

Suburban Life and Place-Conscious Education: The Problem of Local  
Citizenship

By Robert Brooke

"The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, either by job-training or by industry-subsidized research. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially and culturally responsible." --Wendell Berry (2003, 21).

This book presents a challenge to American education. If education as a whole is to help create the citizenry necessary for the challenges of the century we've recently begun, then education needs to help students become more effective citizens. Citizenship, as we understand it, means more than just voting (and kvetching) around presidential elections. We have in mind a more robust kind of citizenship, tied to the participatory traditions of our country, where active citizens take part in fostering and monitoring local communities, where citizens are witnesses and advocates for their region in national and international policy discussions. To create such a participatory citizenship, American education will have to immerse itself more effectively in the local communities where citizenship can be practiced and grown.

The authors of this book advocate for place-conscious education as the main way to create such participatory citizens. As teachers in

the National Writing Project have argued (Berdan, Boulton, Eidman-Aadahl, Fleming, Garner, Rogers, and Solomon, 2006; Brooke, 2003; Robbins & Dyer, 2005), children and young adults learn best when they actively connect their school work to local concerns, when, that is, their school work matters to them and to the community around them. At the college and university level, this same attention to community engagement is central to teachers committed to public rhetoric (Ackerman and Coogan, 2010; Flower, 2008; Rose and Weiser, 2010; Welch, 2008). In our Rural Voices (2003, 13), Nebraska Writing Project teachers summarized a main element of place-conscious education as follows:

[P]lace conscious education centers schooling in a deep understanding of local place, spiraling outward to include more distant knowledge in all areas of the curriculum. While all people are certainly citizens of the world, place-conscious educators believe people learn to be active citizens by engaging with local issues, which they can actually affect and which directly influence the quality of life in their community.

Further, this book defines a particular kind of place as the crucial arena for place-conscious education: the suburban classroom. If the 2010 Census and the geographers who study it are correct, more Americans now live in suburban spaces than anywhere else. In fact, in demographic terms the past century might well be named the century of suburban expansion (Beauregard 2006), a century in which Americans migrated to suburbs from small rural communities and from traditional urban centers in greater and greater numbers, creating what Robert

Lang (2003) calls the edgeless cityscapes of today. Since the end of World War II, the constant population rise in this country has been in suburban living. It is in suburbia that most American youth are educated. It is in suburbia where the dominant modes of citizenship for the next century will be created.

And suburbia, as a location for place conscious life and learning, is a particularly vexed space. The structures of suburbia (political, demographical, and architectural) make it hard to see connections between the suburban home and the region's peoples, environments, and history. As geographer Jon Teaford (2008) points out, the cultural "myths" of the suburbs makes suburbia itself hard to see. Contrary to the media's image of suburbia as a rich, white, prefabricated cul-de-sac of sameness (think The Stepford Wives or American Beauty - the suburban image most denounced by critics like James Kunstler (1994; 2001) or Phillip Langdon (1994)), there are so many kinds of suburbs, and so many different kinds of people living there, that generalizations rarely capture the full story. Instead, geographers point out three ongoing tensions or issues that illuminate suburbia:

1) Diversity and housing: With over half of our nation living in suburbia, suburbia as a whole is remarkably diverse. As Teaford (2008, 218) points out, there's a suburb for everybody:

There are straight suburbs and gay suburbs. There are suburbs for seniors and others for horses. Some suburbs are predominantly African American, others are overwhelmingly Hispanic, and still others are exclusively Anglo. . . . Nothing

about suburbia precludes any form of endeavor or way of life.

And as America becomes more suburban, the suburbs will continue to reflect the rich diversity of the nation.

Yet within any single suburb, the residents are likely to be similar in lifestyle, class, and often ethnicity. To maintain this local similarity, the issue of housing - especially the percentage and definition of low-cost housing in any new development - remains the flash point and mechanism for self-selection of suburban residents. As Teaford puts it, "municipalities make vigorous use of the zoning powers, excluding uses and people deemed detrimental to home values . . . Though the nation has long given lip service to the ideal of equal opportunity, exclusionary zoning thwarts the efforts of some Americans to realize their desired place in suburbia." (159-60). Suburban life, thus, is routinely suspended between the astounding diversity of the region and the insularity of like-minded in the specific suburb.

2) Freedom/Self-Determination and responsibility: Geographers routinely point to suburban policy debates as test cases for contrasting American ideals of individual freedom and civic responsibility. As Goddard (2012, 164) points out, an acreage owner in an independent suburban community is curiously kin to Jefferson's ideal of the independent yeoman farmer, seeking life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness alongside a spirited defense of individual property rights. At the same time, geographers like Beauregard (2006, 188) denounce the historical reality of white flight from urban civic responsibility as a "national shame." He writes:

The flight to the suburbs produced a moral divide. It created a spatial separation between one group of people—white, relatively affluent—and another, mostly nonwhite and poor. The separation that enabled suburbanites to avoid urban problems and people unlike themselves reflected and exacerbated a moral disregard for the needs of those in the cities and a political reluctance to support a collective response.

Suburban communities - especially those incorporated as separate municipalities - are routinely suspended between the protection of individual rights to property and self-determination versus the wider metropolitan region's needs for integrated approaches to decisions. The current and ongoing debates over Regional Competitive Acts, Metropolitan Compacts, School District Consolidation Agreements, and Smart Growth initiatives all point to this thorny issue (Lucy & Phillips, 2000).

3) Landscape and Ecology: "Suburbia was always meant to be green," wrote Joel Garreau (1991: 399). But the specific nature of suburbia's green space remains an enduring issue. The relationship between the imagined or iconic green space of the suburban community on the one hand, and the actual geographic land on the other, continues to vex suburban living. This relationship is key to understanding the issue of suburban sprawl (Lindstrom and Bartling 2003) and the accelerating pace of suburban development of once agricultural or "undeveloped" land. Goddard (2012) describes how suburban living has, since the 1940s, been an imagined "country" space. Savage and Lapping (2003) describe how the influx of urban

commuters to nearby rural communities change the very idea of what life there is supposed to be. The New Urbanist movement in community planning (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 2000) is centered on the idea of returning to the walkable neighborhood as the ideal place of human living. The issue of what the landscape is, what we imagine it to be, and what is actually sustainable given the physical realities of water, land, and resources, continue to define suburban experience.

Place conscious education, of course, is centered in the complex tensions that suburban living is both shaped by and obscures. The issues of diversity, civic responsibility, and actual landscape are exactly the issues for local understanding and action that place conscious education seeks to engage. To become active local citizens, young people must learn to see these three issues and understand how they impact local living. If place conscious education, and the kind of active citizenry it seeks to create, is to have any force in American consciousness, then place conscious education must take root in suburbia.

