

# Rural Literacies

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Kim Donehower,  
Charlotte Hogg,  
and Eileen E. Schell

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project of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center market[ing] products as an economic development project to raise funds for the resource center's programs", product development and marketing ventures by rural women, the Landless Workers Movement, "the largest social movement in Latin America and one of the most successful grassroots movements in the world", and more ("Sustaining Rural Living").

The RWZ is a rich and vibrant resource for rural women that facilitates discussion and analysis of a host of issues ranging from domestic violence to World Rural Women's Day perspectives from Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Sturgis, South Dakota. In and of itself, it serves as a kind of critical, public pedagogy that scrutinizes various rural issues to highlight issues of power and privilege. The site can also be a literacy tool as I describe with the writings of Paxton women, debating and engaging public memory. What might it look like to read essays by RWZ contributors alongside memoirs from the Paxton women and also Wendell Berry, for example? How much richer could conversations about place become for students and researchers when the issues these women attend to conjoin those traditionally associated with agrarianist writing?

Placing women's literacies and agrarianist literacies in dialogue is just one of many ways to engage in inquiry that complicates rural literacies. While this is important work for rural students, teachers, and citizens to invest in, our goal throughout has been to dismantle the idea that rural literacies are just for rural people to pay attention to. In our concluding chapter, we describe how to enact a critical, public pedagogy both in the composition classroom and as activist intellectuals, employing the metaphor of sustainability that centers on the relationships among rural, urban, and suburban people and literacies.

## 5 / Toward a Sustainable Citizenship and Pedagogy

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Throughout this book, we have argued that literacy educators need to examine rural literacies in context and work against the urban biases that inform much of the literacy research in our field. Literacy has traditionally been used as a wedge to separate rural from urban and suburban, symbolizing rural people's perceived otherness from the rest of America. Until we recalibrate our understanding of rural literacies, it will be difficult to see beyond the public rhetorics of red state versus blue state, rural versus urban that separate us. As part of revising what rural literacies can mean, we advocate a critical, public pedagogy that questions and renegotiates the relationships among rural, urban, and suburban people. Student and citizen involvement in a critical, public pedagogy makes way for an alternative metaphor for rural literacies—that of sustainability—to emerge.

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor is not simply a characteristic of language; it shapes both thought and action (3–6). As we have argued, for too long the operating metaphors for understanding rural literacies have primarily been those of preservation, modernization, and abandonment. Under a sustainability metaphor, there is no comparison of rural literacies against urban and suburban default models; rather, the sustainability metaphor allows us to see rural literacies as adaptive practices that change over time to respond to the short- and long-term needs of the communities those literacies serve. And, instead of setting rural, suburban, and urban communities in opposition, the sustainability metaphor allows us to see the ways literate practices can connect those communities to ensure a stable future for all.

How, then, can rural literacies be incorporated into the curricular and pedagogical practices that reach students at American colleges and

universities? The composition classroom is the primary site in which undergraduate students negotiate their relationships with disparate forms of literacy, from those they bring with them to college, to those of their classmates, to the teacher's, to the institution's. Many first-year students need to look no further than the books they carry to class to see the traditional images of rural literacies perpetuated. These textbook readings are worth considering in some detail; they model rhetorical strategies and ways of thinking that our students are likely to emulate, particularly if they are unsure of their own thoughts on the issue at hand.

Three common types of composition readers that can shape impressions of rural literacies are those whose readings focus on identity and diversity, those that deal directly with literacy as a topic for inquiry, and those that interrogate particular issues, such as the environment. In the first category, the majority of textbooks omit place-based identity—one of the few exceptions is *Writing Places* (Mathieu, Grattan, Lindgren, and Schultz), which directly encourages students to explore identity in terms of “where I’m from”—or they include it in indirect ways, as in Gary Columbo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle’s *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, which includes readings on “the myth of frontier freedom” (v). Still, in a text whose goal is to “encourage students to grapple with the real differences in perspective that arise in a pluralistic society like ours,” *Rereading America* does not explicitly deal with differences in urban, suburban, and rural viewpoints. Many first-year composition readers that take the “diverse perspectives” approach still work within the trinity of race, class, and gender or deal only with race and ethnicity. While these anthologies do valuable work, identities tied to region, place, and geography are often left out, aside from some environmentalist writing that celebrates or interrogates our relationship with nature.

Literacy-focused readers are hampered by the availability of depictions of rural literacy that push beyond the standard rhetorical frames. Susan Belasco’s *Constructing Literacies* represents rural literacies with essays by Andrea Fishman on the Amish and by James Moffett referencing the censorship battles of *Storm in the Mountains*. Both depict rural literacy as deeply religious with a fundamentalist

bent and therefore resistant to engaging in critical interpretation. Linda Adler-Kassner’s *Considering Literacy* also uses the Fishman essay. Granted, the stated goal of Belasco’s and Adler-Kassner’s textbooks is not to represent a diversity of perspectives, as in *Rereading America*. Instead, they have gathered thought-provoking pieces on the nature of literacy and the purposes of higher education. Yet in this mix, literacies that spring from rural contexts appear as either deficit models or as quaintly out of date.<sup>1</sup>

Composition readers that ask students to interrogate particular issues, although they increasingly address the topic of globalization, still represent rural America, if at all, in ways that subscribe to the problematic rhetorics we have discussed in this book. Diana George and John Trimbur’s *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*, in its chapter on “Public Space,” features specifically urban and suburban locales: malls, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Ground Zero in New York City, city streets and sidewalks. The only exception is Barry Lopez’s “Borders,” an excerpt from *Crossing Open Ground*, describing the largely unpopulated border between Alaska and the Yukon Territory in evocative images of vast, open, empty, forbidding space. The only “culture” here is that of arctic foxes, tundra swans, and a single abandoned Eskimo house.

