian because he was from Sciotoville, adding, “I think it’s being from this area, having family from this area. Being a part of it [the area].” Regarding geographic borders, Reynolds writes, “We are so intent on figuring out where the borders lie and who can cross them that we may be neglecting the places constructed by those borders” (6), and the students’ initial narratives illustrate how public discourses of Appalachia as a shaded area on a map shaped tellable understandings of Appalachian identity. The narratives they told did not include much discussion of how Appalachia and Appalachian identity is constructed and performed. Appalachia was simply a function of its borders.

Students who did not at first identify as Appalachian also relied on geography as a marker of identity, though in ways that challenged some tellable narratives of Appalachian identity. Mike, a Riverton student who was born in Colorado and moved to his parents’ hometown in the region when he was six, concluded that he is “not really” Appalachian because he was born somewhere else. While Gladys, a returning adult student at Riverton, initially defined Appalachianness in terms of where one lived, she stated that she wasn’t Appalachian because she had lived outside of the region for twenty-two years, moving away when she was twenty-nine and returning when she was fifty-one. These narratives of Appalachian identity conflict with official discourses such as the ARC’s, confirm Taylor’s point about the nuances of self-identification, and illustrate Reynolds’s contention that in cultural geography, “identities are constructed ‘in place,’ where and how place and identity intersect” (56). These were both tellable and untellable narratives, as they challenged some public discourses (the ARC) while engaging in others (cultural geography).
As these students continued talking and reflecting, they further pushed at the boundaries of what narratives of Appalachian identity are tellable. While Gladys stated she did not identify as Appalachian, she later added,

I was born here. So I am [Appalachian]. But I lived here for 29 years, and I never felt like I belonged here. And then moving away, I realized that I’m not the same as people from Massie County. So yes I am [Appalachian], but I don’t know, even moving back here I feel like I’m still different.

Here Gladys moves among what Reynolds would call perceived, conceived, and representational spaces of Appalachia. Reynolds defines perceived space as “what we see or smell or otherwise register with our senses” (15). The perceived space of Riverton would include the hills and hollers surrounding the university, the river that borders the campus, the sounds of the trains carrying coal and timber from the region, and the smell of fertilizer, animal waste, and chemicals. Conceived space is “the dominant space in a society,” according to Reynolds, the “verbal signs and codes” that shape how a physical space is actually used (15). It is our understanding of the space we occupy. Finally, Reynolds writes that representational spaces “are the lived spaces of inhabitants and users” (15). These are the spaces we use every day. According to Reynolds, “It is not only places and their built-in constraints that determine certain practices, which then become habitual or taken for granted, but also the adjustments and compromises, the shifts and turns in the process of accommodating to a place” (14) that form our understandings of space and place—in other words, our conceived space. As will be discussed in more detail later, Gladys’s comments suggest that while she has lived for many years in the perceived space of Appalachia, her conceived space is very different from that of others in the region.

Similarly, the narrative Schueler told about his Appalachian identity shifted the more we talked and engaged in discussions of conceived space. At first, he attributed his Appalachianness to his location, or perceived space, but eventually his narrative expanded to include his family and their geographic location: “My family, they’re from the hills, too. They came from [a neighboring state] and stuff. My grandmother and grandpa, both my grandparents, were farmers. They grew up on farms. I always went to my grandparents’ [farm]. I was always on the farm.” In a sense, Schueler does claim an Appalachian identity for himself, as he points to being from the area and having family from the area as markers of Appalachian identity—markers that he often noted applied to him. Further, since Schueler himself grew up on a farm in a neighboring county, his construction of “Appalachianness” as a geographical, and especially rural, identity was further reinforced.
But note the emphasis of Schueler’s narrative: his Appalachian identity comes not from his own experiences growing up on a farm in the region, but from his extended family’s experiences in another state. His Appalachian identity was rooted outside of himself, many miles away at his grandparents’ farm. It is as if his grandparents’ location is somehow more Appalachian than his own. As he continued, he drew on what Journet calls “tropes of authenticity” (14), or conventional markers of Appalachianness, when discussing his relatives’ perceived and conceived space:

**Schueler:** “Everything just stems from down deep in [the neighboring state]. I have a lot of [long pause, then whispers] shiners, people who make moonshine, in my family. [Return to normal volume] People who play the fiddle, bluegrass. So I kind of grew up with that whole. . . [pause]

**Sara:** “My grandpa ran moonshine, too. [Laughter from both Schueler and Sara] During Prohibition, well, the Depression really, but that was still during Prohibition down there. So I know a little of what you’re talking about.”