"The question can be validly raised," wrote poet and activist Adrienne Rich almost thirty years ago in another context (1972, 68), "Is this existing public educational system, school, or university the place where such a relationship to language can be developed? Aren't those structures already too determined, haven't they too great a stake in keeping things as they are? My response would be, yes, but this is where the students are." In our era, over three decades after Rich's words, "where the students are" has changed, but her principle endures. What does it mean, for educators interested in

place-conscious citizenship, that "where most of our students are" is suburbia—and what does it mean that this is where most of us are too? These are the questions we will explore in this book.

### Suburbia as Geographical and Psychological Space: A Brief History

What exactly is a suburb, and what is it like to live there? These are crucial questions for educators, if, as contemporary geographers argue, over half of the school-age children in the United States now live in suburbia. They are especially vexing questions since the term "suburb" is not precise. Officially, the 2010 US Census does not use "suburb" as a category: Census Director Robert Groves (2011) argues that the term has "many potential definitions . . . best suited for different uses" and hence is imprecise.

In the geographic literature, the term "suburbs" applies to communities that surround and extend from a given metropolis, but the concept is complicated because the array of such communities includes very different kinds of civic bodies. Geographers identify at least the following four kinds of "suburbs":

- Traditional suburban housing developments, tacked on to the existing city, either inside or outside that city/county boundary, primarily residential in character (Beauregard, 2006). These suburbs are often loosely categorized as "first tier" or "inner" suburbs, as opposed to "outer" or "metropolitan fringe" or "exurban" suburbs

- categories that suggest an ongoing process of new suburbs creating rings of development around old ones. A crucial contemporary issue is the ongoing decline of "inner" suburbs, now long-since city-locked by more recent construction. Many of the nation's most ghettoized communities are "inner" suburbs (Lucy and Phillips, 2000).

- Edge or edgeless cities, full-fledged urban areas of recent origin (30 years ago, the new urban area was rural) that now meet residents' needs for jobs, shopping, and entertainment. These new communities might be organized around new civic hubs (the edge cities of Garreau 1991) or around uncentered sprawls of office development (the edgeless cities of Lang 2003). In both cases, claims Teaford (2008, 92), commercially "the edge" has become "more significant than the core."
- Micropolises and bedroom communities, or previously rural communities outlying a metropolitan center and presently buffered from them by some open country, in the process of being colonized by the larger metropolitan center. Officially, the 2010 Census requires an urban center of 10,000 for a county to be categorized as micropolitan (50,000 is required for metropolitan). Yet geographers interested in "suburban sprawl" are especially concerned with this changing boundary between rural and suburban, and the changing nature of small rural communities in the "exurban" shadow of nearby micropolitan or metropolitan



areas (Savage and Lapping, 2003).

- Relovilles and Penurbia, or planned/gated communities for the affluent, located in the "penumbric shadow" of metropolis's expanding exurban rim. Kilborn (2009) defines Relovilles as communities designed for mobile workers of large corporations drawing annual incomes between \$100,000 and \$200,000, who expect to stay in any given community only 2-4 years and need new, resaleable housing. Goddard (2012) defines Penurbia as the affluent exurban country estates loosely connected to major metropolitan areas, a space that "looks like the country but thinks like the city. Or rather, it looks like the city thinks the country should look" (2).

While all four forms of suburbia are distinct, all share a common population history. Historically, the development of suburbia has followed a relatively consistent path, as metropolitan scholars Beauregard (2006) and Teaford (2006; 2008) both explain. While urban expansion has of course been a feature of the American landscape since the arrival of the European-Americans, the development of traditional suburbia can be dated to the period 1945-1970. In this quarter century, traditional suburbs were built and settled around virtually all cities, with corresponding population drifts away from the urban core of those cities and away from the rural areas of most states. This demographic shift in our nation came about because of the increased national industrial economy following World War II, the rise of the automobile as a cheap and individual form of transportation,

and the corresponding availability of the "American Dream" of single-family dwellings and community self-determination.

Prior to 1945, as Teaford (2006; 2008) points out, the downtown of any major city centered urban life. People of all classes worked and shopped and were entertained downtown, used public transportation to reach and leave downtown, and lived within access of downtown. While cities certainly were segregated into neighborhoods by race, class, and ethnicity, the primacy of the downtown area for jobs, shopping, and entertainment meant that daily life routinely involved contact with cultural and ethnic pluralism. Living in an American city, thus, meant living with an awareness of the cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of that region, with all the corresponding tensions brought about by living in such close quarters. Teaford suggests that part of the motivation behind the explosion of suburbs after 1945 was a release from these tensions.

Between 1945 and the 1970s, the traditional suburbs that sprung up around American cities allowed most urban workers to move their families into lives of greater homogeneity. The country's economic prosperity allowed individual workers to afford the main elements of "the American Dream" of the 1950s: a single-family dwelling and a car. Suburban planners and housing developers catered to this new affluence by creating new subdivisions and suburbs with largely prefabricated houses of similar design and expense. The traditional suburbs hence allowed the urban population to segregate itself by class, based on the cost of those houses in a given area. In a traditional suburb, shopping, schooling, and entertainment all were within biking distance

of the new residence. While the family's wage earner might still drive the new freeway system to the office or factory, the family's life could become much more insular. Teaford (2006) provides some compelling evidence of the segregating impact of the initial suburban development period, from the planned race-segregated suburbs surrounding Los Angeles to the planned "retirees only, no children allowed" communities of Sun City, Arizona. While suburbia as a whole has always been remarkably diverse, with settlements catering to the "richly contrasting mosaic that corresponds to the diversity of contemporary American life (43)," the specific suburban community is likely to be planned (and chosen by residents) to reflect a lifestyle island. Teaford (2008) points out that there's now a suburb for everybody. Those valuing ethnic diversity might seek out the suburbs which are the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States (Aurora, Colorado and Bellevue, Washington as of the time of his writing); those wanting a community limited to seniors, or equestrians, or gays, or high net worth individuals, will also find a place limited to those demographics.

The flip side of the suburban explosion, of course, was the depopulation of other areas, both urban and rural. In urban centers during this quarter century, urban neighborhoods became abandoned by the white-collar families moving to the suburbs, giving rise to the so-called ghettos. In rural areas, depopulation occurred as families and young people moved to the suburbs for work. As Wendell Berry points out in his aptly-titled The Unsettling of America (1977) the combination of national agricultural policies that had created the

Dust Bowl of the 1930s alongside the new urban prosperity of the late 1940s post-war boom made it increasingly difficult to sustain rural life. He views the quarter century of suburban explosion as the last step in a century-long process of enforced "unsettling" the American rural landscape. Berry's ideas are currently being reinterpreted by scholars of suburban sprawl (Lindstrom and Bartling, 2003) and penurbia (Goddard 2012), who point out that new suburban developments often sought to recreate an imaginary kind of "country living" just outside the existing metropolitan rim. Goddard (2012) analyses the marketing of "country living" from 1945 to today as the iconic American ideal in mainstream magazines Town and Country, Mother Earth, Good Housekeeping and Country Living. For Goddard, this idea of "penurbia" - a pastoral space on the periphery of metropolis while still in the "penumbric shadow" of metropolitan cultural light - connects directly to the accelerating pace of suburban sprawl. (He cites [p. 2] the American Farmland Trust's 2012 rate of agricultural-to-suburban-land-development of "2 acres per minute" and [p.4] the New York Times Almanac estimate that "Nearly one-quarter of Americans lived on farms in 1940; only one in fifty did in 2010.") So Berry's historic depopulation of rural areas clearly went hand in hand with a new suburban reimagining of "country" life.