In its first edition, *Speculations: Readings in Culture, Identity, and Values* (Schuster and Van Pelt) contains in a section on “Work and Wealth” an essay by Lee Smith titled “The Face of Rural Poverty.” In it, Smith subscribes to standard preservationist and abandonment rhetorics. He references *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and argues that “the world that Agee and Evans uncovered endures” (qtd. in Schuster and Van Pelt 621). He suggests that “the best thing the government could do would be to persuade residents to migrate to . . . promising small cities” (627) and concludes his essay by describing incentives the government could offer rural residents to move. This essay is the only one in the anthology that addresses the problems of rural areas, and it does so without establishing any kind of connection between its presumably urban and suburban student readership and the rural people it describes. It represents a missed opportunity to get a student audience to genuinely connect with rural people, and it promotes

the idea that rural problems are not problems for city-dwellers. Similarly, the Longman special topics reader *Reading City Life* (Bruch and Marback) includes essays on suburban life but nowhere mentions the rural. While rural themes were not the focus of these texts, our sampling highlights the ways the absence or problematic depictions of rural lives and literacies are repeatedly reinforced to students. The composition classroom offers an excellent space to demonstrate to students that issues that seem at first glance to be only about farming or ecology are tapped into a complex global system and that rural, urban, and suburban life are deeply intertwined.

In this chapter, we describe a number of ways compositionists can bring a new understanding of rural literacies to this space and to the communities in which they reside. What follows are descriptions of three different first-year composition courses, each built around a different topical focus that engages rural literacies: media representation, food politics, and place. In each, we offer extended examples of how understanding aspects of rural literacies can enhance our work with students and provide a much-needed critical perspective on rural literacies. The units build on the research described in the preceding three chapters and address the economic, social, and political facets of rural literacies. Each unit can be utilized independently for a particular assignment or together for a whole course that takes as its focus rural literacies. Individually and collectively, these sites represent for us features of rural literacies that invite connections among students and teachers from a variety of positions. We encourage writing teachers to adapt these course models to their own university contexts and to consider how the places where their universities are located call to mind different assumptions, texts, and contexts for rural literacies.

Responding to Henry Giroux's call for a pedagogy that is wholly public in its nature, we also provide examples of how a critical, public pedagogy can be enacted through various organizations, groups, and projects that sponsor rural literacies. Like many scholars in composition studies, we envision the work of composition teachers and scholars as having a public dimension beyond the classroom. Cushman, Mortensen, and Weisser have called for compositionists to play a role

as public intellectuals or activist intellectuals. While the definition and idea of public and activist intellectualism has been hotly debated across a variety of disciplines (see Weisser 117–27 for a useful summary), Christian Weisser has offered a tempered and useful view of how compositionists might engage in activist intellectual work in their communities. In Weisser's view, activist intellectuals are "individuals who work through, around, and beside our academic occupations to bring about social reform on local levels" (123). He envisions activist intellectual work as a practice that intersects across teaching, scholarship, and community life. We find his concept of activist intellectualism particularly useful for our own work as scholar-teachers interested in addressing rural literacies. It is our hope that this chapter provides models for how writing teachers can engage in activist intellectual work across the various arenas of our lives—teaching, scholarship, and community life—to affect change in the ways rural literacies are perceived, represented, practiced, and enacted.

### ***Designing a Media Representation Unit for a College Composition Course***

Part of public pedagogy, according to Giroux, requires acknowledging the critical role of culture in shaping our ideas of ourselves and our relationships with others. In college composition classrooms, a number of first-year courses have been developed that train students to analyze cultural artifacts from sources such as print media, visual media, television, film, and advertising.<sup>2</sup> In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, James Berlin describes the goal of many of these types of courses:

Our main concern is the relation of current signifying practices to the structuring of subjectivities—of race, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnic, and gender formations, for example—in our students and ourselves. The effort is to make students aware of cultural codes, the competing discourses that influence their positioning as students of experience. Our

larger purpose is to encourage students to negotiate and resist those codes—these hegemonic discourses—to bring about more democratic and personally humane economic, social, and political arrangements. From our perspective, only in this way can students become genuinely competent writers and readers.

We thus guide students to locate in their experience the points at which they are now engaging in negotiation and resistance with the cultural codes they daily encounter. These are then used as avenues of departure for a dialogue. (116)

The first-year composition course described here is the first of a two-semester sequence at the University of North Dakota and takes as its topical focus popular and media representations of rural people and rural literacies. Its goal is to use these materials and classroom dialogue and writing about such materials to foster an analysis of “the structuring of subjectivities . . . in our students and ourselves” based on our identifications as rural, urban, or suburban. This course description is not intended as a model for first-year composition with rural college students; instead, its purpose is to show how the potentially problematic relationships between academic literacy sponsors and rural students, and among rural, urban, and suburban students, can be addressed.

### Rationale

Even when our intentions are good, rural students may misinterpret our desire to genuinely connect with them. When Kim’s husband, a native New Yorker, taught his first class at Berea College in rural Kentucky, he confessed to his students that he was nervous about his ability to communicate well with them as this was his first time teaching outside the northeastern United States. Later, a student told him that this had made a very bad first impression, as she and other students interpreted his remarks as, “I don’t know how to talk to you people, because I’m from the center of culture and you’re all stupid.”

His intention had been to communicate something very different, but, given the cycles of stereotyping and counter-stereotyping that have long affected the relationship between Appalachian people and academic literacy sponsors, it was, perhaps, inevitable that his remarks would be interpreted in this way.

The academic job market lands many of us far from home, at institutions that may serve students from communities with which we are unfamiliar. Many of us teach at places that predominantly serve rural students, and we therefore must be prepared for the attitudes these students may bring to the classroom. First, regardless of their teachers’ own origins or attitudes toward rural places and people, rural students may presume that their professors bring to the classroom a mindset that rural students are uncultured and subliterate and have little to contribute in the way of knowledge. Also, as described in chapter 2, rural students may devalue their own knowledge and previous education, assuming, in the words of one of Kim’s students, that “my country teachers didn’t teach me right.”

Taking media representations of rural areas as a topic for a composition course addresses these problems in several ways. First, such a topic can promote a model of mutual inquiry in the classroom, in which both teachers and students engage in a genuine investigation of both the topic and their own assumptions about it.<sup>3</sup> Second, careful sequencing of the type of media representations considered, from the more blatantly stereotypical to the more subtle, can allow students and teachers to explore what they themselves believe about rural places and how this affects their relationships to one another, to the media, and to academic literacy. Third, this topic lets teachers and students assess the affective filters students bring to the composition classroom that shape their relationship with academic literacies. Getting these out on the table and exploring the distinctive features of academic literacy can encourage students to take an appropriative stance toward incorporating some features of academic literacy into their own literacies. As an additional benefit, this topic provides fertile ground for teaching the basics of argument and rhetorical analysis, as students are motivated to be critical of readings that they perceive to be critical of them.