**Schueler:** “Yeah, I grew up like that.”

During this part of our interview, Schueler’s idea of Appalachian identity still begins in perceived and conceived space, as indicated by his comment that “everything just stems from down deep” in the state where his parents grew up and where he still has many relatives. But as our conversation evolved, so, too, did Schueler’s narrative performance. Schueler whispered and turned bright red as he confided that his family made moonshine, and his seeming embarrassment about this activity prompted me to reveal my own family history of moonshining. I did so because I could see and feel Schueler’s discomfort in that moment, and as a fellow Appalachian who has felt the shame of exemplifying stereotypes about Appalachians and moonshine, I wanted him to know I shared that history and would not judge his family or him. In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Thomas Newkirk asks, “What kind of self are we inviting students to become? What kinds of selves do we subtly dismiss?” (6), and in this moment, I unwittingly invited Schueler to tell a different kind of narrative about Appalachian identity, one that may have been untellable to another audience.

While Schueler began his narrative by distancing himself from an Appalachian identity and speaking in the third person, he responded to the inadvertent invitation of my disclosure by discussing “his” Appalachian identity in more detail, switching to the first person as seen below:

I’ve always considered myself Appalachian, but not to the extent that I [short pause] tell people or brag about it. I’m not really ashamed of it. It’s just never really played that big a role for me. I just never thought it would be something to start a conversation with. But I still consider myself Appalachian. [. . .] I think it depends
more on the mindset. Like if someone moved away from a country to another place. If they gave up everything they had, their old ways, the old country, for the new, they’re trying to become part of the new. But if they moved away and kept their old traditions, they’d still be whatever they were before. So I think it would depend if I moved away. I’d still have the mindset of an Appalachian. I’d still have my views.

Thus, during this interview Schueler’s narrative of Appalachian identity begins with perceived space (i.e., location), but he expands his narrative to discuss his conceived space of Appalachia, including economic and cultural markers such as trading in bootleg alcohol and performing music identified with the region. He eventually concludes that part of Appalachian identity involves the development of a particular mindset and traditions. In Schueler’s narrative of Appalachian identity, being Appalachian is not simply a matter of where one is born, but a matter of engaging in certain behaviors and beliefs that are associated with the region. As long as one participates in the conceived space of Appalachia, according to Schueler, perceived space does not matter—a conclusion that conflicts with public discourses of Appalachianness, such as the ARC’s. Schueler’s eagerness to craft narratives that appealed to his understood audience—an understanding that shifted during our interview, given my disclosure—further illustrates Newkirk’s contention that “every act of self-presentation involves the withholding of information that might undermine the idealized impression the performer wants to convey” (3). What Newkirk describes as being withheld are untellable narratives, which may become tellable—as Schueler’s moonshining narrative did—depending on the audience and the performer’s purpose.

The most notable example of shifting tellability in identity performance came when I read a short narrative by Julie, who had resumed her college education after sending her son to kindergarten. During the first class at Sciotoville, the professor asked the students to write in class a personal narrative that illustrated a time when they had defied social conventions, a topic that was addressed in the first set of readings. This assignment would not be graded, because the professor “simply wanted to get a sense of who you are as writers.” When the papers were returned, Julie’s narrative was singled out for praise, and she flushed with pleasure as her professor stated, “Now, this was an incredible narrative. Just incredible. Sara, you should really take a look at this, because it’s delightful. The imagery and pastoralism were amazing!” Julie then turned away from the professor and toward me, rolling her eyes while also smiling at the enthusiastic endorsement of her work.