Summing up the period from 1945 to the 1970s, geographer Robert Beauregard (2006) claims that the rise of the suburbs produced a troubling, long-term shift in American consciousness:

Once the industrial cities began to seem obsolete and no longer offered opportunities for wealth and fame, Americans forgot

about them. Only unavoidable pleas for help or the possibility that their problems would overflow into the suburbs elicited assistance. For Americans, history is the past, and the past is that which has been discarded. The history of the country is a record of what has been achieved and thus of places and institutions that have served their purpose and are now no longer needed. This is how the industrial cities were treated after World War II. (194).

Calling this shift in American consciousness "a combination of historical amnesia and chauvinism," Beauregard suggests that the rise of the suburbs meant that Americans "turned away from a robust and compassionate public culture" (196). He sees both the country's enduring political divisions during the civil rights era of the late 1960s-early 1970s and the urban crisis of the mid-1970s-early 1980s economic downturn as emerging from the "amnesia and chauvinism" of the rise to suburbia. When the national economy dipped in the mid-1970s, bringing with it a slow-down in the housing boom and widespread financial troubles in many industrial cities, the limitations of the move to suburbia became nationally apparent.

Of course, suburbanization has not ceased since the mid-1970s economic downturn. Instead, claim contemporary geographers, it has changed its form. As Joel Garreau pointed out (1991), what has happened since the late 1970s is that suburbs have ceased to be subservient to any pre-existing urban core. The very word "suburb" no longer captures the geographic reality: where, during the 1945-1970 explosion, a traditional "suburb" may have been community that existed

"sub-" or under the city it surrounded, in the metropolitan landscape post-1975 there is no actual center around which to revolve. Teaford (2008) goes even farther:

Suburbia's multitudinous communities have rendered the older notion of the city largely obsolete and have created the amorphous metropolitan regions of today where there is no single focus for the lives of residents throughout the area. They are not subordinate to the urb; but they are subversive to the whole concept of the urb. (xii; his italics)

Instead, our major metropolitan areas have evolved into centerless conglomerates of "edge cities" stretching across vast amounts of previously rural or residential territory. People living in these edge cities work, sleep, shop, and recreate wholly within that civic space, not needing in any way the once-center city to which they are sometimes attached. Garreau's examples of edge cities included the eastern seaboard cities stretching from New Jersey to Boston, the western seaboard of southern California, and the conglomerates of new cities around Atlanta, Phoenix, Washington DC, and Dallas/Fort Worth. By 1991 Garreau identified more than two hundred "edge cities" that fit under his now-famous five-part definition: a city with at least five million square feet of leasable office space; six hundred thousand square feet of retail space; a population that increases at 9 AM on workdays; a clear local awareness of the city as a destination itself for jobs, shopping, and entertainment; and a recent history (the city didn't exist as an urban center 30 years ago).

Peter Kilborn (2009) provides an intriguing update of the edge city idea. As Kilborn points out, up until (and perhaps past) the home mortgage crisis of 2007, the development of newer and more affluent edge cities has been a constant feature of the new globalization of American business. With the development of global technology and large multinational corporations that sustain it, a growing number of American professional workers have become "Relos." Kilborn defines Relos as "corporate relocatees or career transferees" who move every few years as they shift companies or positions within companies, and are relocated to new parts of the United States or abroad. As an upwardly mobile professional class, Relos are "economically homogenous, with mid-career incomes of \$100,000-\$200,000," and are predominately white and Midwestern in origin (though Asian Americans outnumber African Americans and Hispanic Americans, counter to the nation's overall demographics). Relovilles, or edgeless cities that cater to the new confluence of corporation and mobile professionals, are built on the cheap land outside existing metropolitan centers. Kilborn lists the Top 25 Relovilles just after his title page, and his list includes several of the edge cities identified by Garreau (1991) and studied by Teaford (2006): Alpharetta, Georgia; Plano, Texas; Woodbury, Minnesota. What's striking about the \$250,000-to-\$400,000 multi-bedroom homes in these new communities is that they are built to be resold. With the average Relo expecting to be relocated again within two-to-five years, resale value is key.

In short, the history of suburban development since 1945 suggests some enduring themes for suburban living, whether in the traditional suburbs that sprung up after World War II or in the Edge Cities, Relovilles, and exurban Penurbia of today. Suburban living in all four forms is:

- Tied to mobility and our financial ability to migrate;
- Based in the American Dream of self-determined single family housing, located in diverse communities of others who are "like us";
- Dominated by the "new"—new construction, new communities, etc.;
- Historically naïve and disconnected, that is, not linked to the cultural history of the region's traditional urban centers, nor to the natural and agricultural history of the land on which the suburban development now rests.

For the young people who grow up in any form of suburbia, the dominant message is of migration in service of career. As Kilborn (2009) explains, citing an interview with anthropologist Bradd Shore, career migration and relocation has now become the defining characteristic of the 70 per cent of the population that makes up the middle class:

Bradd Shore segments the classes by their attachment to hometowns and their predisposition to move. As we toured the Relovilles north of Atlanta, Shore said a town's upper class—its entrenched doctors, lawyers, accountants, its leading stockbrokers, insurance agents, and business owners—has the means to either move out or stick around and prepare their own children to



succeed them. By contrast, Shore said, many who land in the working class—as farmhands, grocery store cashiers, mill workers, and school janitors—are too rooted or ill-equipped to go. They might not have a parent to open doors, the skills for a better job somewhere else, or even the funds for the trip there for an interview. Or maybe they don't want to shed their only real wealth: their extended families, churches, ethnic ties, and shared interests and rituals. The remaining middle class, in Shore's view, amounts to about 70 percent of the population. Its kids have neither the choices of the rich nor the immobility of the poor. They are congenital itinerants whose families raise them to chase the American Dream wherever it leads, much as their forefathers did in chasing it west. Like the pioneers, the middle class equates wealth with perseverance and mobility. "You define yourself as belonging to the middle class through various kinds of mobility," Shore said. (87)

According to Shore's analysis, contemporary class consciousness is deeply tied to careerist mobility in the pursuit of individual wealth. The suburban life experience is a huge part of this class consciousness. Where both the very rich and the working poor are integrated into regional place, the mobile middle class is not, and the trappings of suburbia help obscure any connection that might be there. If the subdivision you grow up in didn't exist 30 years ago, if your family has moved to similar (or slightly more affluent) subdivisions already at least once during your childhood years, and if

you've been raised and taught to believe that you'll need to move yourself to where the best job is in order to make a career of your own, then it becomes exceedingly difficult to imagine your region as something important in its own right.