### Readings

The course begins with an analysis of a reading that students are likely to find most objectionable: Bill Bryson's "Fat Girls in Des Moines." In the course of the essay, Bryson indulges in several stereotypes that coastal urban-dwellers hold about the Midwest. The title refers to what is, for many students, the most objectionable of all the images in the essay:

Iowa women are almost always sensorially overweight. . . . [But] it's a strange, strange thing—the teenaged daughters of these fat women are always utterly delectable, as soft and gloriously rounded and naturally fresh-smelling as a basket of fruit. . . . It must be awful to marry one of these nubile cuties knowing that there is a time bomb ticking away in her that will at some unknown date make her bloat out into something huge and grotesque, presumably all of a sudden and without much notice, like a self-inflating raft from which the stopper has been abruptly jerked. (204–5)

The essay also discusses Iowans' literacy. Bryson is careful to say that Iowans are not "mentally deficient"; rather, they are "decidedly intelligent and sensible people" with the highest adult literacy rate in the country—99.5 percent, according to Bryson (206). He goes on, though, to describe them as "a tad slow . . . not because they're incapable of high-speed mental activity . . . [but because] there's not much call for it. Their wits are dulled by simple, wholesome faith in God and the soil and their fellow man" (207).

Such passages are ripe for argument analysis, rhetorical analysis, and a general discussion of the stereotypes urbanites hold about those who live in "flyover land." As a piece of humor, written by a Des Moines native, the essay fosters discussions of genre. Students disagree on how seriously readers are supposed to take Bryson's claims but on the whole feel that he sells out his hometown to get laughs from an urbane, cosmopolitan audience. (The piece originally appeared in *Granta*, a travel magazine primarily for urban audiences.) In its outrageous take on standard clichés, the essay allows for a discussion of the sources of

these images. Bryson manages to dish out all the typical stereotypes about rural America in a short space here, from the noble, simple tillers of the soil referenced above to images of depravity reminiscent of both *Deliverance* and Erskine Caldwell, of an "old man" in "some no-hope town with a name like Draino, Indiana," who "would almost certainly have only one leg and probably one other truly arresting deficiency, like no nose or a caved-in forehead" (210).

Once Bryson's more explosive statements have been dealt with, the essay also encourages discussion of students' own relationships to their hometowns. At the end, after unleashing the full force of his wit against Des Moines, Bryson becomes seized with "nostalgia" for the place. Many students, especially those who have happily left very small towns for college in the small city of Grand Forks, have similarly ambiguous relationships with their hometowns at this particular stage of their lives. This is a delicate subject that is rarely initiated by the students themselves; however, if it is brought up by the reading or by the teacher's own musings on her or his relationship with home, students can have much to say on this topic. Bryson's essay also allows for discussion of other important topics, such as others' (and our own) desires to consume such caricatures of midwestern places. Do we find the essay funny? If so, why? What is the appeal of such images for rural, urban, and suburban people? What political goals does the promotion of such images serve? What is gained by dichotomizing people according to place in this fashion?

The class's work with the Bryson essay offers a model for the kinds of discussion that need to happen to open up the possibility of students and teachers renegotiating their senses of the rural, urban, and suburban and the relationships among them. A brief discussion of the other readings in the course shows how the class moves from issues of rural, urban, and suburban identities into an engagement with academic literacy.

Bryson's essay provides a segue into the subject of the next reading: different notions of "intelligence," "culture," and "literacy." Kathleen Norris's essay "Status: Or, Should Farmers Read Plato?" from *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* introduces this topic. Mixing descriptions of uncultured, uneducated rural people with images of farmers

reading Plato and waitresses reading *Anna Karenina*, Norris explores Dakotans' complicated relationship with "book learning": they seem both drawn to it and suspicious of it. Because it is difficult to isolate the exact nature of Norris's claims in this essay, it provokes a nuanced discussion of the complex relationship between status, education, and cultural literacy. This helps the class begin to describe the differing notions of "knowledge" and "literacy" held by different groups and the reasons for these distinctions. It also initiates an exploration of what counts as knowledge and literacy in the composition classroom. Norris's essay lets the class make the critical move into an explicit discussion of different ways of valuing and practicing literacy and of the benefits and stigmas that can accrue from such methods.

The other two central readings in the course both address the periodic movement to change the name of North Dakota to "Dakota" to promote tourism and investment in the state. The first, by Mark Singer, appeared in the *New Yorker* and offers a detailed analysis of the state's economic situation, quoting liberally from local leaders in ways that make them seem to be knowledgeable, canny people with a good deal of self-awareness. The second, a set of four humor columns by Dave Barry, takes a more satirical approach but also documents some of the realities of life in North Dakota and Grand Forks. Between the two sets of readings, the class begins to explore the realities that lie beneath the consumable images of the region that Barry exploits and Singer explores. This moves the class into the research segment of the course in which students are asked to investigate the deeper issues behind a particular rural image or stereotype.

There are many other possibilities for readings in a course such as this one; any cultural text that highlights the relationship between rural and nonrural people or communities would work well. Reality television, with its tendency to create drama by forcing dissimilar types to live together, offers many possibilities for analysis. Perhaps the best is the first season of *The Simple Life*, available on DVD, which features the antics of Paris Hilton (heir to the Hilton fortune) and Nicole Richie (daughter of Lionel Richie) after they are relocated to rural Arkansas to work on the Leding family farm. The controversial *Amish in the City* would be another example.

Given the media's obsession in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections with dividing up America along red state/blue state lines, a productive course or unit could be developed around exploring the realities and rhetorical attractions of this concept. Barbara Kingsolver's essay "A Good Farmer," reprinted elsewhere as "The Good Farmer," could provide a good starting point for this discussion:

Recently a national magazine asked me to write a commentary on the great divide between "the red and the blue"—imagery . . . suggesting a clear political difference between the rural heartland and urban coasts. Sorry, I replied to the magazine editors, but I'm the wrong person to ask: I live in red, tend to think blue and mostly vote green. If you're looking for oversimplification, skip the likes of me. Better yet, skip the whole idea. Recall that in many of those red states, just a razor's edge under half the voters likely pulled the blue lever, and vice versa—not to mention the greater numbers everywhere who didn't even show up at the polls. . . . Recall that farmers and hunters, historically, are more active environmentalists than many progressive, city-dwelling vegetarians. (And conversely, that some of the strongest land-conservation movements on the planet were born in the midst of cities.) Recall that we all have the same requirements for oxygen and drinking water, and that we all like them clean but relentlessly pollute them.

