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Pedagogy, Volume 9, Issue 1, Winter 2009, pp. 35-59 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Suburban Studies and College Writing

Applying Ecocomposition

Thomas Hothem

This essay collects some thoughts on environmentally oriented composition curricula, particularly what has come to be known as ecocomposition—a pedagogical approach dedicated to the notion that writing is contingent upon a complex web of environmental relations through which writers find expression. These relations encompass nature and culture, span time as well as space, and involve historical, cultural, and personal contexts. As Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser (2002: 9) observe in their work on the subject, *ecocomposition* is a composite term for writing instruction that implicates natural environments as well as “classroom environments, political environments, electronic environments, ideological environments, historical environments, [and] economic environments,” to name but a few. I favor such a multidimensional understanding because, in elucidating environmental relations, it cultivates a comprehensive awareness with which writers approach their craft, investigate their surroundings, sharpen their critical engagement with language, and shape rhetorical positions for themselves. That is, in calling our attention to our surroundings and the discourses by which we know them, it helps to contextualize our written expression. Hence, in its purest form, ecocomposition essentially concerns itself with “where as well as how and why writing works,” as Jimmie Killingsworth (2005: 364) nicely puts it.

As a holistic means of interdisciplinary inquiry, the practice of ecocomposition can foster a comprehensive sense of place whereby student writers might critique linguistic, cultural, educational, and professional environ-

ments that inform their experience. To that end, for such an approach to matter for the generality of students, it must engage a variety of environmental foci. In committing their own experiences to paper, students often remind me that there is more to the environment than the pristine pastoral or alpine imagery that traditionally animates literary nature. Ellie Hodara (pers. com., 2004) speaks for many of her peers in admitting to feeling somewhat “lost when faced with the task of writing on environments like lakes, rivers, forests, etc.,” because these things are “not a huge part of many students’ lives growing up.” Such sentiment is particularly important to monitor for the extent to which place-based writing instruction unintentionally alienates students who cannot relate to places or to the voices describing them.¹ Indeed, given the rich tradition of nature writing on which it draws — not to mention the often politically loaded rhetoric of environmentalism² — the practice of ecocomposition should carefully reconsider its ties to nature writing as we know it, and revalue landscapes that students have known all along yet haven’t necessarily had the tools (or time) to critique.

For such reasons, advocates of ecocomposition rightly warn against compromising writing instruction with literature appreciation or consciousness-raising, and especially against conflating ecocomposition with its apparent progenitor, ecocriticism.³ Of course, despite ecocritics’ sense that literary studies remain “untinted by environmental concerns” (Glotfelty 1996: xvi), nature writing holds a relatively privileged place in letters — due to its prominence in such literary movements as British Romanticism and American naturalism, to seductive notions of solitary inspiration these movements have instilled in us, and hence to the kind of enhanced escapism we have inherited from such writers as William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau. Whereas such literary efforts are useful models for autobiography and remind us of the promise of nature and the importance of conservation, their canonical weight threatens to overwhelm writing pedagogy (especially insofar as they stifle or bore students, who sometimes suspect complicity between literature and the natural world as contributing to the staleness of traditional instruction).⁴ Perhaps with such literary models in mind, Mark Long (2001: 135) goes so far as to observe that, for the most part, the time-honored “ritual of retreat to nature . . . simply leads most students nowhere.”⁵ As a result, student writers often end up negotiating idealized literary landscapes that outshine the real ones in which they live.⁶

A multi-/meta-environmental mindset can offset pedagogical approaches that endorse overly privileged, polarized, or escapist conceptions of the environment, which risk distracting us from our immediate surroundings and

divorcing us from the everyday language in which we describe them. That said, in this essay I would like to echo Derek Owens's (2001a: 6) suggestion that we "envision composition studies as environmental studies — not as an offshoot of ecology but as the study of one's immediate and future environs (city blocks, mall parking lots, backyards, office cubicles, apartment buildings, crowded highways) so that students might explore how their identities have been composed by such places and vice versa." For my part, in hopes of remedying perceived disjunctions between real and imagined landscapes and helping students cultivate critical voices, I decided to find a middle ground between nature and culture, so as to "deconstruct" — and thus problematize — them both, and hence to follow a road that is well traveled in modern American life but undertraversed in contemporary composition and literary scholarship.⁷ Suburbia was generally conceived as being the best of both worlds, a home in nature beyond the metropolis, a private space dedicated to the cultivation of individualism and the idea of the nuclear family. As a separate sphere whose residents communicate with the outside world via transportation (primarily the automobile) and technology (print, electronic, and broadcast media), suburbia is as much a textual entity as a physical one, a place we regularly read and write. The fact that many college students hail from such an eminently legible, formative environment confirms its ripeness for ecocompositional inquiry. It is a decidedly ordinary, familiar landscape — to some a "placeless" or "in-between" place that students such as Seo Moon (2002: n.p.) often find "mundane and difficult to grasp (because we are so used to ignoring [it])." Yet this is all the more reason to study it: in reexamining the suburban experience and conceptions of normalcy it has come to represent, students can refine their sense of place and reevaluate the language in which they express it.

An ecocompositional turn to suburban studies can thus recoup seemingly irreconcilable differences between nature and culture in writing instruction by making everyday life a subject of serious inquiry and promoting a general environmental awareness in student writing. As an important manifestation of modern attitudes toward domesticity and individuality, suburbia provides ample subject matter for observing the role of place in our lives and for exploring our subjectivity as writers. Such an ecocompositional focus is attractive partly because, given the relative dearth of suburban literature in the canon of nature writing, student writers are not as burdened with literary models and may feel better authorized to assess their surroundings on their own terms, in their own language. In writing about the suburban condition — or in invoking it for investigations of urban or rural contexts that reflect its influence — they can

nurture a practical sense of place that corresponds to their position within the web of social relations intrinsic to written expression.