What follows is Julie’s narrative, which I have included in its entirety and with Julie’s original language and formatting:
As a child, I was very imaginative and experimental. The town I lived in was in [a neighboring state] and some of societies views were a little different compared to others. There was many different things I enjoyed to do as a child; but only a few of these things were accepted by society. I was very big on nature and my favorite thing was to go in the woods and sing till darkness fell. My parents discouraged this activity for they felt I should participate in more girlish activities like my sister. I informed them that I was like a river for no matter how many dams are built I will keep flowing through the mountains and valley I loved. They felt that being in the woods for many hours was very dangerous and more suited to boys than girls. My friends were mostly boys and they felt that no matter your gender you should be able to experience what life has to offer. I believe that as a child I did not see any dangers in the activities I chose; but now I can see that I could have very easily been killed in the many trails I walked and the streams I crossed. The idea of taking those walks and experiencing the thrills of nature took me to a different world that I was not able to live if I had not accepted in a more boyish fashion, as my parents thought. I feel that I am a more rounded person and I don’t care as much about what society thinks of my actions.

When I interviewed Julie after this particular class, I inquired about her process of composing. She then revealed that she had fabricated and enhanced parts of the narrative: “Yeah, I played in the woods, but I wasn’t running around singing all the time or things like that. Where we lived wasn’t that pretty. We lived in a run-down house. It was near the woods, but things were all torn up from the mines. And my parents didn’t care if I played in the woods or not. So some of it was true, but some of it wasn’t.”

While Julie talked, I was struck by the awareness of audience Julie’s response indicated and asked why she created this particular kind of story. Her response was simple: “Because I thought she [the professor] would like it.” When I asked why she thought the professor would like it, Julie replied, “Well, I know what people think of [her home state]. They think we all live in the mountains, that we’re closer to the earth or whatever, and that we’re kind of backwards. So I kind of played that up by talking about the mountains and the streams and by acting like my parents thought girls couldn’t do certain things.”

In Julie’s “autobiographical” narrative, we see an example of an identity being performed in ways recognized as natural by the discourse community of this classroom and, more specifically, the professor. In other words, it wasn’t Julie’s Appalachian identity that was expressing itself in this narrative; it was her understanding of which narrative of Appalachian identity would be tellable to this audience. Folklorist Mark Workman writes that because “we tend to ignore, even in this Foucauldian ‘age of information,’ just how constructed and compelled the self truly is” (172), we are vulnerable to unquestioningly accepting tellable narratives of identity, particularly those of marginalized communities—or, as
he so memorably puts it, “we are all ultimately dopes governed by hopes of being seduced by tropes” (171). Similarly, Newkirk writes in “The Narrative Roots of the Case Study” that “without some form of resistance, either in the construction of the text or in the act of reading, it is difficult to see how readers can avoid the seductiveness of deeply rooted and deeply satisfying narratives that place us in familiar moral positions” (149). It is the powerful tropes of Julie’s narrative—the lush imagery, the pastoralism, the sense that she is “closer to the earth,” to use her term—that “seduced” her professor. The professor constructed Julie’s narrative in a way that conformed to her understandings of Appalachian identity, understandings which were shaped by the tropes and conceived space of Appalachia embodied in Julie’s narrative.

Yet Julie was not left without agency in this rhetorical situation. Her stance was similar to that of the tobacco farmers in Ferrell’s study, who “both manage[d] stigma and actively respond[ed] to it” (138) through the narratives of tobacco farming they circulated; Julie did not sit passively while her professor received her performance through the cultural lens of tellable narratives of Appalachian identity. Instead, Julie crafted her narrative in order to make it tellable, meeting the expectations of her audience—or at the very least, what she understood those expectations to be—by engaging in strategic essentialism, quite purposefully performing an Appalachian identity via a narrative that she intuited would appeal to her professor and enable her to negotiate successfully this particular literacy event. Much like Gonçalves’s student Vincente, Julie “used particular stories to create an ethos [s]he believed [her] audience would understand” (65); a skilled rhetor, she knew her audience quite well and could perform Appalachian identity through convincing and powerful narratives that called upon public discourses of Appalachian identity.