The point is that readings for such a course, and the discussions of those readings, must serve to complicate the easy media dichotomies that suggest that rural, urban, and suburban people have nothing to say to one another.

### Writing Assignments

The writing assignments for this class are designed to move students from argument analysis to rhetorical analysis to argument construction and research. In response to the Bryson essay, students identify a set of Bryson's claims, which they analyze for both logical and rhetorical

effectiveness. With the Norris essay, students are similarly asked to sort out her claims, evidence, and rhetorical goals—essentially the same task as with the Bryson essay but practiced on a more difficult, nuanced piece of writing. The pairing of the Singer and Barry essays let students identify a claim or set of related claims used by Barry and use evidence collected by Singer to contest, support, or develop those claims.

The culminating assignment asks students to conduct independent research and bring their own knowledge of rural areas to the table. Students choose one issue raised by several of the essays they have read and construct their own argument about it, using as support firsthand knowledge as well as source material. In this way, students begin to see how their knowledge could be made compatible with academic standards. Even in a course with a focus such as this one, many students still have to be coaxed into believing that their firsthand knowledge “counts”—that, as in one case, a student’s knowledge of the ways in which farm subsidies were awarded, attained by helping his father run the farm, could be made valid in an academic context if handled in a particular rhetorical fashion.

### Outcomes

Ultimately, this course has been successful at getting students to publicly work through some of the problematic relationships created by popular representations of rural regions for urban and suburban audiences. This topic is the explicit subject of much of the discussion and writing that takes place in the course. Students have also made some headway on negotiating their relationships with academic literacy and understanding how their experiences can count as knowledge in the composition classroom. Their writing has demonstrated steady progression in their abilities to analyze both arguments and rhetoric and to begin to work with sources to develop and complicate ideas. As they have in so many other cases, media materials provided accessible entry points for these first-year students to hone their analytical and rhetorical skills.

However, regardless of the cultural texts used as targets for analysis in a course such as this one, the relationship between rural students and academic literacy sponsors and the relationships among urban, suburban, and rural people will not be negotiated unless these topics are brought explicitly into classroom discussion and writing. It is easy enough to examine stereotypical images of rural America to teach the skills of argument and rhetorical analysis. But to use such material allows both teachers and students to negotiate the tensions among rural, urban, suburban, and academic literacies and requires certain pedagogical moves.

First, the idea that there are different systems of defining, valuing, and practicing literacy must become a central concept of the composition classroom. Kim begins her first-year composition courses by giving students a quick overview of Shirley Brice Heath’s work in *Ways with Words*, emphasizing that each of us learns from our home communities and experiences outside of school particular ways of using and producing texts that may or may not match up with the ways of using and producing texts privileged by schools. Exploring what we’ve absorbed in the past about how and why to read and write and then comparing that with the messages we get about what counts as literacy in the university allow us to deal directly with the choices we must make about how much, or whether, to incorporate academic literacy practices into our own, or vice versa.

Second, the course must focus on a mutual exploration of both teachers’ and students’ assumptions about the differences among rural, urban, and suburban lifestyles and literacies. Teachers must be willing to first offer up their own assumptions about life in places dissimilar to their own hometowns as test cases for analysis to determine the origins, accuracy, and rhetorical appeal of those assumptions before asking students to submit their own assumptions to similar public scrutiny. Since identifying and questioning assumptions is a core skill of academic literacy, this move is particularly appropriate in the first-year composition classroom.

Third, it is the relationship among rural, urban, and suburban people that must be the ultimate topical focus of this course or unit,



not an attempt to pin down the "reality" of some monolithic notion of "rural places" or an essentialized group known as "rural people." What readings such as the ones discussed here reveal is what different groups seem to want rural America to be. As such, they allow for input from all students and teachers—rural, urban, and suburban—and encourage them to investigate, as either subjects or consumers of these images, or both, the rhetorical constraints that such media representations have placed on our ability to relate to one another. Such a goal is particularly important in a space such as the first-year composition classroom at the University of North Dakota, in which a student from a town of fifty might find herself sitting next to an aviation major from New York City, each of them dealing with their adjustment to the relative size of Grand Forks compared to what they are used to.

### **The Public Role of the Composition Professional in Addressing Media Representations**

We compositionists can extend the goals of a course such as this one by offering public commentary and critique on media representations of the rural, urban, and suburban "divides" and on general rural issues. We can also speak out to contextualize research on rural literacy and education that gets reported in the media in misleading or exaggerated ways—for example, by tempering the "failing schools" label that gets assigned to rural districts that do not meet the adequate yearly progress guidelines of *No Child Left Behind*. University communities often provide many outlets for such activism. In Grand Forks, local and area newspapers often feature letters and guest editorials by faculty, and North Dakota Public Radio solicits opinion pieces that air statewide. The university itself provides a site for public activism on a number of topics that affect rural constituencies, such as the controversy over UND's "Fighting Sioux" sports team name and logo. An understanding of the prevalence and rhetorical consequences of the preservationist, modernizing, and abandonment metaphors and of the possibilities of the sustainability metaphor gives us a starting point for our analyses and activities on these issues.

There is much in the media that needs public critique. During the

first half of 2001, the Center for Media and Public Affairs analyzed 337 news stories about rural America that had appeared in major newspapers, in news magazines, or on television networks. Their study suggests that, although the preservationist metaphor is waning in terms of offering a positive representation of rural life, "the media frequently use the term 'rural' to describe areas facing urbanization and trying to preserve a rural past or atmosphere." Also, "rural" was frequently used as a kind of 'boutique' term to conjure up an idyllic vision, rather than as a mark of real places that have a rural lifestyle" ("What Do the Media Really Say"). The study also reports that 78 percent of the television news stories it surveyed focused on rising crime in rural areas, with particular attention to the rise in methamphetamine use, production, and distribution. Any sense of the viewer's or reader's connection to what is happening, or could happen, in these rural communities is downplayed. What happens in rural places, these representations suggest, is a result of unstoppable forces. It is unfortunate, but there is nothing anyone can do. This narrative of rural decline participates in the tragedy rhetoric that is critiqued in chapter 3 and promotes a lack of scrutiny of the public policies that have led to the economic destruction and decline of these areas.