Perhaps most importantly, then, treating students' personal experience as an object of knowledge encourages them to explore implications for critical perspective and self-fashioning in their writing. In thinking of their writing environmentally, they acquire a sense of context with which to gauge their relationship to their surroundings, their backgrounds, their education, and hence their future. A suburban studies focus in composition might thus "win back" local ground lost to standardized knowledge and thus "recover" places and voices subsumed by it. As such, it might encourage students to abandon tried and true — and thus tired — approaches to college essay writing. Suburban studies can thus provide an important lens for the production of knowledge and for including students in such a practice. Indeed, it can affirm local knowledge that is often obscured by what many perceive to be the standard fare of college classrooms. As one student, Danielle Thorpe (2001), put it in a reaction paper, "Although I have lived in suburbia my whole life, I never realized just how much I knew about it until I started to hear other people's interpretations."

The present essay will explore intersections between ecocomposition and suburban studies by recounting a continuing pedagogical experiment in theme-based composition curricula that I initially undertook as instructor of The Suburban Experience — a first-year undergraduate composition course offered a few years ago in the Knight Writing Program at Cornell University — and have continued to teach in various incarnations at the University of California at Davis and the University of California at Merced. In describing this course and some ideas that have proceeded from it, I hope to promote practical applications of ecoliteracy and to reaffirm the importance of basing writing curricula on students' experience. Of course, not all students are suburbanites. Yet a suburban focus might encourage writers to conceive of the term *environment* more comprehensively and to unlock its many implications for understanding the language we use to describe ourselves in our surroundings — thereby comprehending everything from mountains and lakes to cities, communities, homes, classrooms, and lives.⁸ The better we perceive such environments, the more informed our written expression might be (insofar as we become better readers of the world and of ourselves).

In cultivating such critical perspective with respect to the suburban environment, it is worth reiterating that all scholarship implicitly negotiates what counts as knowledge, that each of us has a stake in producing it, and that composition courses are excellent places in which to practice such produc-

tion. This is important to note in light of otherwise anti-intellectual dismissals of studying popular culture. Scholarly efforts to understand the suburban condition are sometimes discouraged by a curiously insistent intellectual bias against it. For instance, in his outspoken animadversion on suburbia, *The Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler (1993: 10) describes it as a “depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading” landscape replete with

jive-plastic commuter tract home wastelands, the Potemkin village shopping plazas with their vast parking lagoons, the Lego-block hotel complexes, the “gourmet mansardic” junk-food joints, the Orwellian office “parks” featuring buildings sheathed in the same reflective glass as the sunglasses worn by chain-gang guards, the particle-board garden apartments rising up in every meadow and cornfield, the freeway loops around every big and little city with their clusters of discount merchandise marts, the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobia-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call “growth.”

To his credit, Kunstler follows this colorful characterization with some important analyses of suburban life. Yet such overwhelmingly negative sentiment tends to preclude balanced critical inquiry (i.e., the suburbs have lost the game before it has even begun). While I often share Kunstler’s disenchantment with suburbia, this has only increased my desire to understand it on its own terms.

Revaluing suburbia, whether for better or for worse, might encourage those of us who are interested in reconsidering where we are from, and thus promote renewed interest in our studies in general (insofar as we might assert our perspectives and positions more avidly). Along these lines, my hope in offering *The Suburban Experience* is to present an impartial picture of suburban life that encourages a range of responses, and to give students a taste of firsthand scholarly inquiry supported by their own adventures in writing. A primary goal of the course is to revalue local knowledge and to enter it into the annals of knowledge proper. In this respect, though we acknowledge and examine the kind of suburban sameness that Kunstler describes, we also recognize that each suburb is historically unique, and that such uniqueness is a potential watershed for purposeful critical inquiry. Hence, in the interest of placing the otherwise “placeless,” I encourage students to see themselves as writing suburban histories that relate their personal backgrounds to their educational pathways and break new ground for scholarship in general.⁹ To underscore this point by way of anecdote, Hodara (pers. com., 2004) points

out that despite the quizzical looks she often gets when she tells people we studied such things as “Tupperware, the lawn, and highways,” “after a few moments’ explanation they begin to understand the fascination” and recognize “how little we realize about our daily lives.” Such inquiries dramatize the extent to which, as Owens (2001a: 7) notes, writing courses might privilege “local, necessary knowledge.”

As Hodara’s description suggests, the “Suburban Experience” course features a transhistorical tour of suburban culture that students explore in personal reflections and critical essays. En route to writing, students survey such subjects as the history of landscape architecture and regional planning, Victorian conduct literature and building plans, twentieth-century lawn care manuals, the evolution of the American interstate highway system, the ideals and realities of family life, the centrality of television in suburban life, and recent depictions of suburbia in film. They apply literary essays and historical scholarship to analyses of building blueprints, aerial photographs, advertising trends, maps, television programming, and of course personal experience. Students pursue their interests and develop theses about them, integrating anecdotal evidence and personal observations with primary and secondary documentation. To this end, as groups brainstorm hypotheses in class discussion and workshop drafts in writing groups, they review such fundamental scholarly issues as where to look for ideas, how to develop, manage, and structure them, and ultimately how to produce written knowledge about our lives. Ironically, many class sessions begin with discussions of how facile and limited a subject suburbia can be. Yet our explorations always yield more material than we can reasonably handle and require that we entertain just enough of it for focused critical exposition.

This collaborative approach to the subject of community is designed to make the most of the immediate classroom environment and our respective positions within it. One of the greatest attractions of ecomposition is that it animates the spirit of William Rueckert’s (1996: 111) trailblazing essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” which portrays the classroom as “a community, a true interactive field.”¹⁰ Conceiving of the classroom as a vibrant social microcosm of intellectual positions enables us to anatomize larger debates by reproducing them in miniature and considering how they pertain to us. Of course, college freshmen tend to appreciate such an approach because, in their concerted efforts to understand their new educational community, they are eager to discuss where they are from (and, by extension, where they are “coming from”). For such reasons, it is useful to begin the course by determining the class demographic with respect to

students' geographic backgrounds, commonalities, and differences. We supplement this introductory exercise with maps and photographs that help us visualize the geographic scope represented by our little population and suggest specific sociogeographic subjects students might eventually explore in more detail. These familiar discussions of specific environments set the tone for the course as a whole. The more our inquiries reflect students' lives, the more forthcoming they are with their ideas, the more included they feel in the production of knowledge, and the more comfortable they are with exploring their positions as writers and thinkers. In other words, among the advantages of such an inclusive academic pursuit of place is that, as Julie Drew (2001: 60) observes, it "is more likely to include students in the academic work of composition, and less likely to continue to identify and manage students as discursive novices."