Embedded in this view of the transitory suburban home, of course, are the psychological effects that so excite suburban geographers. Over and over in the literature three main negative consequences are identified:

- Suburbia, while overall diverse, is locally segregationist: While suburbia as a whole is extremely diverse, because individual suburbs separate the populace into isolated, "like" groups, suburban living makes it harder to engage fully with social issues that cut across race, class, and cultural lines.
- Suburbia is ahistorical: Because the built environment of suburbia is so recent, it is harder for suburban dwellers to develop, understand, and act from any deep sense of regional history.
- Suburbia is unsustainable: Because the transitory nature of suburban living always requires newer, more modern suburbs, suburban development of all forms places unrealistic and unsustainable demands on the region's ecosystem, while eliding the cost of such development.

Each criticism is psychologically complex because, as the critics point out, the felt experience of suburban living is in conflict with the geographical and demographical reality of the region. Let's examine the conflicted experience in each of these three widespread

criticisms.

Segregation: The segregation criticism of suburban living is probably the clearest example of the conflicted nature of such experience. Put simply, while the psychological effect of suburban living may be a kind of segregation, the physical reality of most regions now works toward cultural pluralism. Hence, suburban experience tends to place additional psychological demands on its residents to make sense of the difference between their lived experience and their wider understanding of their region (and, for the high-income Relos, of increasing corporate globalization).

Writing of the rise of traditional suburbs between 1950 and 1970, Beauregard (2006, 173) summarizes the logical progression toward a segregationist mindset:

The embrace of suburbia meant the rejection of an urbanity that had nurtured the coexistence of diverse peoples and life experiences from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The resultant pluralism had been central to the nation's identity. An urbanization that rejected density and social diversity impaired the moral ties that might have enabled the country to "save" its cities. First, commitment eroded as households fled to the suburbs and the sprawling Sunbelt cities. Then, attachment diminished as the suburbs became self-sufficient. Finally, empathy waned as race and crime came to symbolize the central cities. A sense of national belonging was severely compromised.

For Beauregard, the psychological effect of moving to (and living in) a suburb, surrounded by similar houses with similar families in them, was a gradual eroding of the cultural and ethnic pluralism that had been central to the national identity. Commitment to, attachment to, and empathy for that national pluralism eroded the longer Americans lived in segregated suburban enclaves. As what he terms "parasitic urbanization" (where a suburb needed the metropolitan center for employment and industry) gave way to Edge City autonomy, this lack of commitment, attachment, and empathy increased. The reality of ethnic and cultural diversity in the region, of course, never went away: the physical structure of suburban isolation just made it psychologically harder to see.

Yet, in direct contradiction to the isolating effects of suburban enclaves set apart by race and class, the demographic reality has been that, since 1950, every region of our country has increased in cultural diversity—including the array of suburbs within each region. As Teaford (2006) points out in his chapter on "boomburbs" circa 2001, many of the sprawling edgeless cities had become home to an increasing array of new immigrant Americans. According to Teaford, life in the boomburbs circa 2000 was exceeding different from the simple isolationism of the "parasitic" suburb of 1960. On the one hand, cultural plurality existed right in the boomburb. On the other hand, the charters of neighborhood homeowner's associations, the emergence of gated communities, and the physical layout of freeways and major strip malls separating neighborhoods with real barriers caused suburban isolation to remain a felt reality. With more than 7

million American households in gated communities by 2001, "the walls provided needed edges in the edgeless city, boundaries that distinguished neighbors from intruders, the privileged from the poor, and the protected from the vulnerable" (244-5).

In short, in most forms of suburban living, segregation is a mindset but not a reality, a function of the carefully constructed nature of suburban space. The layout of suburbs, edge cities, and relovilles, along with the neighborhood associations within them, allows for an implied "concept of community where some belonged and some did not" (Teaford 2006: 245), even while the overall demographics of the city or region may show large increases in immigrant population and cultural diversity.

History: Another psychological effect of living in transitory, recent, and replaceable space is a shift in our sense of history. History, says Garreau (1991), is Edge City's problem because "it has none" (9), emphasizing the recent built landscape of malls, tech parks, housing subdivisions, schools and corporate offices that make up an Edge City. To live in such a space is to be reminded, hourly, of the newness of things. Of course, in the same bifurcated consciousness we saw in suburban segregation, the psychological newness of a 25 year old Edge City is located in a physical regional history that goes much further back—psychology is again at odds with physical reality.

Rural theorist Wendell Berry argues that such a lack of history merely a symptom of a much deeper problem. He writes (2003):

One of the primary results—and one of the primary needs—of industrialism is the separation of people and places and products from their histories. To the extent that we participate in the industrial economy, we do not know the histories of our meals or our habitats or of our families. This is an economy, and in fact a culture, of the one-night stand. (113)

For Berry, the migratory nature of suburban living depends on an almost absolute and widespread ignorance of history. Not just history in the cultural literacy sense, as in the media questionnaires about American Presidents that show up around Independence Day, but the history of all aspects of our lives. In Berry's phrase, "people, places, and products" all have become separated from their histories in the contemporary industrialized world. The corporate manager and family now in a Reloville outside Atlanta may have lived in Hong Kong, Colorado, New Jersey, and Texas in the past decade, and within Reloville culture what that manager "does" is much more important than where the family comes from. Similarly, since the family will only live in Alphaville for 4-8 years, there's not much point in learning Georgia history or even choosing to live in a subdivision based on "authentic" Southern architecture (if one could be found). And, for Berry most damning, the products consumed by a contemporary migratory family are equally migratory and history-less. The family most likely doesn't know where the beef comes from that's served in the local strip mall, where the wood came from that frames their current 2-year-old home, or even who made the furniture for the family's new den (or how those workers were trained, who by, and where). As Berry sums it

up, "the global economy institutionalizes a global ignorance, in which producers and consumers cannot know or care about one another, and in which the history of all products will be lost." (121

Peter Kilborn, a much less polemical and prophetic writer than Wendell Berry, offers strong evidence for the psychological reality of the historical ignorance of transitory Relos. Citing his interviews with pastors, mayors, and elected officials of many of today's major Relovilles, Kilborn (2009) points to a number of salient trends: the lack of attendance at school events, including athletics; the choice to donate to civic causes somewhere else (such as where parents or grandparents live) rather than in the local community; the difficulty of getting residents to volunteer for any forms of community service; the desire for housing and churches and shopping venues that are similar to those in other Relovilles rather than anything specific to the region. In short, while the large estates of these communities may make a Reloville a nice place to live, rarely are they felt to be a "real" place to live.

Unsustainable: Directly tied to the criticism of historical ignorance is the criticism of unsustainable resource exploitation. Put simply, it takes a large amount of resources to transform a landscape of agricultural fields, trees, and open spaces to a built landscape of malls, subdivisions, schools, churches, and office complexes. The debate over whether or not that allocation of resources is worthwhile is ongoing. Critics of suburban experience all across the nation claim the pace of resource consumption is unsustainable (that is, we will run out of resources before we run out

of places someone wants to build). Joel Garreau calls the debate over development "the new civil war" in our country (401). This "new civil war" is complicated because the strong arguments for sustainable "smart growth" conflict directly with deeply held beliefs about individual property rights. The two ideologies remain in daily combat wherever local zoning ordinances, right to sell property, and differing ideas of development come into contact.