Tellable narratives that move beyond the perceived space, or geographic understandings, of Appalachia can sometimes trade in the types of stereotypes Julie utilized in her narrative. In his book *Appalachian Values*, Loyal Jones, who helped advance the field of Appalachian studies, identifies ten values as especially important to Appalachians: religion; independence, self-reliance, and pride; neighborliness; familism; personalism; humility and modesty; love of place; patriotism; sense of beauty; and sense of humor. Jones’s work has been used in public discourses of Appalachianness—including those of Appalachians—to construct another tellable, romanticized narrative of Appalachian identity: the rugged, down-to-earth, independent mountaineer who values faith, friends, and family. Given the virulence of the tellable narratives the wider culture circulates about Appalachians—particularly narratives concerning incest, racism, and violence—the instinct of some cultural insiders such as Julie and Jones to engage in strategic essentialism and create their own tellable narratives of Appalachian
exceptionalism is understandable, even though these discourses can be limiting in their own ways.

Some Sciotoville and Riverton students perpetuated the tellable, essentialized narrative of Appalachian identity circulated by Jones and other cultural insiders, drawing on multiple “values” Jones identifies—neighborliness, familism, humility and modesty—to perform an idealized narrative of Appalachianness. Katie May, who was taking summer classes at Sciotoville while home from the large state university she attended, frequently commented on the importance of being “down-to-earth” and of “helping out,” identifying these qualities as particularly Appalachian with such statements as, “We’re all in this together,” “By helping each other we help ourselves and our communities, eventually,” “I feel a responsibility to help others in the class learn,” and “We [Appalachians] are just down-home people.” Similarly, Schueler stated that the “mindset of an Appalachian” includes “Strong ties to the land and family. Very high morality—you look out for your family, you look out for your neighbors. You don’t really put up with crap or crime, because everybody is tied and close-knit.”

Michelle, a Riverton student, voiced similar understandings of Appalachian identity, yet her comments about stereotyping reveal that performing essentialized, tellable narratives is not the only work the students are doing here. She said, “I think we—it may be a stereotype—but we’re more down-to-earth kind of people, which is a good thing. I’d rather be down-to-earth than snooty or stuck-up or whatever. [. . .] So that would be a positive thing. But then again that’s a stereotype, so I don’t know.” While Michelle to some extent relied on essentialized narratives to perform Appalachian identity, she also recognized their limitations. Michelle’s comments also reveal another of the complexities that characterize her narratives of Appalachianness: she had a keen understanding of the tellable narratives that circulate about Appalachians, and she continually tried to emphasize in her comments that these narratives—even those that might seem “positive”—are based on stereotypical thinking. While at first she labeled Appalachians, including herself, as “down-to-earth,” she backpedaled from that statement, noting that it was a stereotype and saying, “So I don’t know.” After this remark, I then performed what Cheri L. Williams calls a member check, during which researchers check their interpretations with their participants (50), and told Michelle that it seemed as if she was reluctant to directly identify herself as an Appalachian. She initially agreed with my interpretation, but her follow-up comment challenged my understanding of her identity performance and the narrative she was trying to tell: “I would say that I live in that area, but I wouldn’t say I was [Appalachian]. I guess maybe me living in the area makes me one, but I wouldn’t take the negative stereotypes, or even some of the positive ones. I’m probably not even some of the positive stereotypes of Appalachian people.”
Michelle’s remarks, particularly her final comments, reveal an awareness of
tellability and the performative nature of identity. Michelle makes a distinction
between labeling an area as Appalachian and labeling a person as Appalachian,
revealing an understanding of perceived and conceived space as she shares her
realization that living where she does would, in the eyes of some, automatically
confer her with an Appalachian identity. However, Michelle refuses to engage
in the tellable narratives of Appalachian identity: “I wouldn’t take the negative
stereotypes, or even some of the positive ones.” If identity is constituted by its
expected expressions, as Butler argues, then Michelle is performing her identity in
a way that does not fit the expected expressions of Appalachianness. She is telling
a narrative that is untellable in public discourses of Appalachian identity.