In gathering the contexts from which they hail, students begin examining the physical and linguistic environments we all inhabit by considering their sensitivity to place. Two provocative readings that examine modern environmental awareness help initiate such inquiry: Barry Lopez's "The American Geographies," from his *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory* (1998) essay collection, and John R. Stilgoe's "Beginnings," which introduces his book *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (1998). Lopez seeks to resuscitate geographic knowledge by wrenching it from the machinations of the image industry and restoring it to the realm of local knowledge. He laments the current state of geographical literacy, citing the extent to which Americans rely on idealized images from television programming, magazine articles, and calendar photographs—all of which, he says, reduce the American landscape to so much "attractive scenery" and hence promote a highly mediated, false sense of place (131). To counteract this dynamic, he presents a tapestry of American places that tend to elude aesthetic idealism; for every Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls, he shows us a Delaware Bay and a Black Rock Desert.

The heroes of Lopez's piece are the "local geniuses of the American landscape" (132). Such people, he says, represent "the antithesis of geographical ignorance":

They may not be able to recall the name of a particular wildflower—or they may have given it a name known only to them. They might have forgotten the precise circumstances of a local historical event. Or they can't say for certain when the last of the Canada geese passed through in the fall, or can't differentiate between two kinds of trout in the same creek. Like all of us, they have fallen prey to the fallacies

of memory and are burdened with ignorance; but they are nearly flawless in the respect they bear these places they love. Their knowledge is intimate rather than encyclopedic, human but not necessarily scholarly. It rings with the concrete details of experience. (132–33)

This is Stilgoe's project as well. But rather than call our attention to alternative natural environments, Stilgoe's local genius surveys the landscapes we negotiate every day, the places we all have a hand in shaping but do not ordinarily recognize as ours. He urges his readers to "go outside" and "pay attention to everything that abuts the rural road, the city street, the suburban boulevard. Walk. Stroll. Saunter. . . . Explore" (1). Hence he tours us around shopping plazas, chain link fences, railroad tracks, power lines, mail routes, highways, backyards, and cul de sacs as he extemporizes on such things as the intricate ecosystems of roadsides and parking lots. He does not presume to cover everything in his minimalist prose and modest scope. Instead, his enthusiasm is intended to encourage our capacity "to see acutely, to notice, to make connections" (3).

As departure points for inquiries into our environs, these two essays raise important questions students must consider as they work out their own senses of place in writing. Such questions hinge upon the idea of local genius, which is sentient and inspiring at best and idiosyncratic or quixotic at worst. For instance, despite Lopez's inclusive intentions, students often accuse him of ecological sanctimony insofar as he condescends to the very people he hopes to enlighten by namedropping places that are equally unfamiliar to many readers. Save for a brief mention of New York City basements, he overlooks urban and suburban landscapes altogether, and instead focuses on such places as the Cascade Mountains and Mojave Desert—with which most students from beyond these regions have little experience. Stilgoe, on the other hand, is so infectiously enthusiastic as to risk inscrutability. His tours of the everyday environment skip from subject to subject via a stream of consciousness delivery. Though we may benefit from what he calls "casual indirection" and occasional "absence of mind" (8–9), such an approach entails fleeting contemplation, as he covers barn architecture, kitchen decor, and lawn mowing patterns—in sum, the countless "vicissitudes of life" (11)—all in the course of a few paragraphs. Some students find this means of apprehending the world pointless or bewildering, a kind of soft science that makes too much of too little or too little of too much.

The solicitation of such debate is nevertheless my motive for assigning these essays, in hopes that students might explore positions along the con-

tinuum that Lopez and Stilgoe delineate. I try to inspire student application of, or resistance to, Lopez's litany of places and Stilgoe's whimsical perspective. Of course, these writers' point is that deeper analysis is up to us; they're just trying to jog our powers of intellection. Hence, students who are moved to advance or interrogate Stilgoe's suppositions implement an environmental intelligence whose parameters he merely sketches. Similarly, students who critique Lopez's catalog of places by weighing his inclusions against his omissions ultimately assess the nature of geographic knowledge in toto. Such responses to the tensions that these essays embody are indeed fundamental to the project of composition because they require writers to determine positions, to "place" themselves. The fact that Lopez's and Stilgoe's essays are not without flaw is thus their most instructive aspect. In eliciting reply, they invite us to articulate our own senses of place and to contribute to the production of knowledge accordingly.

Having considered the politics of place, students draw upon their responses to Lopez and Stilgoe to write their own place descriptions, striving for new insights into otherwise unconventional topoi and accordingly assembling linguistic, rhetorical environments to represent them. Because I try to privilege places important to the class before introducing an overtly suburban focus, I ask students to exercise their creativity on environments of their choice and to provide fresh insight into places we might otherwise take for granted. For inspiration, we read descriptions of unconventional places, such as Robert Sullivan's "Valley of the Garbage Hills" (1998), about exploring the much-maligned Meadowlands marshes of industrial New Jersey, Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels" (1982), which describes a suburban wilderness near her Virginia home, Tim Brookes's "Seventeen Ways of Looking at a Dirt Road" (2005), about the seasonal and situational vicissitudes of an unpaved driveway, and Stilgoe's "Strips" (1998), an observation of strip mall parking lots and delivery alleys. The place description assignment usually produces a variety of intriguing depictions like these, as students generally enjoy exerting their powers of expression on offbeat places that they know intimately. Among the places they typically bring to light are dorm rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, rec rooms, basements, backyards, gardens, driveways, neighborhoods, subdivisions, farms, parks, roadways, cities, shopping centers, restaurants, summer camps, and vacationlands. Some of the more revealing descriptions have explored such things as the paradox of the middle-class suburban living room (whose purpose often seems more for show than for actual living); the peer group politics of convenience store parking lots on Friday nights; the extent to which concrete islands in urban avenues serve as

village greens; and the experience of working retail jobs in malls. By committing such places to paper and composing linguistic environments in relief of physical ones, students refresh their writing skills and establish perspectives on which they can draw throughout the term.