By emphasizing differences and conflicts between rural and urban America and by adhering to preservationist, modernizing, and abandonment rhetorics, media portrayals of rural issues can inhibit any sense of urgency that political action can and should be taken to improve the conditions of rural life. They suggest that the ills of rural communities are idiosyncratic and cultural, denying the role that public policy, economic realities, and social complexities play in shaping the conditions of rural life and the circumstances for rural literacies. As public intellectuals, as community activists, and in the ways we ourselves choose to understand rural places, compositionists are ideally situated to resist such damaging rhetorics of representation and to offer more productive ones in their place. We can do this in a number of ways: through tried-and-true strategies of writing editorials; through publishing reviews of books, films, and television shows that address rural issues; and through direct advocacy work in our communities.<sup>4</sup> One concrete way we may choose to intervene

in debates over the rural is to intervene in how our food system is constituted—an issue that the next unit takes up in its exploration of food politics.

### **Designing a Food Politics Unit for a College Composition Course** **Rationale**

As Eileen argues in chapter 3, although much has been written about the farm crisis, few commentators have approached the issue of food and farming as a fundamental issue involving critical literacy. Many Americans find farm issues so confusing and so utterly remote from their experiences of living and working in urban or suburban areas that they can't imagine or don't want to imagine how food arrives at the grocery store. Food comes in packages, boxes, and plastic wrappers; food is simply there, and it is relatively cheap compared to other commodities like gasoline or new technologies. Since it's cheap and easy to find—unless you are one of the nation's thousands who go hungry every day—why worry about how it is produced and distributed? Indeed, with obesity as the nation's number two preventable health problem (smoking is number one), most middle-class consumers of food are more likely to worry about whether or not they are eating too much or not exercising enough rather than where their food comes from.

Food's cheapness, abundance, and accessibility for many Americans make it one of the most taken-for-granted, although essential, commodities that directly affects our health and the health of the environment. At the same time that we have a relatively abundant and cheap food supply, we have an increasing loss of small family farms and, as chapter 3 shows, an increasing lack of awareness among the general American public about how their food is grown, marketed, distributed, and sold through the food industrial complex. Since we all have a stake in agriculture, we also have a vested interest in better informing ourselves and helping others become better informed about where our food comes from and how its production and consumption affect us and our environment.

Public interest in this topic is keen given the recent explosion of high profile books and documentaries addressing food and farm

issues (for example, see Cook, Nestle, Manning, Schlosser, and Spurlock, to name only a few). Morgan Spurlock's film *Super Size Me*, an excellent companion piece to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, analyzes the obesity epidemic against the backdrop of Spurlock himself surviving on nothing but fast food from McDonald's for a month. Along the way, he examines American's eating habits and their health consequences, dramatically demonstrating how his health problems multiplied when he ate nothing but fast food. Even conservative columnist George Will jumped on the bandwagon in 2005 with a surprising editorial, "What We Owe What We Eat," in *Newsweek*, which urges conservatives to read Matthew Scully's critique of the ethics of factory farming, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. With increasing public scrutiny of factory farming, fast food industries, the obesity epidemic, and the loss of small family farms, a unit on food politics provides college students with the opportunity to study, analyze, and debate an issue of great public concern.

Teachers of writing courses have a particularly interesting vantage point from which to pursue critical literacy work on issues of the food industrial complex. First, our courses reach most of the students in our colleges and universities. In addition, many large composition programs are situated in land-grant institutions where students majoring in agriculture, agricultural economics, and food science make up a considerable portion of the student population. Even if such issues are introduced at urban colleges and universities and liberal arts institutions where agriculture or food science is not a subject of study, they are significant issues to address as they raise questions of public interest, environmental health, personal and societal health, and contemporary politics. Second, a focus on food politics fits in well with the focus in many introductory composition courses on critical analysis and argument. With the significant public attention given to issues of food politics in public essays, editorials, book-length studies, and documentaries, there is plenty of written material for students to assess, analyze, and debate. Third, a focus on food politics complements efforts in our field to raise questions of the environment and ecomposition (Dobrin and Weisser, Weisser), place-based

education (Brooke, Hogg in this book), and sustainability (Owens). Derek Owens argues in *Composition and Sustainability* that knowledge of sustainable agriculture and forestry are basic understandings that students should leave the university with if they are to be environmentally aware citizens: "It stands to reason that sustainable culture cannot exist unless sustainability features prominently throughout the curriculum" (28).

Owens is not alone in arguing that sustainability should be an important part of the university curriculum and of writing courses and English courses. Many colleges and universities have instituted required courses that address sustainability. Some campuses have drawn up and enacted plans to make their campuses more "sustainable" or "green." As the editors of *Sustainability on Campus: Stories and Strategies for Change* argue: "Campuses across the United States alone represent an enormous investment in buildings and land, and therefore how we maintain and build our physical plant, engage in buying practices, dispose of waste, and consume energy is critically important to the environmental health of the broader society" (Barlett and Chase 5). A number of such green campus initiatives also include efforts to promote local foods in campus dining facilities and involve the development of curricula related to food politics.

Although ecocomposition, sustainability, and place-based issues have become an increasingly strong emphasis in writing courses and in research on writing, there has been little or no published scholarship documenting writing courses that address food politics issues, even though there is a rich tradition of such courses being taught in the social sciences. There is evidence, though, that the field of composition studies is beginning to take up this issue. Notably, a panel at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication offered perspectives on teaching Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* in first-year composition classes, and it is likely the case that a number of courses across the country are taking up these issues, although the scholarship in the field is slow to reflect this change. Eileen has engaged the concept of sustainability in her writing courses by asking students to examine consumerism, the food industrial complex, and issues of globalization. More specifically, the second unit of her

Writing 205 course, a sophomore-level research and writing class that she teaches at Syracuse University, is devoted to asking students to research and write about the food industrial complex. Other instructors at Syracuse University also focus their sections of Writing 205 on this topic, although each instructor designs the unit according to his or her expertise and interests.