At issue is the actual land that goes under the bulldozer in the development of suburban sprawl. As Savage and Lapping (2003) point out, the land that's to be developed isn't empty:

Sprawl occurs not on a tabula rosa landscape but rather on a peopled and working rural landscape. Sprawl is an amazingly disruptive force that triggers conflict and rearranges the rural and village geography, economy, and society in the most profound ways. (5)

The "working rural landscape" into which suburban development moves is a complex mix of agriculture, small rural communities, and any abutting areas of natural preserves left near urban areas in the continental United States. How we conceive of this landscape - as a regional resource shared in certain ways commonly; as individuals' property to do with as they see fit - is a core issue.

The basic assertion of the Smart Growth advocates is that suburban (and urban) development is possible in a sustainable way, if planned with a sense of the needs of the entire region. (See the active Smart Growth Network list of over 40 organizational partners (2013). See also the "Canons of Sustainable Architecture and



Urbanism" on the Congress for New Urbanism website.) Teaford (2008)

summarizes:

The basic principles of smart growth are the creation of compact, dense, walkable, mixed-use communities; preservation of open space and farmland; promotion of public transit with a resulting decline in the use of the automobile; and provision of a range of housing options including affordable units. Dedicated to curbing sprawl and getting people out of their automobiles, smart growth proponents envision a world where Americans will waste less land and walk more. (197)

The explicit target of the smart growth advocates is unrestrained suburban sprawl. In contrast to the unsustainable development of new suburbs in exurban areas, they advocate careful regional planning of "human scale" communities. The key premises of this movement reach across all forms of suburbia, addressing the potential revitalization of declining "inner" suburbs as well as the planned construction of New Urbanist communities, such as Kentlands, Maryland or Celebration, Florida.

In contrast, the opponents of smart growth planning across the country argue that the regional zoning instructions necessary to enforce these ideas place too great a burden on individual property owners. This was the core issue behind Oregon's Measure 37 of 2004 (and the revision, via Measure 49, in 2007). That proposition required adequate state compensation to the landowner if regional zoning wouldn't allow development. If individual landowners couldn't sell exurban land to developers, the advocates argued, then their

personal property rights were in jeopardy. By contrast, the penurban residents of Loudoun County, Virginia studied by Goddard (2012) organized against planned development because they wanted to preserve the larger estates from planned higher density housing developments. They also argued "personal property rights" in the face of regional planning.

In short, the debates surrounding suburban sprawl and sustainability point out enduring psychological effects of suburban living. The city's edge, the exurban arena where rural and metropolitan collide, is home to both ideological and ideational battles over the nature of country and the nature of property.

#### Basics of Place-Conscious Education

As this brief history of suburbia and its criticisms indicates, the physical and psychological experience of suburban living works against the development of robust citizenship as we define it in this book. To be able to live lives that are "economically, politically, socially and culturally responsible," as Wendell Berry states in the epigram to this chapter, young citizens will need to imagine themselves in a different relationship to local place. Rather than seeing place as a transitory place you're currently passing through ("now we're in Omaha, but Dad says we might be moving to Chicago next year") or an abstract, distant point of origin ("our family's originally from Nebraska, and before that Eastern Russia"), robust citizens will need to see the local place as a particular, rich mix of

cultural heritage, natural resources and wonders, opportunities, and challenges. This is the task of place-conscious education.

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. -David Sobel, 2004.

In his short, oft-cited manual for "place-based education," David Sobel (2004) suggests that the most successful and enduring communities are based on a "three-legged stool" of academic achievement, social capital, and environmental quality. Schools, he points out, do not exist apart from the community that sends its children there. Neither do schools exist apart from the physical landscape in which that community is located. While it is possible to narrow attention to just one of these items, it is counterproductive to do so. He writes:

While we all started out thinking that our focus was on school improvements and academic achievement, we have come to realize that our focus is equally on creating vital communities and

preserving the quality of the environment. We are now aware that there is a dynamic tension between these three elements—that together they form a three-legged stool that will not stand if any one of the legs is missing. Try to improve a school without actively engaging the community, and your efforts won't garner the budget support and human capital necessary for success. Emphasize community development without the involvement of the school and you won't have the youthful energy that makes projects work. Build thriving local economies with little concern for the environment and you'll find businesses will have trouble attracting workers because people aren't willing to raise children amidst deteriorated air and water. (36)

Sobel's vision, in short, is for a deeply-considered collaboration between schools and local place. His vision of healthy communities requires the mutual support of education, community vitality, and environmental vitality. With all three in place, a community will continue to thrive. With any one missing, that same community may well be at risk.

Within Sobel's vision of the "three-legged stool" of vital communities, education itself has an important role: helping students understand their role in the local community and environment. As other critics have pointed out (Brooke, 2006; Zencey, 1996), this role involves a significant redirection for American education, for the dominant educational model is towards portable, context-less information processing that leads our best and brightest students to imagine themselves as "rootless" or "migratory" intellectuals. If

students are educated to see themselves as part of an abstract "ivory tower" committed to the study of a specific discipline, or to see themselves as developing globally marketable personal skills that they can use anywhere the best jobs are offered, then these students find little reason for imagining their lives as rooted in specific regions and communities. While the dominant migratory model of education may have served the interests of American expansion and multinational economic development in the last century, this same model of education has exacerbated the decline of many American communities and regions because it leads students away from developing clear ideas of local citizenship. To embrace the goal of helping students understand their role in local community and environment, thus, would be to redirect education from inculcating rootless migration to developing committed local citizenship.

In the past decade, this new role for education has been adopted and refined by many practitioners of place-conscious education, in a variety of rural and urban contexts. The task of this book is to consider how place-conscious education might be connected more directly to the particular context of suburban classrooms—a demographic area where place-conscious education has largely been absent. To prepare for the task of extending place conscious work to suburban contexts, I'd like to summarize the main ideas from the existing place-conscious scholarship. I'll organize this summary around the current division in the scholarship between rural place-conscious work and urban place-conscious work. I'll take up suburban place conscious possibilities following that.