Despite this assignment's seeming ordinariness — and especially its popularity as a composition assignment on so many syllabi and in so many classrooms — it achieves some fundamental goals with respect to critical engagement. For instance, so many of us talk of place or the environment without specifying either. The suburbs appear to embody this paradox. Despite having been built with great purpose — for instance, to codify the middle-class way of life and ground it in networks of property — our sense of suburbia has been so extensively naturalized as “the way to live” that many of us have forgotten why we tend to live that way at all. In leaving such narratives unremarked, we run the risk of obscuring our very narrative bases for living, the words we use to describe and critique our environs. Moreover, in failing to specify our surroundings we also commit one of the “cardinal sins” of critical explication — that of leaving our conjectures vague and indeterminate, lacking requisite support to carry our points. In this respect, specifying environmental vision requires us to exercise equally precise rhetoric and diction.

Given the course's primary concern with cultivating writing skills, such precision lends itself well to the study of “descriptive/rhetorical environments” alongside physical/natural ones. Insofar as “writers use language to construct rhetorical environments or situations in which they exist [and] interact with one another” (Weisser and Dobrin 2001b: 4), they need to interpret “ecosystems of argument” contextually, in much the same detail they might that of their surroundings. As Dobrin (2001: 19, 20) observes, “Context is environment, not just the environment where writing takes place, but the environment where words are situated in relationship to other words, to other knowledges, to other texts, to other traditions in order to construct a system of words that have meaning” — to the extent that “the activity of writing is the activity of creating an ecosystem of words. Sentences, paragraphs, and texts are habitats for words and for knowledge.” In this respect, texts and landscapes are equally legible, featuring discernible logics and constructions that we read and write from given rhetorical positions. Hence, in rendering the suburbs a text that many are otherwise predisposed *not* to read — by mapping its rhetorical environments — we might also illuminate similarly obscured palimpsests rooted in the language of everyday life. In so doing we elucidate the degree to which, as Dobrin points out, composition is “a study of rela-

tionships: between individual writers and their surrounding environments, between writers and texts, between texts and culture, between ideology and discourse, and between language and the world” (12).

To broaden the focus to include the rhetorical environment in relation to the physical one, to consider the ways in which each informs the other, and thus to cultivate engagement with the language we use every day (to “hit them where they live,” as it were), the second writing assignment in the course builds upon the first by taking one step further into the verbal realm, asking students to analyze the language of each other’s place descriptions. This exercise is particularly important because it makes students’ very language the focus of our study—which of course is the case throughout writing courses, whether explicit or not (in fact, it’s too often *implicit*, too often lost amid the critique of others’ language—to the extent that students often don’t know how to critique each other’s writing). Guided by a meta-environmental focus, students examine each other’s work in a holistic sense, to avoid criticizing proficiency in and of itself—a tendency to which they are prone, but one that perhaps makes sense given the ways in which they have learned to write—and instead to channel their impressions into careful considerations of their classmates’ descriptions, to examine what their word choices might suggest about their perspectives: for instance, to explore the significance of describing a room in terms of oneself, or of portraying one’s backyard as place of escape from over-determined spatial or familial relations within the home. Many students find this exercise difficult because they do not consider their writing strong enough to warrant aesthetic analysis (a doubt I work hard to dispel). Yet in distinguishing the effects of using particular images, emotions, phrases, styles, and structures to portray certain places, they come to see that their own writing is as critically interesting as that of the most anthologized authors. Moreover, in so doing they raise an array of issues that are central to the course—including the extent to which people and place shape one another, the historical element of place, place as a form of escape or sanctuary, and implications of sharing or threatening it—and thereby politicize the classroom themselves, with relatively minimal prompting from the instructor.

In this respect, the “Suburban Experience” writing course is much like any other composition curriculum: students practice thesis inventing and building (supporting points accordingly), and delineating and elaborating rhetorical positions, both in the classroom and on paper. Of course, such self-guided means of inquiry require lots of active engagement on the part of the instructor, particularly because many students in this age of standardized testing are unaccustomed to researching their own experience or relying

on themselves for their learning. Hence the critical observation assignment includes a crash course in argument, a workshop for discussing strategies of critiquing writing in general. This process manifests itself most often in veritable community meetings I like to call “thesis-building power hours,” wherein I transcribe class brainstorming on the whiteboard and we puzzle out the results as a group, to help students derive theses and structure arguments before workshoping their essays in smaller groups. In highlighting the processes of writing and thinking, such polylogic activities help students become commentators on a par with those they read in print — in fact, many students end up citing each other in their essays, as they incorporate ideas generated in community interaction. The process of composing the critical observation essay thus encourages them to situate themselves by comparing attitudes toward the physical environment and consolidating places from which to speak about them. As Long (2001: 139) reminds us, the benefit of “writing about the ways in which other writers make sense of their surroundings” is that students “think about their own surroundings, enhancing their capabilities to think creatively and critically about their place in the world.” That they do so with explicit reference to their own words and ideas extends this sense of place to include local rhetorical environments and community dynamics intrinsic to critical awareness.

