NEGOTIATING CONCEALABLE IDENTITIES THROUGH STRATEGIC SELF-REFLECTION: THE RHETORICS OF APPALACHIAN COLLEGE STUDENT WRITERS

This dissertation uses ethnographic methods to examine how students from the predominantly rural Appalachian region navigate their transition into the intercultural environment of Carnegie Mellon University. Specifically, the study questions how these students negotiate their connections to Appalachia as a concealable identity in their academic writing practices. Previous studies focus on Appalachian students who can be easily recognized, typically through their rural dialects. This dissertation, on the other hand, foregrounds the experiences of an understudied group: students from the region who do not look or sound Appalachian but still face marginalization based on their cultural and class-based backgrounds. The ethnographic data illustrates three key moves of strategic self-reflection the students draw on in their efforts to negotiate connections to a stigmatized region. They critique stereotypes, redefine their backgrounds as experiential knowledge, and weigh the risks and rewards of identifying with their home region. These moves lead the students to selectively weave aspects of their backgrounds into their writing to both appeal to the values of academic discourses and honor connections to home. Ultimately, the study illustrates how these Appalachian students find rhetorical power in academic writing as a space to resist and redefine the labels that are often projected onto them.

More broadly, this study reveals how students manage concealable identities – which can also include socioeconomic background, religion, disability, and LGBTQ status – differently than they do more visible identities such as race, ethnicity, and gender. As unrecognized rhetorical agents, the students in my study resist visibility and discover power in their abilities to disclose or conceal their home identities for strategic purposes. This finding challenges the assumption that marginalized students are necessarily empowered through visibility and suggests new methods for supporting a critical engagement with difference for all students in the writing classroom.