### Readings

The main text Eileen assigns to introduce debates and issues in the food industry is Schlosser's *New York Times* best-seller *Fast Food Nation*, a book that persuasively guides students through the history of the rise of fast food as an American institution and systematically unpacks its political, social, environmental, and global consequences. A number of chapters in the book focus on the American agricultural system: on corporate consolidation in agribusiness, on the loss of small cattle ranches and the rise of large Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, the exploitation of slaughterhouse workers, and other topics, all of which connect back to the burgers and fries that many Americans consume on a daily basis. While it could be argued that Schlosser's book participates in the tragedy and smart diversification narratives of the farm crisis critiqued in chapter 3, the key difference is that he sketches the economic and political realities that lead to these commonplace narratives. As Schlosser narrates the tragic story of Hank, the Colorado rancher who committed suicide in the wake of tough times on his ranch, we also learn of the suburbanization of Colorado ranch lands and the global economic pressures and policies that Hank and other small ranchers face. As Schlosser puts it:

It would be wrong to say that Hank's death was caused by the consolidating and homogenizing influence of the fast food chains, by monopoly power in the meatpacking industry, by depressed prices in the cattle market, by the economic forces bankrupting independent ranches, by the tax laws that favor wealthy ranchers, by the unrelenting push of Colorado's real estate developers. But it would not be entirely wrong. (146)

In short, *Fast Food Nation* highlights the systemic and structural issues with the human costs, allowing for the sort of integrated global analysis that Naomi Klein calls for in *Fences and Windows*, her analysis of alternative globalization movements. Klein argues that understanding the concept of global linkages is "about recognizing that every piece of our high-gloss consumer culture comes from somewhere. It's about following the webs of contracted factories, shell-game subsidiaries, and outsourced labor to find out where all the pieces are manufactured, under what conditions, which lobby groups wrote the rules of the game and which politicians were bought off along the way" (30). While Klein's comments about understanding "global linkages" address the manufacture of consumer goods specifically, her comments can be applied to the food industrial complex as well and offer an interesting commentary upon Schlosser's analysis.

To round out Schlosser's book with multimedia texts, Eileen shows three films that help students visualize how the food industrial complex affects workers, consumers, and the environment. The first is *Fast Food Women*, which provides an analysis of the lives and working conditions of women in eastern Kentucky working in four fast food outlets. The second is Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, and the final film is *The Meatrix*, a flash film that humorously but compellingly describes the rise of factory farms. Mimicking the plot and characters of the cult classic *The Matrix*, *The Meatrix* details the hidden truth about our food supply: that the idyllic small family farms of our national unconscious have been replaced by factory farms run by large agribusiness corporations. The film is interesting not only for its content but also for its quick-moving style and its spoof of popular culture. In conjunction with showing this film, Eileen discusses with her students the potential of new media as a tool for educating and persuading the public about food and farm issues, especially the Internet generation.

To round out the discussion of food and farm issues, Eileen also assigns supplemental readings on issues of globalization to open up questions of global trade, labor, and the role of the international community in addressing issues of agriculture and fair trade. Assigned chapters of Klein's book *No Logo* introduce students to debates over globalization, multinational corporate branding, and consumerism. Ex-

cerpts from Klein's more recent *Fences and Windows* detail her observations about the alternative globalization movements and their fight for fair trade, not just free trade. Visits to the on-line archive of the World Trade Organization History Project at the University of Washington also provide students with a glimpse into the protests that took place on November 29–December 3, 1999, in Seattle, Washington, at the WTO Third Ministerial Meeting. Students have the opportunity to view and analyze protest announcements, fliers, pamphlets, interviews, and other organizing and informational literature that was distributed before and during the protests. These readings and films combine to help students gain increasing insight into how citizen-activist movements have responded to questions of food politics and globalization.

### Writing Assignments

The writing assignments that accompany this unit include weekly two- to three-page responses to the assigned readings as well as a formal essay that involves students in collectively researching and writing a "research anthology" on a particular topic of concern that arose from their reading of *Fast Food Nation*, the other assigned readings, and the films. Although the anthology is a collective assignment, with students collaboratively authoring an introduction and conclusion and composing a cover, each student contributes an analytical essay of six to seven pages that introduces a specific issue appropriate to his or her anthology topic and provides informed perspectives on that issue. The group also gives a presentation on their anthology at the end of the unit, offering their ideas for discussion and critique.

In the course, Eileen's students have composed anthologies that investigate a number of agriculturally related topics, including a comparative analysis of factory farming of beef cattle versus organically raised range-fed beef, the rise of mad cow disease in light of contaminated feed and lapsed food safety inspection standards, French farmer Jose Bove's nationalistic resistance to McDonald's, President Bush's immigration policies and their impact on Mexican farm workers, and the conditions of banana workers in Costa Rica in light of free trade agreements. One of the chief advantages of this assignment

is that students constantly move back and forth from their individual essay writing and research to thinking about the collective project as a whole. This mix of collective and individual research efforts challenges students' preconceived notions about writing and research as a single-minded enterprise and helps them figure out how to consider a topic from multiple angles.

### Outcomes

Interestingly, few of Eileen's students are from rural backgrounds; even fewer are from farming communities, and few coming into the course are initially aware of the issues raised in Schlosser's book, the other readings, and the films. The unit on food politics, however, helps students think through the food industrial complex in a way they may never have thought about it before. A unit on food politics, in Schlosser's words, encourages students to "think about where the food came from, about how and where it was made, and about what is set in motion by every fast food purchase" (270). While a number of Eileen's students say they won't stop eating fast food, they are thinking about it differently, and others maintain that the class unit has caused them to go further in seeking alternatives to fast food and convenience foods. Indeed, Eileen spends part of one class session talking with her students about "eat local" campaigns, farmers' markets, farm-to-cafeteria programs, and the international movement founded by Italian Carlo Petrini called "Slow Food," which opposes fast food culture and promotes the eating of local foods, sustainability, and biodiversity ("All About"). Some of Eileen's students go on to visit the local food co-op for the first time and seek out alternative places to eat and buy their groceries, since many of them live off-campus in apartments.