Applying such methods and realizations, we turn our focus to suburbia’s past incarnations — the history behind its ideology — in order to attune students to the intricacies of everyday environments and to show that they respond directly to long traditions of environmental consciousness — some of which their very parents espoused and instilled in their children accordingly. The first stop on our tour of reading for what Lynn Spigel (1997: 218) calls a “spatial language in which people lived their lives” is thus a sampling of literature that heralds the advent of modern suburbia. Informed by Robert Fishman’s account of early suburban history in his book *Bourgeois Utopias* (1987), we read a selection from William Cowper’s 1785 poem *The Task* (1994), which celebrates domestic contentment in contrast to the unrest of the outside world, passages from Jane Austen’s 1815 novel *Emma* (a suburban soap opera about life in the fictional town of Highbury, as Greater London pushes into the countryside), and portions of J. C. Loudon’s 1838 *Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (a treatise on landscape architecture that codifies the maintenance of the suburban home and grounds). Despite being fairly removed from the present day, in sketching the spatial parameters of the early suburban landscape these works elaborate such familiar suburban issues as class tension, upward and downward mobility, family values, prop-

erty management, and neighborly scruples. To help set these phenomena in greater relief—and to elucidate their historical continuity—we also watch Amy Heckerling’s 1992 film *Clueless*, which places *Emma* in the exclusive, sheltered environs of present-day Beverly Hills and the San Fernando Valley (two much-hyped epitomes of twentieth-century suburban life).

Of course, such historical traditions—no matter how germane to student experience—aren’t always easy to discern. Hence the essays students generate on this two-hundred-year-old literary/historical tradition are based entirely on what they see. Though this sounds obvious, the culture shock of looking in the historical mirror—no matter how familiar the likeness—is sometimes so pronounced that we don’t recognize ourselves in our own past. Historical and linguistic disjunctions can present difficulties for modern readers, who must find ways to cultivate faith in their perspectives by asserting their sense of place. Hence I encourage students to explore their confusion in reconciling past and present, to evaluate such history in terms of its resonance for them today, and to proceed conceptually above all. To visualize historically removed depictions of suburbia, some students draw maps of Austen’s Highbury, or of Cowper’s neighborhood, and in their essays explain why they put things where they did. Others examine neighborhood politics allegorized in the relationship between Austen’s well-heeled Emma Woodhouse and her underling orphan companion Harriet Smith, conflicts between new and old money in Highbury, or ways in which broken families or threats of thievery complicate life in the suburb. Still other students explore parallels between Heckerling’s Beverly Hills and Austen’s Highbury, including the ways in which peer group politics dramatize class tensions in both works. In exploring how they feel about particular literary characters and the allegories in which they feature, students grasp important implications for the concept of community in suburban life and establish historical contexts for its modern manifestations.

With such historical consciousness established (however tenuously), students subsequently examine the remnants of early suburbia in our contemporary world. Fortunately, there is no dearth of material that links such otherwise distinct eras. The meticulously manicured suburban environs depicted in both *Emma* and *Clueless* inform a student-driven survey of American attitudes toward home and garden. A selection of ideologically amusing readings from lawn care and home improvement manuals dramatizes spatial manifestations of American family values. For instance, such publications as Frank J. Scott’s *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds* (1870) reveal that “a fine lawn and large trees” are “most essential to the business man’s home” and

that “the manner in which [the lawn] is kept will affect the mind in the same way as the ill or well-ordered house-keeping of the wife” (22). Scott exemplifies Stilgoe’s claim that lawns “reflect moral light” (Stilgoe 129) — particularly by “recall[ing] the agrarian origins of [our] country” (127) — when he extols the virtues of pushing a lawn mower “over a velvety lawn, breathing the fresh sweetness of the morning air and the perfume of new mown hay” (111). Scott’s extensive diagrams for delegating space in one’s yard anticipate those of F. F. Rockwell and Esther C. Grayson, whose *Complete Book of Lawns* (1956) advocates strict separation between public and private space. Rockwell and Grayson emphasize that the front yard be laid out purely for show and the backyard for practical use and that “play areas” be distinct from “living areas” (and hence children’s space from adults’). They also list a veritable arsenal of weed control chemicals — including DDT, whose devastating environmental effects led to its discontinuation twenty years later — and laud power lawn mowers as “almost as much of a boon to the man (or the boy) of the house as mechanical dishwashers [are] to the wife in the kitchen” (171).

The salience of so-called suburban values in these vintage guides helps inspire exploration of contemporary suburban life — which, of course, begs questions many have pondered but have kept unproblematized (perhaps in keeping with the suburban practice of keeping up appearances and doing as we’re told, insofar as suburban life has been naturalized as “the way to live” in our culture). For instance, Rockwell and Grayson’s and Scott’s pronouncements on outdoor versus indoor industry necessarily bring our inquiries to bear on the ideological anatomy of the suburban family home, which the architectural historian Clifford Edward Clark (1986: 238) describes as “an island of stability in the midst of an unstable social system,” a place designed to “protect and strengthen the family” by promoting “the proper virtues needed to preserve the republic.” Tempering their debates about the pros and cons of suburban development with Wallace Kaufman’s (1992: 40) caveat that, no matter how much we think otherwise, “all of us by nature are developers,” students also explore the successes and failures of such an architectural stratagem with reference to diagrams of our own homes.

Having determined these domestic spatial paradigms, students survey the kinds of attitudes such paradigms sponsored. Stephanie Coontz’s (1992) investigation into the realities underlying idealizations of American family life, Alison J. Clarke’s (1997) documentation of the mid-twentieth-century Tupperware craze, and Christopher Holmes Smith’s (2001) observations on the history of TV dinners fuel our discussion of ways in which such domestic amenities strike an uneasy balance between convenience and consumerism

for its own sake. In subsequent discussions and essays based thereon, some students hold that Tupperware made housework easier and entrepreneurship attainable for housewives, whereas others maintain that it merely perpetuated women's disempowerment by playing upon stereotypes and ultimately keeping them homebound. Such tensions come into clearer focus when we witness their portrayal in Bryan Forbes's 1975 film *The Stepford Wives*, whose painstakingly presented domestic interiors and mechanized housewives dramatize conditions familiar to many of our own suburban families.