Michelle was not the only student who challenged tellable narratives.
Gladys also performed her Appalachian identity using narratives that at times
departed from the norms of tellability. Gladys’s definition of Appalachianness
began with one type of tellable narrative of Appalachian identity, one depen-
dent on geography or perceived space. But as the interview continued, Gladys
simultaneously invoked perceived space (identifying as Appalachian, citing her
birth in Riverton) and conceived space (dis-identifying as Appalachian, citing
her values and behaviors) as she told her narrative of Appalachian identity, one
that challenges some tellability norms:

SARA: “Do you feel like an outsider?”

GLADYS: “Yep, always. [pause] That’s why I say yes, I am [Appalachian], because I
was born here. But no, I don’t [identify as Appalachian]. I am different from most
of them.”

SARA: “How do you define that difference? What is it that makes you feel differ-
ent? Because you say you felt that before you ever moved away, so it’s not even just
the moving away. Because I could see where that [moving away] would make you
feel different.”

GLADYS: “That’s really hard to describe. I don’t know. But I have different people
make comments to me that they don’t feel like, I never felt like I belonged here. I
don’t know, it’s just [short pause]. I really can’t describe it. I always felt I was a little
different. I have a sister here, and we are two different personalities. Of course
everybody is, but [short pause] she’s home, she’s very happy being here, in this little
small town. She makes it to [large city in the region] or [a neighboring state] once
every year, and to her that’s the greatest thing in the world. To me, I’d like to go
on the trip to Greece next year with the school. That’s for me; I want to explore
the world. People here are just happy by just driving to Myrtle Beach.”

Although she has difficulty articulating her narrative at times, Gladys’s remarks
reveal some of how she conceives the space of Appalachia—as a place that can
be limiting for people like her, who “want to explore the world.”
Later in the interview, Gladys recounted a conversation she had with her adult son, and in this narrative Gladys again performs a different type of Appalachian identity, one that pushes some boundaries of tellability:

My son was on the Internet, and he said they have a need for all these people in Johannesburg, South Africa. And he said if you have your bachelor’s, they’ll hire you, you can get a job over there making $200,000 a year. And he said, “Mom, would you up and leave when you get your degree and move to South Africa with me?” and I said, “Yes, I’m packing now.” And I asked somebody else that, and they said, “Oh my God, no. There’s no way.” And I said, “Well, you don’t know anything about the world.” That’s why, I don’t know, I just feel different. I just don’t feel like I’m your typical Massie County girl.

At this point I performed another member check, asking Gladys if my impression that “a typical Massie County girl” was a synonym for an Appalachian was correct. She verified the accuracy of my interpretation and added, “I think they’re hilljacks. I do, I think they’re backwoods maybe, they’re happy with their environment, they’re happy, not really expanding. They’re happy just to be here. I guess to me, that’s what it is. They just want to do what their mother did, even though it’s changing some now. They’re just happy in this small, little world. And narrow-minded.”

In this narrative, Gladys shared her desire to leave Appalachia, presenting it as a conceived space full of people who are happy at home and even comfortable in their ignorance. This is in stark contrast to the identity that Gladys performed—a worldly, cosmopolitan woman who had lived in several states and two foreign countries before returning to her hometown. In this identity performance, Gladys shares a narrative of herself as an Appalachian who doesn’t necessarily identify as Appalachian and who doesn’t want to live there—a narrative that is untellable among many Appalachian cultural insiders. Jones writes, “Sense of place is one of the unifying values of mountain people, and it makes it hard for us to leave the mountains, and when we do, we long to return” (99), and this scholarly discourse normalizes a view of Appalachians as entrenched in place, one that has become part of the public discourse of many Appalachians. Thus, in this tellable narrative, to be Appalachian means to always long for home. This conceived space of Appalachianness leaves no room for someone like Gladys, who does not want to stay close to home. She cannot use this narrative to identify as Appalachian, and as a result she shares another narrative of Appalachian identity, one that is untellable by cultural insiders and in Gladys’s conceived space of Massie County.