Rural Place-Conscious Education: David Sobel's "Place-based Education Evaluation Cooperative" in New England (2004) is just one of many rural programs to see place-conscious education as a necessary focus for rural schools. Since the mid 1990s, the Rural School and Community Trust has been promoting place-conscious education as an important component of revitalizing rural America. To combat the ongoing "brain drain" depopulation of rural America, many schools across the country are now working with place-conscious principles. These educators are guided by a core set of educational concepts. Paul Theobald's concept of "intradepence" (1997) suggested that teaching how we "exist by virtue of the necessary relations within a place" might redirect American focus on "independence" as individual rights and self-determination and "interdependence" as the increasing rhetoric of global interaction. To have curriculum "spiral out" from the local to the examination of how national and international forces connect with the local (instead of the other way around) would help students imagine the way their lives, and their communities, are centered in and affected by the content studied in school—a far cry from falsely believing, in the words of Lisa Knopp (1996), that "all real life happened elsewhere." Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal of the Rural School and Community Trust (1998) offered a prophetic list of the goals for place-conscious education, rhetorically crafted as a set of "five senses" to enhance the physical senses so often relied on in language arts education. Haas and Nachtigal imagine five different senses that might enable rural people to live well:

- 1) a sense of place, or living well ecologically;

- 2) a sense of civic involvement, or living well politically;
- 3) a sense of worth, or living well economically;
- 4) a sense of connection, or living well spiritually;
- 5) a sense of belonging, or living well in community (1998).

Our work here in Nebraska with the National Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools program fits solidly in this tradition of place-conscious rural education. In our Rural Voices (2003), teachers from the Nebraska Writing Project described place-conscious units devoted to understanding local culture, heritage, and history through interviews, oral history, and cross-generational partnerships; and place-conscious units devoted to social action on specific community issues, such as preserving a rural school in the face of consolidation or career development in the region. We defined three principles guiding all such work:

- 1) Place-conscious education requires "active students" directly involved in defining and acting on the local issues they see as important;
- 2) Place-conscious education centers schooling in "a deep understanding of local place, spiraling out" to make connections across content areas;
- 3) Place-conscious education aims for a "specific kind of citizenry," active, engaged citizens who "know enough about their natural and cultural region to fashion lives that enhance the communities located there" (13).

In the decade following our involvement with Rural Voices, Country Schools, we have used these principles (and the many examples of

place-conscious units developed from them) as core components of our Rural Institute program—a three-week intensive workshop, based on the National Writing Project model, that helps rural teachers design their own place-conscious units from their knowledge and engagement with their communities. Rural Institute programs like ours have developed as well throughout the National Writing Project's Rural Sites Network, and are aided by online introductions to place-conscious education offered by the Rural School and Community Trust. While all of these programs are complex and multifaceted, most are guided by a rich sense of inquiry into and care for the local region. Understanding that region as a natural, cultural, and historical area with particular opportunities and particular needs is what leads place-conscious rural teachers and their students to define the specific issues they choose to act on.

Urban Place-Conscious Education: Where rural place-conscious educators use concepts of region as the guiding ideas for their work, urban place-conscious educators tend to employ concepts of social difference and social action as their guiding concepts. As described above, rural place-conscious education emerges from a nexus of ideas that explain and emphasize issues facing rural America. If you live in a small community located near productive agriculture and among an aging populace facing depopulation as the ongoing "brain drain" leads young people to migrate out of the region, then the idea of your surrounding region as something of value to be understood, preserved, and protected clearly has importance. Hence, concepts like Sobel's three-legged stool of academics, cultural capital, and



environmentalism, or Theobald's "intradependence," or the new agrarianism promoted by Wendell Berry make a whole lot of sense. By contrast, if you live in a major urban center that's been through cycles of ghettoization and gentrification, where the "natural" landscape is mostly obscured by layers of "built" cityscape, where the community's boundaries are hard to discern and the community bears witness to the waves of immigration and emigration by a variety of cultural, national, and ethnic groups, then social difference and social action make more sense as concepts to guide your engagement with place.

In urban settings, educators interested in connections with local communities, history, diversity, and public policies are likely to describe their work using a different array of terms. Along with "place-based" or "place-conscious" education (Powell and Tassoni 2009; McComsky and Ryan, 2003), urban educators are also likely to describe their work as civic engagement (Ackerman and Coogan 2010), public engagement (Rose & Weiser 2010), public writing (Welch 2008), and community engagement (Flower 2008). Within university composition and rhetoric programs, this array of terms is often located within the field's "public turn" (Mathieu 2005): the shift away from university academic discourses narrowly defined to the "public work of rhetoric" in shaping local policy in the full range of public discussions. Linda Flower (2008), whose Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh is often regarded as a model program for public engagement, summarized this emerging field:

For many educators, this search for both a new rhetoric and relationships that are more diverse has led outside the classroom. Here students no longer study public discourse or community writing from arm's length but become writers and researchers with those groups (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters 1997; Deans 2000). Researchers may draw their subjects into a partnership that goes public in policy discussions and statements (Higgins and Brush 2006). In community-based service learning projects, one uses the role of student, mentor, teachers, researcher, or activist to move beyond the academy and form working relationships across differences of race, class, culture, gender, age, status, or discourse. Many of these community projects then seize the power of publication, art, or multimedia to gain a hearing (Cushman 2006; Flower 2003; Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Heath and Smyth 1999; Hull and James 2007; Robinson 1990; Rousculp 2006).

For Flower and other practitioners of urban civic and public engagement, this process of encountering difference in the multiplicity of urban peoples, inquiring into the complex histories of those differences, and moving to intervention through community dialogue is, finally, a model for social action. Her "intercultural inquiry practice" (Flower, Long, Higgins, 2000; Flower, 2008), for instance, brings students and representatives of the Pittsburgh community together to inquiry into a local issue important to them all, leading often to shared social action. Similarly, Thomas Deans' service learning model (2000) asks students to write "for, about, and

with" their community, noting the different social action implied by each preposition. David Seitz's work ethnographies (2004) immerse students in the study of workplaces and their cultural histories, aiming at personal and social reconsideration. Nedra Reynolds (2004) invites students to adopt critical geography's metaphors of "mapping" and "dwelling" in their urban environments as a means of identifying, understanding, and acting amid the cultural differences they are exposed to by every journey through their city. Nancy Welch (2008) urges educators to teach urban students how to create public space for discourse, rather than merely relying on the pre-existing (and to her mind often ineffectual) officially sanctioned public forums.

Within the National Writing Project, urban place-conscious education has been explicitly linked to social action. In the award winning 2006 volume Writing for a Change, Berdan and her eleven urban colleagues (often co-authoring with their students) describe "social action" projects their classes developed, adopting processes from the Centre for Social Action in England. All of these projects involved students encountering, inquiring into, and intervening in the very local issues of differences in their school and community. Similarly, in the rich and exceptionally well designed "Keeping and Conserving American Communities" program of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project outside Atlanta (2004), Sarah Robbins and Mimi Dwyer use a cultural history approach to urban place-conscious education, offering five "national themes" that influence civic understanding and citizenship across America, along with five specific "local applications" to the Atlanta area.

### National Themes

- 1A) Reclaiming Displaced Heritage
- 2A) Educating for Citizenship
- 3A) Cultivating Homelands
- 4A) Building Cities
- 5A) Shifting Landscapes, Converging People

### Local Georgia Applications

- 1B) Re-examining the Cherokee removal
- 2B) Uplifting a "new" South after the Civil War
- 3B) Farming Georgia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- 4B) Re-imagining Atlanta as cultured, corporate center
- 5B) Re-configuring 21<sup>st</sup> Century Suburbia

Teachers working with "Keeping and Conserving American Communities" worked in cross-grade clusters on one of these themes over a three year period, designing with their students walking tours, dramatic presentations, museum displays, and other public writings. To live well in an urban center like greater Atlanta, Robbins and Dwyer argue, young citizens need to be able to understand the cultural differences around them through rich inquiry grounded in cultural history, and they need to learn how to intervene in their complex civic culture.