As might be expected, these curious cultural histories provoke much debate. While many students recognize immediate implications for writing about their personal pasts, others question the use of examining home and garden maintenance at all, given the seeming banality of such exercises. These questions beg further elaboration and transhistorical application—a process that, insofar as it entails interrogating knowledge itself, is of course a primary motivation of composition curricula. By assessing the educational value of such ideologically loaded material, students ultimately reevaluate their attitudes toward the home, the lawn, their families, and even the purpose of their scholarly pursuits—which assume new urgency via the many practical applications we deduce. This process of realization is occasionally enhanced by the transgenerational perspectives of such guest lecturers as my parents, who visit class from time to time. As teachers who relocated to the rapidly expanding New York City suburbs of the 1950s, my mother and father witnessed developments that students of similar landscapes are experiencing anew, albeit differently, today. My parents' tales of suburban New Jersey often amaze those of us who cannot imagine that place in terms of field or forest. Their first-person accounts of a history whose details we procure primarily through books help render our inquiries even more concrete. Ultimately, by informing us about where we *were* as we recovered the history of where we *are*, our discussions of lawn care guides, Tupperware parties, TV dinners, and Stepford wives generate an important cultural context for our current experiences and expressions of place.

By this point in the term, students are generally ready to take on otherwise moot points in popular documentation of suburban life. I always tell students that the best writing makes something out of what seems like nothing, particularly by infusing otherwise “ordinary” subjects with new critical vigor born of personal perspective. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the essays students write about the suburban home and garden are often among the strongest they produce all term. Some address the frequency with which lawn care manuals describe their subject in terms of personal hygiene, citizenship,

or warfare. Many of these inquiries include brief historical surveys of advertising in such periodicals as *American Home*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *House Beautiful*, wherein students find images of bikini-clad models pushing lawnmowers, pest control chemicals targeting insect “enemies,” and flamethrowers used for weed whacking and melting driveway ice (a yard care concept all the more chilling for its appearance during the Vietnam War era). Alternatively, some students draw upon childhood experience to explore psychological implications of segregating the home or yard with respect to gender or age. Many take up the “Great Tupperware Debate” (as one class came to call it), assessing the extent to which advancements in culinary technology empowered suburban housewives, or examining suburban values implied in advertisements for other household appliances (such as vacuum cleaners and refrigerators). Still others apply the science fiction allegory of *The Stepford Wives* to careful considerations of their own families, including the sacrifices their mothers or fathers made to uphold the suburban ideal, and the pressures of “keeping up appearances” in general.

Such various inquiries serve as convenient touchstones for enlightened considerations of the “textuality” of modern suburban life and the extent to which it is reified in contemporary media that dramatize and/or describe the concept of cultural remove on which suburbia is conceived. Accordingly, on the heels of the above debates, we turn our attention to the current state of the suburban imagination with respect to two of its primary agents: television and the automobile. Both of these things, of course, are near and dear to college students. For many teens and twenty-somethings, the automobile is the very embodiment of hard-won privileges, responsibilities, personal expression, and even freedom itself. In a word, they are what they drive, and their cars get them places. Hence, as a vehicle of self-expression, the concept of automobil-ity is an invaluable one for gauging student writers’ subjectivity in context. After all, we tend to idealize both driving and writing as solitary pursuits and creative means of boundless expression (even as we take both somewhat for granted). We like to believe that speech and travel are somehow “free.” Yet both activities have protocols and limits according to context—certain routes that must be followed to reach specific destinations or audiences. Student writers who are eager to travel unfettered and Kerouac-like through their essays often complain that they can’t say what they really want to in their writing, that they are always writing for someone else (usually the teacher). They can, of course—but only insofar as they proceed along avenues down which others also travel, or conjoin readers in dialogue with degrees of familiarity and depth that uncalculated compositional meandering can preclude.

The concept of automobility helps set the extents to which we might exercise our cars/pens—and the places in which we’re channeled to do so—in stronger relief. Our discussions are often directed by drivers/writers who assert their right to mobility/expression, and as such exercise varying degrees of “road/page rage.” Informed by Tom Martinson’s vindication of the automobile in his book *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia* (2000) and Paul Roberts’s article “Bad Sports; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the SUV” (2000), students debate the kinds of mobility, access, and convenience that automobility offers us, often conceding that such advantages can come at the cost of natural resource depletion, traffic congestion, and place consciousness itself (insofar as, when driving, we experience place less intimately than we might when walking or biking). SUV owners are particularly adamant in defending their right to drive such vehicles, invoking aesthetic criteria and safety standards. Other students counter that such reasoning isn’t community oriented, that SUVs demand too much space and fuel to benefit all drivers on the road. Whichever side of the debate they argue, students usually agree that the automobile is so important to our culture that being carless, much like being speechless, can be a significant disadvantage.

In noting the politics of individual expression associated with automobility, our debates mirror those about the ways in which language grants us access to communities and systems of communication—the systems by which we live (roads, media, texts, etc.). Indeed, the contexts in which we drive or write come into stronger focus when we elucidate the environments we negotiate with cars or voices—the webs of relations that both occasion and enable our transports. Investigations into the automobile’s influence on suburban geography help us appreciate the environmental implications of driving (much as we do with respect to the linguistic and rhetorical environments in which we write). In analyzing maps and aerial photographs of our hometowns, of Los Angeles (an overgrown “garden city” that exemplifies automobile-dictated development), and of suburban sprawl spurred by the rise of the interstate highway system, students see that, although the suburbs were born of a desire for open space, the shared nature of this dream requires strict traffic control and the conservation of private property. Part of the problem of writing about suburbia, of course, is that we rarely “get above” it; we live intimately with development schemes that we cannot envision on a grand scale. A bird’s-eye view affords us a commanding perspective on the nature of suburban space—the infrastructural purpose of cloverleaf highway interchanges, tendril-like subdivisions, and meticulously ordered green plots,

white squares, and blue ovals (yards, homes, and pools). To this end, students examine the extent to which street grids determine where drivers and walkers can and cannot go, and the ways in which the automobile, as Rebecca Solnit (2000: 253) points out, “encouraged the diffusion and privatization of space, as shopping malls replace shopping streets, public buildings become islands in a sea of asphalt, civic design lapses into traffic engineering, and people mingle far less freely and frequently.”