Gladys’s narrative met norms of tellability for non-Appalachians, however, because some of their tellable narratives of Appalachianness emphasize
the negative traits Gladys identified (i.e., ignorance and small-mindedness). These narratives of stigma also exist in the academy; while not all Appalachians may know the particulars of those portrayals, they know those images exist, as Julie’s comments about her narrative illustrate (“I know what people think of [her home state]”). And like many of the scholars responsible for those images, I came into an Appalachian community to conduct a research study. Thanks to my accent and introduction on the first day of class, Gladys was aware of my connections to Appalachia, but my education, experiences growing up outside the region, and university affiliation meant that I was still an outsider in some significant ways. Ferrell urges understanding of “stigma and stigma management in face-to-face interactions between stigmatized persons and those [Erving Goffman] calls ‘normals’ [the unstigmatized]” (138). In this particular rhetorical situation, in which Gladys was faced with what she saw as an unstigmatized, academic audience, it was not unreasonable for her to manage potential stigma and conclude a narrative that performed Appalachian identity as ignorant and narrow-minded was one that would be appropriate and possibly even allow her to avoid being stigmatized.

**Conclusion**

In “Writing Identities,” Wendy Hesford cautions teachers of writing to consider the role they play in students’ performances of identity, stating, “[D]iscourse communities define which voices are the most personal or real. If we do not recognize how students must negotiate their identities in response to perceived power relations and teacher expectations, we risk dismissing the complexities and struggles involved in writing autobiography within the academy” (134). I was reminded of the importance of Hesford’s words during a moment in the Sciotoville classroom, when the professor of the course advised the students to be proud of being from a small town in Appalachia. She drew parallels between their experiences as Appalachians and her experiences as a woman of color and an immigrant, cautioning the students to be open to change and new experiences. She concluded by saying, “Keep the Appalachian. Drop the redneck.” In this moment, how was this professor constructing Appalianness? What performances and narratives was she inviting from these students? What was she dismissing?

With these statements, the Sciotoville professor invited particular performances of Appalachian identity and insured certain standards of tellability. Heartwarming narratives such as Julie’s pastoral tale of wandering through hills and valleys would be told; others, such as Julie’s life in a dilapidated house on a mountain that had been strip-mined, would remain untold. Julie and the other
students’ performative identities arose in part from their understanding of their audience’s expectations, and they crafted narratives of identity that could be told to the audience at hand. Julie insured her narrative would conform to the image of Appalachia she assumed her instructor held. Schueler, Michelle, and Gladys all constructed narratives of Appalachian identity that were untellable to some audiences.

The students of Sciotoville and Riverton shaped their narrative performances of identity according to their understanding of their audience, revealing a level of rhetorical savvy that many instructors would love to see in their students’ writing. Gonçalves links “the rhetorical identity performance of student speakers to the writing of students in our classes” (62), later adding, “students who were explicitly conscious of specific identity performances were much more likely to make transfers across contexts and demonstrate success in these other contexts” (84). Gonçalves further claims that this type of rhetorical understanding is more likely to develop in students from marginalized backgrounds (such as the LGBT students of her study and the Appalachians in my own), who “are aware that certain identity performances are valorized and often choose to perform those identities for their own personal safety” (60). I concur with Gonçalves that the rhetorical understanding of audience these students exhibit can transfer to the classroom, but I question how and to what extent instructors can promote this rhetorical understanding, particularly in light of tellability. This concept forces us to confront the reality that some student narratives of identity may be untellable to their professors, an audience that not only receives students’ identity performances, but also evaluates their academic work.

Gonçalves further writes that her instructional goal is “the conscious creation of specific identity performances in order to position audience members as allies and move them to action” (90–1) and that students need a classroom that gives them “a place to feel honest and safe” (95). This is a laudable goal born of good intentions, but I wonder about its feasibility and recognize its potential dangers. Given the realities of marginalization, the college classroom is a space that is inherently safer for some students than others. Even if we could make our classrooms “honest and safe” for all students, students have a long educational history before they reach us, during which some have learned harsh lessons about what is—and is not—tellable to an audience of teachers and peers. As a result, these students will rightfully question the safety of the classroom space and will rely on tellable narratives, such as the narrative Julie wrote, to help them negotiate their classroom identity performances.