In sum, place-conscious education of various kinds has allowed rural and urban teachers to connect their classrooms to the communities and regions in powerful ways. Though rural educators have emphasized the root problem of sustainability (keeping and preserving vanishing landscapes and ways of life) and urban educator have emphasized the root problem of social action in the encounter

with difference, both settings have led to direct connections between classrooms and community. Place-conscious education in both settings may also offer the possibility of new kinds of citizenship to develop, and perhaps in the long term new kinds of civic vitality.

But what about teachers and students in suburban settings? If the core problems of sustainability and difference situate place-conscious education forcefully in rural and urban settings, what core problems and experiences might situate place-conscious education for the simple majority of Americans now living in the suburbs, in the edgeless cityscapes and built environments?

#### Watershed and Commonwealth: How to Belong in Suburban Places

What are the crucial place-conscious issues for the suburban majority? If the brief history of suburbia in this chapter can be a guide, the central issue for suburban residents may well be the overwhelming feeling of disconnection that goes along with the migratory landscape. In the transitory world of today's Edge Cities and Relovilles, the largest felt issue may well be how to belong, and what to belong to, and maybe even where that belonging might take place. Belonging, as a deeply felt sense of continuity and community, is the emotion today's Relos identified as missing in their interviews with Peter Kilborn (2009). Belonging to someplace, something, and someone likewise stands behind Joel Garreau's plea for Edge City to work out the new meaning of the old words "community, civilization, and soul" in our new relationship to land (371).

As noted above, Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal identified belonging as one of the "five senses" crucial to effective place conscious living. In Nebraska Writing Project's 2003 *Rural Voices*, we elaborated on this sense of belonging:

A sense of belonging, or living well in community. "Community," Haas and Nachtigal write, "is how we together create a story about our place." (1998, p.26). This final aspect of living well involved the collective meaning in which one locates one's life, along of continuum of heritage to imagined future that one shares with others. Developing a sense of belonging is, in part, understanding and internalizing the heritage, values, and history of a community, but it is equally developing vision and efficacy. Students need to understand who their community is and why it is that way—they need a healthy, historical, and contemporary sense of celebration and critique of local culture. At the same time, they need to be able to act effectively in and with the community—identifying current strengths and problems, negotiating satisfactorily with community members who hold different opinions, challenging local and external definitions of community that would restrict and stagnate. (12).

Belonging, as we developed the concept, depends on knowledge and vision. To belong to a community, an individual needs to understand the "heritage, values, and history" that have brought that community into being. At the same time, commitment to a community relies on a vision for its future, for a healthy sense of what the community can become.

Both aspects of belonging—a robust sense of history and a vision for the future—are at present missing in the contemporary suburban landscape. Heritage, values, and history, if present in the single family dwellings of suburbia, are brought there from somewhere else in the multigenerational family memory. And it's hard to have a vision for the future if you imagine yourself living somewhere else by the time the next decade rolls around. In short, the main issue for suburban place conscious education would seem to be raising the question of belonging. What forms of historical knowledge and visionary imagination can help suburban students belong in their transitory place?

In this book, we suggest that we can help suburban students find ways to belong by focusing their attention on the "watershed" and the "commonwealth," that is, on the two large-scale units of interdependence in which any community exists. Roughly speaking, a "watershed" is an ecological entity: a network of mutually interdependent natural systems that work together around a particular river system. A "commonwealth" is a cultural entity: a network of mutually interdependent cultural systems that work together within a particular political entity. To understand yourself (and your community) as part of a watershed and commonwealth, thus, is to see yourself (and your community) as enmeshed in a certain set of ecological and cultural relations.

We borrow the terms "watershed" and "commonwealth" from Wendell Berry's short essay of that name (2003). Berry points out that any region is at once an ecological and cultural system, and that viewing

the region as a system carries with it a certain set of responsibilities. Writing of watersheds, Berry asserts:

People who live at the lower ends of watersheds cannot be isolationists—or not for long. Pretty soon they will notice that water flows, and that will set them to thinking about the people upstream who either do or do not send down their silt and pollutants and garbage. Thinking about the people upstream ought to cause further thinking about the people downstream. Such pondering on the facts of gravity and the fluidity of water shows us that the golden rule speaks to a condition of absolute interdependency and obligation. People who live on rivers—or, in fact, anywhere in a watershed—might rephrase the rule in this way: Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you. (135)

Berry's rephrasing of the golden rule ("do to those downstream as you want those above you to do to you") shifts the old Biblical maxim from reciprocity to system. Instead of merely treating others as you want to be treated, Berry asks us to recognize our place within a mutually interdependent system of relations. Wherever you are in the watershed, your quality of life depends on those upstream. While you can't affect those people directly by how you live, your actions will determine the quality of life of those downstream. We are part of an ecological system, and a complicated system at that, in which the ethics of others determines our life quality, even while our ethics affects still others.

Berry is quick to point out, however, that any given watershed is not only a physical or natural entity. Because of the human



habitation within that watershed, because of the economic and cultural relations to the watershed that human habitation has developed, any given place is also a "commonwealth":

I have begun speaking of the river both because it is itself a common wealth, and because it instructs us so unsparingly about the condition and the requirements of living in a common wealth. We have come to think of the word "commonwealth" as merely synonymous with "state" or "political body." I am attempting here to use the term in its literal sense, unfortunately obsolete, of the general welfare, the public good, the wealth that can only be held in common. (135-6)

The "wealth held in common" in any region, of course, is more than simply the natural resources of the region (though natural resources are part of a region's common wealth). To see a region's wealth as only the exploitable natural resource (such as, say, coal in Berry's home state of Kentucky) is to miss the wider wealth of "general welfare, public good" that is held in common.

When your community loses a school, a church, a doctor, a grocery or hardware store, a restaurant, or a garage, what does that cost you and your community? . . . The point is obvious: In a national and increasingly international industrial economy, the land-dependent people who do the actual work of production are served last; their places and communities are served not at all. (138)

For Berry, a "common wealth" is the sum total of the heritage, values, and history of a given region, the ways of life that are part of the general welfare of the place. Like the physical watershed itself,

these aspects of wealth-held-in-common are part of a larger system of interdependencies. Hence, the life choices of work economics are involved in the same complicated ethics as the river itself—not simply “reciprocal economics, a game of tit for tat,” but the more complicated system of responsibilities where those downstream are always affected by those upstream.