Much as suburban subdivision plans do, the infrastructure of mass media—to which students contribute as writers—determines our expression and our place. If the focus on automobility manifests an intimate suburban geography we are prone to overlook, it also begs questions about other means of navigating suburban space—namely the communication networks and virtual realities we access daily to overcome isolation and interact with society. Because our culture increasingly relies on television, film, radio, telephones, e-mail, and the Internet for entertainment and information exchange—and, accordingly, because today’s students tend to be more critically conscious of mass media than they are of language in and of itself—media analysis has rightly been a staple of composition curricula. It assumes even greater importance for our purposes when we consider that modern suburbia was first and foremost an imagined place between the city and the country. In fueling our image-saturated culture and promoting idealized visions of fenced plots, manicured lawns, and tree-lined avenues, media such as television overcome the breach between the public sphere of the outside world and the private one of the suburban home. As Raymond Williams (1990: 36) once observed, television “can show us distant events,” allowing us to occupy “one place, usually at home,” while “watching something in another place,” as the technology “closes the gap to a familiar connection” and cultivates an illusion that passes for reality. Spigel (1992: 186, 205) calls television a “picture window” onto the world, a “*discursive space* through which the family [can] mediate the contradictory impulses for a private haven on the one hand, and community participation on the other,” and thus “enter into an imaginary social life.” To understand television’s role in suburban life, then, we must come to terms with the images it propagates, the ways in which we interpret them, and the function of such interpretation in our self-expression.

Such a theoretical framework guides students’ analyses of suburban families portrayed on television. Television, of course, strongly contributes to the prevailing sense of what is otherwise “normal” and disseminates language in which we build our realities. In recognizing television’s influence on the suburban imagination, student essays often examine contemporary sitcoms

that ordinarily would have been the subject of preclass small talk, including *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Ed*, *That Seventies Show*, and that perennial favorite of so many college students and professors alike, *The Simpsons*, comparing these with previous incarnations of the suburban family in such programs as *The Cosby Show*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Thirtysomething*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, so as to comprehend historical variations in attitudes toward family life. Despite the prevalent opinion that television has debased the family, students often conclude that—with the exception of certain gender stereotypes—most of these programs actually depict relatively functional, egalitarian families. Such is not so much the case in film (at least in the ones screened for class). Class discussions of family tragedies depicted in such films as *American Beauty*, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides* often yield poignant, sustained commentary about the dislocation of suburban life. The degrees of alienation explored in these films dramatize the remoteness and boredom that trouble many suburbanites. By attending to personal relationships portrayed in television and film, students therefore cultivate another important perspective on suburban space: characters' efforts to overcome their isolation invariably reveal the formative characteristics and finest details of the suburban environment.

The essays that emerge from our discussions of television and the automobile often evince a personal urgency that reflects the degree to which students associate these things with personal expression and an intellectual sophistication indicative of their eagerness to apply the knowledge they have accumulated. Many students examine the effect of the automobile on the organization of space. Some write about the differences between driving particular stretches of road and walking or biking them. Others extend their observations on the freedom or restriction associated with driving, elaborating on such debates as those concerning the ethics of SUV ownership. Those who explore the realities behind telemediated ideals often consider conceptions of place that television promotes in standardizing knowledge or distracting us from our surroundings. Some examine its influence on personal life, defending a particular television family as the epitome or nadir of American family life, comparing two television families from different historical periods, or describing how television affects their own family relations. Other students analyze suburban family life as it is portrayed in films such as *The Virgin Suicides*, taking into account the representation of the household and the high school, the idealization of girls in suburban culture, the place of suicide amid such things, and the ways in which suburbia flirts with danger, despite its apparent security.

As this contemporary historical context suggests, writings on sub-

urbia often have pointed personal implications. So when it comes time to conclude the course, students often find themselves reflecting on the legacy of suburban history in their academic as well as personal lives. To encourage such reflection on life and writing, I employ a portfolio grading system. Students collect and revise their work guided by a brief reflective essay they write about the course and their development in it. I encourage them to examine what it means for them to write about suburbia, to consider the “paths” of self and local knowledge that they forge alongside the “highways” of standardized knowledge, the role of such competing knowledges in their education, and the language they develop to articulate such things. The resulting archive of suburban stories represents a new corpus of knowledge that continues to grow. A few years after the course’s initial incarnation, I still hear from students who share realizations and comments on a small e-mail discussion group. Many of the students I have taught are now upperclassmen or graduates studying abroad in such international cities as London, Florence, Rome, Barcelona, Seville, and Madrid. Although these places are markedly different — particularly in regard to suburban development — in exploring them students have learned a great deal about social geography in general. Their observations on these places remind me of how much more there is to learn about suburbia, self-expression, and the sense of place that informs them both. These communications also represent the fulfillment of scholarly inquiry; they are indicative of “future places” that students are coming to occupy — elsewhere, in cyberspace, and in their lives.

Successful writing requires the ability to see clearly and to communicate this vision to others. This means acknowledging and observing one’s immediate environment, in order to discern perspective — to “see the forest for the trees,” as the saying goes. Such has been my guiding motivation in writing instruction, with or without the suburban focus; in fact, I find that such a focus can also help students navigate academic and professional contexts, “grounding” their writing and the places they may take it. In this sense, I apply Owens’s (2001b: 29) recommendation that composition faculty “create environments that serve as filters through which students might apply a growing sense of sustainable awareness to the goals implicit within their chosen majors.” I base such curricula on the idea of environmentally informed self-knowledge, such that students translate their familiarity with environmental observation into renewed awareness of their educational and personal environments. Hence any given writing course may begin with reading and writing about the physical environment and continue on to reassessing our

own reading and writing ecosystemically (in such projects as position papers, critical autobiographies, and statements of purpose). Such writings encourage students to “place” themselves, to recognize their positions in various ecompositional contexts by attending to their written expression.