Sometimes these tellable narratives may lead to the type of writing Julie produced or that we sometimes see in all our classrooms, writing that relies on public discourses about marginalized groups, “common sense,” or under-
standings gleaned from religious and cultural teachings. These narratives can be frustrating to read, especially for those of us who teach students who seem incredibly invested in political, economic, and religious ideologies that could cause (or have already caused) them great harm. Yet these students may produce this writing—writing we may see as clichéd or limited—for good reason. I’m reminded of students who have written papers arguing for drug testing of welfare applicants—the very same students who have shared in journals the anger they felt when others shamed them for seeking public assistance after the birth of a child. On the surface, the students’ writing may seem illogical, contradictory, or even hypocritical and lead an instructor to conclude that these students want to deny others the same assistance they received. But such a reading ignores the complexity of the students’ rhetorical situation: their work will be reviewed by peers and an instructor they may or may not know well; they are negotiating highly critical public discourses about public assistance along with their own individual narratives; and they are managing the heavily stigmatized identity of “welfare mother.” As a result, the inconsistent or hackneyed narratives we read may be the only ones these writers can tell in a particular rhetorical situation, one in which they may be managing conflicting cultures and understandings of tellability and audience.

Issues surrounding identity, narrative, and tellability may be of particular interest and importance when teaching certain genres of writing, but they are important in all interactions with students, both inside and outside the classroom. Tellable narratives of identity matter because they shape our perceptions of, and our relationships with, our students. These narratives give us another way of understanding students’ behaviors in and out of the classroom, including their motivations and their struggles. We must consider tellability in ways that respect the various rhetorical aims and purposes, audiences, and values students may be negotiating. As we work to help students negotiate academic writing, we need to think more deliberately about our student populations and their discursively constructed identities. We can begin by respecting our students’ boundaries and realizing that what we see as limited or clichéd writing, incomplete analysis, and the like may be a product of what can and cannot be told.

Notes

1. For more on tellability see Labov and Waletzky’s “Narrative Analysis,” Sacks’s “Reason for a Call: Tellability,” Bal’s Narratology, and Shuman’s Other People’s Stories.

2. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article in order to protect the identity of my participants. This study received IRB approval from my institution at the time of the study and—given the absence of IRBs at the institutions I studied—was approved by campus administrators. The students who are quoted in this article all signed IRB-sanctioned consent forms, as did their professors.
3. This university is unaffiliated with State University-Sciotoville.

4. I selected two case-study participants from each class (Julie, Katie May, Mike, and Michelle); these students were selected because they represented the class’s demographics and were willing and able to commit to one hour-long interview each week. The consenting students who were unable to serve as case studies—including Schueler and Gladys—participated in my project through their comments in class; brief, informal interviews with me before, during, and after class; and an hour-long, formal interview.

5. The term Urban Appalachian refers to Appalachians who migrated out of the region to nearby urban centers and their children. See Borman and Obermiller’s From Mountain to Metropolis: Appalachian Migrants in the American City for further discussion of this phenomenon.

6. See for example Bruce Gilden’s photo essay “Two Days in Appalachia” (written for the website Vice) and Trip Gabriel’s “50 Years Into the War on Poverty, Hardship Hits Back” (for The New York Times).

7. Since Julie’s peers did not read this assignment, they were not directly part of the audience for this particular narrative, though as members of the classroom discourse community, they could be understood as an implied audience.

8. For an example of how Jones’s work has influenced public discourse, see “Appalachian Values and Some People who Exemplify Them” by Ethylene Dyer Jones.

9. One of the most well-known examples of such portrayals is Victoria Purcell-Gates’s Other People’s Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy.

Works Cited

“About the Central Appalachian Network (CAN).” CAN-Central Appalachian Network, www.cannetwork.org/about_us