To see watershed and commonwealth, in Berry's vision, is to focus on belonging and responsibility. The knowledge needed, he claims, is knowledge of interdependencies: How does a watershed work? How does what happens upstream affect lives downstream, and what would make the whole system healthy? Similarly, what is the local commonwealth, the cultural and natural elements of the general welfare, and how does our work contribute to that commonwealth? Contrary to the “reciprocal economics” suggested by the “increasingly international industrial economy” where trade is over-simplified to the exchange of product for wage, or labor for wage, Berry suggests we develop knowledge about the more complicated economics of watershed and common wealth, for a wider sense of how the whole system works, and what our place in that system might be. He writes:

I am interested in preserving the common wealth—the land and the people—of Kentucky. I don't see how this can be done if we Kentuckians don't develop strong, stable, land-and-people-conserving local economies, making the most of local investment, local labor, local loyalty, local diversity, and local caretaking. I think that real jobs—that is to say vocations, callings, lives of work, and working lives—are offered and

preserved only by such economies. (140).

In Berry's view, preserving the common wealth—land and people, or watershed and commonwealth—will come about when individuals in his region choose working lives that are aware of the systemic relations in which their localities are involved. His spiritual terms for these life choices ("vocations, callings") suggests the deep sense of belonging that can come from seeing the wider systemic relations.

Seeing wider systematic relations, of course, involves the development of vision. A sense of belonging emerges from a developed vision of your place in the world. "Vision" here means two distinct things: First, vision means seeing what's around you clearly, that is, being able to describe what actually is going on now, here, in this place, in its relation to other places—a sense of vision related to understanding the present as it has been shaped by the past. Second, vision means having a vision for the future, that is, a critical, informed idea of what your place can become and how it can contribute.

In this book, we suggest that developing vision of the wider systemic relationships of watershed and commonwealth is crucial for suburban students. Such vision can enable them to address the central question of belonging found in so many critiques of suburban life. All three of the consistent critiques described earlier in this chapter stem from difficulties with vision, with the distance between the psychological effects of living in suburban spaces and the physical realities of the region. The alternative to the issues of segregation, historical naivety, and unsustainable exploitation is a

clearer vision of what's really in the region, why, and how that might lead to a vision for the future.

Vision, in short, leads to understanding. At the same time, understanding the connections of the home suburb to the watershed and commonwealth of the region is the route to the new kind of citizenry called for by place-conscious education—a citizenry not merely absorbed into the unsustainable migratory lifestyle of today's edgeless cities, but also able to address the "contemporary civil war" of land use and the "pluralistic national identity" of an increasingly multicultural America.

The teachers who have contributed to this book have chosen to focus on watershed or commonwealth issues in their particular kind of suburbia. Like most regions in our nation, the Great Plains of eastern Nebraska are a mix of all the forms of suburbia identified by contemporary geographers:

Traditional suburbs: Ralston, Nebraska, where Jeff Lacey and Daniel Boster teach, is a traditional suburb south of Omaha, now landlocked by further development since 1975.

Edge and Edgeless Cities: Papillion-LaVista, where Mary Birky Collier teaches, fits the general profile of Edge Cities. Both communities are large, relatively recent built landscapes that serve as "single end destinations" for most residents. Papillion-La Vista now boasts the third largest school district in the entire state of Nebraska.

Exurban areas and Micropolises: Henderson and Aurora, Nebraska, where Sharon Bishop and Cathie English both taught, are both

communities of under 10,000 in driving distance of both the major metropolitan area of Lincoln/Omaha and in the "penumbric shadow" of the smaller urban area of Grand Island/Hastings. Fremont, Nebraska, where Susan Martens lived while in Nebraska, is at 30,000 people too large to be considered a micropolis anymore, though much of its population boom in the last ten years has been from families where the wage earner commutes to the Omaha metro area, 40 miles away.

College Campuses: New Urban Penurbia: The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) campus, where Aubrey Streit Krug, Bernice Olivas, and I all teach and Susan Martens taught, is like many state college campuses in our nation, the result of human-scale New Urban planning, an architecture and landscape crafted to seem gloriously "countrified" to the walkers and bikers who move between the buildings (each state of the art the decade of construction). UNL's grounds are part of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum (2013), whose website splash page boasts "Sustainable Landscapes for Healthy Homes and Communities." At a little over 250,000 people, Lincoln, Nebraska (where the university is located) is just a little smaller than many of the suburbs studied by Beauregard (2006) and Teaford (2008). (Compare Aurora, Colorado at over 300,000, or Plano, Texas at 270,000.) One of the standing jokes in the region is that Lincoln, although the state's capitol city, is really a suburb of Omaha—since the edges of the two urban areas are now separated by a thinning agricultural corridor of less than twenty miles. Given Lang's (2003) idea of edgeless cities sprawling region-wide with no definable real center or at best competing centers, it's increasingly easy to see the entire Eastern Nebraska region in which

we all teach as part of just such an emerging network of all the forms of suburbia, swirling together in a vast melting pot of regional suburban stew.

From these various suburban spaces, these teachers, all experienced Teacher Consultants for the Nebraska Writing Project, have been exploring place-conscious education with their students. While all the teachers are involved in several place-conscious programs in their schools, for this book we've chosen to highlight a set of programs related to the "watershed" and "commonwealth" issues in our region. Collectively, we hope our work in the suburban spaces of eastern Nebraska may inspire other teachers to develop place-conscious programs appropriate to the watershed and commonwealth of their regions.

In the watershed section of this book, we'll feature four projects. University teacher Susan Martens describes Writing Marathons as a pedagogical activity that requires writers to pay close attention to local place through writing, walking, and sharing in direct contact with local landscape. Secondary teacher Sharon Bishop engages her students in a deep investigation of water in our region, literally making the physical relations of our watershed the subject of study for Henderson's 10<sup>th</sup> graders. Borrowing ideas and methodology from the Aldo Leopold Institute, secondary teacher Jeff Lacey describes his Ralston Almanac project where secondary students learn to look closely at the natural environment of their suburban space. Finally, university teacher Aubrey Streit Krug explores her semester-long first year writing course focused on connecting local

environments to global ecologies.

In the commonwealth section of this book, we'll also feature four projects. First, secondary teacher Mary Birky Collier will describe her multi-year exploration of place-conscious literature study in Advanced Placement Literature classes, in a unit which challenges her students to first represent and then act in their community of Papillion-La Vista. Drawing on the work ethnographies of urban place conscious teachers, dual enrollment teacher Cathie English presents a secondary/college unit that uses community interviews to explore the multigenerational history of work. Secondary teacher Daniel Boster describes an activist writing project in which high school students in Ralston engaged in reforming their school's 4<sup>th</sup> grade "discovery of America" unit, and convinced the curriculum director to allow them to teach the "real history" of Columbus. Finally, university teacher Bernice Olivas describes her place-conscious approach to Native American Literature, a multicultural elective course routinely selected by mostly white suburban students.

All of these projects help suburban teachers and students envision their place more completely. If, as we've argued here, such envisioning is key to addressing the particular issues of suburban disconnection, then we can hope that projects like these, adapted to the particular region housing any suburban space, can help young citizens develop the necessary knowledge and vision for the futures all of us will face.