However it is understood, ecocomposition should inspire students to imagine their world as a text and themselves as its authors, so that they build a kind of rhetorical home in their immediate surroundings and cultural contexts. Above all, ecocomposition needs something on which to “condense”—a formative, specific context to which students apply what they learn. Ultimately, if we encourage students to explore places themselves, they will find a place for themselves in their written expression. In admitting personal experience into compositional inquiry, we access a veritable cluttered suburban garage of subject matter that, despite its ordinariness—indeed, *because* of it—relates directly to our lives and hence to the fundamental act of writing about them. As Owens (2001a: 690) notes, “Educators have a responsibility to help students resist the cynicism and hyperboredom of contemporary, consumer culture by discovering the kind of self-worth that comes from being amazed at one’s local worlds.” As such, an ecompositional turn to suburban studies can help unlock the wider promise of environmentally oriented composition curricula by calling students’ attention to where they are and assuring them that there are always rewarding things to write about.¹¹

Notes

For invaluable assistance with the writing of this essay, I thank David Alvarez, Mary Boland, Derek Owens, Christopher Peterson, Andrew Strombeck, and of course Anne Zanzucchi.

1. For a pronounced instance of such alienation see Keller (2001: 195), who suggests that his “African American students’ lack of interest in writing a retreat narrative stemmed from a scarcity of minority authors within the genre.” He theorizes that “because nature itself is in constant need of authentication and credibility . . . writers who seek more authorial confidence and control will not likely write within a genre that appears to marginalize or silence their voices from the outset” (ibid.: 200).
2. See Killingsworth and Palmer 1991 for an in-depth discussion of the politics—perceived, implied, and otherwise—of environmental rhetoric.
3. Such cautionary tales are told by Long (2001), Sumner (2001), and Dobrin and Weisser (2002: 24–27). Cooper (2001), Sumner (2001), and Dobrin and Weisser (2002) survey ecompositional approaches whose extensive focus on literary aesthetics or environmental activism overshadows writing instruction. For general introductions to ecocriticism, see Buell 1995 and Glotfelty and Fromm 1996.

4. The perceived inflexibility of literary tradition informs many readers' negative attitudes toward nature writing. In a recent article on the concept of writing in and about Los Angeles, Jenny Price (2006) goes so far as to identify a general sense of stagnation in nature writing—indeed, a “crisis” that is “one of our most pressing national cultural catastrophes”—claiming that “in the past twenty-five years, the venerable American literature of nature writing has become distressingly marginal” for being “earnest, pious, and quite allergic to irony.” For Price, “nature writers have given us endless paeans to the wonders of wildness since Thoreau fled to Walden Pond, but need to tell us far more about our everyday lives in the places we actually live.” This is a bit of an overstatement; as course readings discussed here hopefully suggest, today there is arguably a wealth of so-called nature writing that isn't about nature “as we know it.” Nevertheless, such works don't ordinarily reach student hands, and many students end up approaching environmental subject matter through the reified lens of conventional nature writing.
5. Even though the escape to suburban life is perhaps the grandest of retreat narratives, Randall Roorda (1998: 18) has much more to say about them than I have space to here. His extensive anatomizing of the concept of retreat—in American literary tradition as well as modern college student writing—reveals strategies by which writers manipulate retreat narrative conventions to explore the nuances of critical perspective via the “movement from the human to the non-human.” Though the concept of retreat is a valuable one for student writers, I recommend that they carefully examine it, rather than uncritically reproduce it, in writing about suburban life.
6. Ironically, this problem is often exacerbated by environmentally themed composition anthologies that, in targeting national if not global audiences, preclude sustained focus on local issues. Michael McDowell (1998: 20) notes that even though such texts include personal essays in which writers respond to “unique, specific places,” students “generally must respond either to readings on global topics or to readings about places and issues which aren't their own and which seldom lead them closer to a sense of their own place.”
7. Anis Bawarshi (2001: 69–70) points out that “composition studies for the most part lack the ecological vocabulary to conceptualize and describe such a dynamic relation between communicants and their environments,” insofar as we tend to perceive “the self and the social” as “fundamentally separate” (i.e., “the self is inside; the social is outside. The self is subjective; the social is constructed”).
8. One of the challenges of such a place-based pedagogy is, as Ball and Lai (2006: 271) note, that “some students are not sufficiently interested in their locale to find local content learning provocative”—a mindset that “is perhaps more likely in certain rural areas, suburban sprawl neighborhoods, and urban ‘ghettos’ where inhabitants have internalized the notion that their place isn't important enough to matter” (ibid.: 272). Still, to my mind, the purpose of any writing pedagogy is to meet students halfway, such that curricula should be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of subjects, local and otherwise. Fortunately the scope of suburban studies includes a wealth of formative popular culture that students can tailor to their own interests.
9. Owens (2001b: 30) advocates a similarly self-revelatory approach to writing, particularly in such writing assignments as “Place Portraits” and “Neighborhood

- Histories” — where “students research their immediate neighborhoods and compose detailed written and visual portraits about where they live.”
10. Rueckert (1996: 121) posits that “to charge the classroom with ecological purpose one has only to begin to think of it in symbiotic terms as a cooperative arrangement which makes it possible to release the stream of energy which flows out of the poet and into the poem, out of the poem and into the readers, out of the readers and into the classroom, and then back into the readers and out of the classroom with them, and finally back into the other larger community in a never ending circuit of life.”
 11. In this fashion we can also work to offset what Killingsworth (2005: 361) identifies as a pervasive “hyperspecialization” — which Owens (2001a: 138 – 42) sees as the “suburbanization of curricula,” the degree to which disciplines isolate themselves — whereby we are prone to believe that “only certain groups are touched by ecological concerns and the interest in place.”

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