Eileen's students' desire to find out about alternative food sources encouraged her to plan a community linking project for a future version of the course. In this potential community linking project, she plans to create a speakers' bureau of community leaders in the area of sustainable agriculture and sustainable living. She plans to invite farmers and representatives from a local community supported agriculture organization, the Real Food Cooperative (the local organic

food co-op), the Northeast Organic Farmers' Association, the Eastern Farm Workers Association, the USDA, and other local groups who will help students think of alternatives and socially just responses to the food industrial complex. She also will create opportunities for students to get involved in the work of these organizations and address how to bring opportunities to the university campus for students to buy and eat local foods. On a neighboring campus of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, student activists have set up an organic food stand. She plans to invite students in her course to dialogue with the founding members of this food stand and to consider and evaluate the university's dining services' use—or lack thereof—of local food sources.

The work Eileen's students are doing in this class is not so much a corrective to the rhetorics of the farm crisis critiqued in chapter 3 but a set of different narratives altogether—more specifically, ones that allow them to work toward understanding a network of community and global linkages and toward realizing an alternative agrarian literacy. Critical literacy work on the food industrial complex provides students with a way to understand the network of community and global linkages that currently shape our lives as food consumers and can help them begin to consider practices that will make those linkages more sustainable and equitable.

### Food Politics and Public Pedagogy

The work of addressing food politics and the food industrial complex, though, should not be limited to the college campus and the college writing classroom, although those are important spaces; it can be part of a broader platform for public pedagogy within communities concerned with community food security, food sovereignty, and support of small family farmers, whether the citizens of those communities are living in rural areas or in suburban and urban areas. The discussion of Farm Aid in chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of how one nonprofit organization has worked to educate the public about the significance of family farmed food and the plight of small family farmers as it has simultaneously provided aid and advice to

small family farmers. Farm Aid, however, is only one of many organizations devoted to fostering a public pedagogy about food issues. Such food politics advocacy groups are numerous and wide-ranging, spanning a variety of local nonprofits to national and international organizations whose mission is to improve food sovereignty, such as the Community Food Security Coalition. The CFSC, like Farm Aid, strives to provide the public with the critical literacy skills necessary to make sustainable choices about the food system for families, communities, and institutions. As a literacy sponsor for groups and individuals, the CFSC provides publications in the form of how-to booklets, reports, newsletters, assessment materials, and conferences that help community members increase food sovereignty through a range of measures, for example, setting up farm-to-cafeteria programs in schools, linking farms with food banks, and increasing local food access for low-income, transit-dependent residents.

In a recent position paper, "Education for Change," posted on the CFSC Web site, local food activist Mark Winne argues that educators, parents, and activists can be a force for change in promoting an alternative agrarian literacy that will change the face of America's obesity epidemic and promote sustainable food in every community:

It should be a matter of national educational policy that every child understands how and where their food is produced, and that they have the requisite skills to critique those systems of production. As Jim Hightower has warned, "Our kids are growing up thinking that a chicken has six legs because that's how many come in a package." Maybe, in fact, students should be required to read Jim Hightower as well as Joan Gusso, Frances Moore Lappe, Marion Nestle, Eric Schlosser, Wendell Berry, Walt Whitman and, God forbid, Marx and Engels.

Although Winne's call is largely focused on K-12 educators, he includes public educators in his manifesto:

I would argue, however, that any attempt to reform our approach to food and nutrition education must be comprehensive

sive and saturate every fiber of our public education institutions. We should not succumb to the temptation to limit our endeavors to isolated and discrete projects, as worthy as they may be. Unfortunately, it is simply not enough to yank the soda machines out of the schools, run a school garden for a few weeks, ban irradiated food, establish a school breakfast program here and there, install an organic salad bar in the school cafeteria. Yes, we need those projects and they must be multiplied a thousand fold. But we have to also worm, no, not worm, and bust our way into the circles of power, nationally as well as locally. We must make our schools the breeding ground for millions of food competent, healthy, and happy children who retain those attributes as adults and become demanding, knowledgeable food consumers, voters, and, in some cases, farmers, nutritionists, chefs, policymakers, and members of the local school boards that control the curricula.

His manifesto against agricultural illiteracy is a call not only to educate young people but also to provide food education for all levels of society: "Food learning must extend from the classroom to the cafeteria to the school garden to the local farms and markets" and include the larger social, economic, and cultural context of each community."

Winne's vision of food learning extending "from the classroom to the cafeteria to the school garden to the local farms and markets" has been realized at the CFSC-sponsored yearly "Farm to Cafeteria" conferences. At the second annual Farm to Cafeteria Conference (June 16-18, 2005) at Kenyon College in Ohio, hundreds of farmers, nonprofit agencies, food and farm activists, farmers' market directors, USDA employees, community gardeners, public school teachers, college and university professors, and college students gathered to discuss processes and models for bringing local, family farmed food into their hospitals, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and prisons. At a number of these sessions, college faculty and K-12 teachers across the disciplines shared syllabi and assignments that addressed food, farm, and sustainability issues. At several sessions as well, college student activists spoke with great vigor about how they have set up

local food projects on their campuses. In addition, K-12 teachers and farmers addressed how they have used provisions in the federal school lunch program to bring locally farmed food to school cafeterias through salad bars featuring local produce or at school fund-raisers or special events ("Second"). The 2005 Farm to Cafeteria Conference made it clear that there is a nationwide movement to feature local foods and to teach and discuss food and farm issues across the disciplines. Indeed, CFSC's organizing and networking efforts through the national Farm to Cafeteria conferences provide an excellent model for creating partnerships between farmers, educators, parents, dining services personnel, and food and farm activists—partnerships that move communities closer toward Jacqueline Edmondson's notion of alternative agrarian literacy as addressed in chapter 3 and that allow communities to enact sustainable food systems.

Addressing food politics allows students and community members alike the opportunity to intervene in and change the food system in a way that benefits their health and the health of the environment. Food politics also creates in students and community members a renewed interest and loyalty to a sense of place: to buying local and connecting to the local while realizing the global connections that link our food system to the environmental health of the planet. In the next unit on designing a place-based unit for a composition course, the idea of place is developed more broadly as a site from which to address an understanding of rural literacies that is not necessarily bound to issues of food and farming.

### ***Designing a Place-Based Unit for a College Composition Course*** **Rationale**

Certainly place has already been a part of writing classrooms through efforts in ecomposition and place-based writing. Compositionists have combined critical pedagogies with place in the writing classroom. Owens writes of asking his urban students to "make written and photographic portraits of where they live" as an exercise leading toward sustainability (36). In Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan's collection, *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices*, contributors

describe how students write and analyze their urban contexts. At DePaul University in Chicago, students are invited to "Discover and Explore Chicago" through a week-long immersion experience and a course that uses Chicago as the site of inquiry. These are just a few examples of provocative models that are critically engaging in place, but their urban contexts reinforce the ways critical work and rural contexts have not been brought together in composition classrooms, nor have fixed place-based identities been challenged.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, it might seem unremarkable to put together writing about place with rural literacies; in fact, it seems a commonplace practice among rural educators and rural students. The idea of writing about place can bring to mind notions of rendering one's place descriptively, creating a "sense of place" on the page, and this work can either be preservationist or dismissive of rural experiences. In such work, "place" often connotes only the literal physical space rather than other cultural, social, and material realities experienced within a place, and as a consequence, place-based identities become tethered to the physical locale. A critical pedagogy of place, however, described in chapter 4, disrupts this tendency by embracing the best of critical (with its focus on urban and social) and place-based (with its focus on rural and ecological) pedagogies. According to David Gruenewald, this fusion can be achieved by decolonization ("unlearning much of what dominant culture and schooling teaches") and reinhabitation ("learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation") (Gruenewald 9). Such a pedagogy first asks that students challenge not only dominant ideologies about their place but also their investment in and identification with these ideologies.

In a beginning composition class in Nebraska, Charlotte began this work by seeking to give students a glimpse of shifting and malleable identities, rather than fixed identities of rural or urban, to help them engage with place as a site for inquiry. While gearing up to read Teresa Jordan's memoir about Wyoming ranch life, *Riding the White Horse Home*, some students from Omaha said they could in no way relate to her discussion of being a "hick" because they identified themselves as urban (though from their writing they seemed to inhabit a suburban place and context). In an effort to help them move toward

mutual identification as a class, Charlotte asked them instead to think of the class as a regional collective. She employed an idea from Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* where Young makes reference to the concept of regions in order to address some of the shortcomings of her discussion of cities. She explains:

I conceive a region as both an economic unit and a territory that people identify as their living space. A region is the space across which people commonly travel to work, shop, play, visit their friends, and take the children on errands, the span of a day trip. It is the range of television and radio transmission. The expanse of a region thus varies with culture, geography, economic base, and primary modes of transportation. Regions usually have a city or cluster of cities as a focus of their activity and identity, but include less densely populated suburban and rural areas. While hardly economically self-sufficient, regions nevertheless count as units of economic interdependence, the geographical territory in which people both live and work, in which major distribution occurs, much of it of products made in the region. (252)

Just as geographers have reclaimed "region" as a tool for local inquiry in addition to a physical locale, allowing for a vision of place that moves beyond landscape to encompass varied aspects of culture within that place (see Glen Lich, Terry Jordan, and others), Young forwards the idea of region as a concept that encompasses rather than divides rural and urban. Keeping this framework in mind, Charlotte then asked students in the class how they are regarded when they visit Los Angeles or New York and mention in casual conversation that they are from Omaha, Nebraska. One student described an encounter with a nonrural person while standing in line at Disneyland; when the student revealed she was from Omaha, the person assumed it was a one-horse town and not a city of over 500,000. A shift in the classroom conversation occurred, and Charlotte realized the exchange began to be about a collective "we" among members of the class—not collective in the sense of the same but in the sense of seeing the malleability of

how "we" define ourselves within a location and how others define us. This doesn't mean that Omaha students rid themselves of their assumptions of students from Venango, Nebraska, but that the physical boundaries of place were transcended by understanding locale as a shifting concept and also as an interdependent part of a whole region rather than as a self-contained town or city. This awareness and revision of how they are perceived and how they perceive others began a conversation about other kinds of interconnectedness between spaces that are usually viewed dichotomously.

The work begun in this classroom moment was a start to the kind of critical pedagogy of place Gruenewald calls for as students are asked to wrestle with comfortable and accepted assumptions about local places and their positionality within and against these assumptions. In asking students to research and write about a region, all students—and the instructor—can in some way locate themselves. This approach invites multiple perspectives but also mutual identification. From this orientation, and drawing from place-based experiential knowledge, discussions, and research, the class is then poised to critically engage and work toward decolonization and reinhabitation of a place.

### Integrating Issues of Place in a First-Year Composition Course

Charlotte now teaches in Texas, a state with a distinctive sense of place quite different from the rest of the plains states. Also unlike the other plains states, Texas encompasses a diverse range of topographies (in fact, only a portion of the state is truly a part of the Great Plains) and population differences, claiming three of the top-ten populated cities in the United States along with suburban and rural spaces ("Top 50 Cities"). Texas is also more ethnically diverse. Overall politically conservative, however, Texas handily fits in with its rural Great Plains counterparts to the north.

The state of Texas is also laden with stereotypes and images, some of which are revered and promoted by Texans and some that are problematic in the ways Kim describes in chapter 2 (for example, MTV's *Real World* reality series, set in Austin in 2005, shows cattle in the opening credits, despite the fact that Austin's population is nearly



700,000). Faced with this intriguing ideology of place, Charlotte developed a course, "Messin' with Texas: Writing about Place." When raising such issues of place, she begins with the assumption that everyone in the class is temporarily a Texan, since they are attending school and living at least part of the year in Texas. For students from Houston, Fort Worth embodies its nickname, "Cowntown," and is seen as a small city at best. For students from rural communities, Fort Worth, population 600,000, can be (as it was for Charlotte) the largest metropolitan area in which they've lived. Again, Charlotte first strives for a sense of mutual identification—not to mask or diminish important differences among members of the class but to build a coalition among students who have a common investment in their current local place.

### Readings

Keeping in mind what she learned from Paxton women about a sense of place, Charlotte defines place as expansively as possible and encourages the students to define for themselves what embodies a sense of place for them. Not surprisingly, she assigns writing about Texas (though, interestingly, given its mythic sense of statehood, while Texas hosts a slew of wonderful writers, place-identified authors and texts are not as prevalent as in other regions like Montana or Mississippi). Teachers anywhere, though, can seek out writing about the place their institution calls home, even if there are not many established memoirs in the area. Local authors are particularly important for this kind of work: the point is for students to hear from voices who don't write about a certain place from a distant vantage point. Students can be encouraged to seek resources from their home places or from their new campus space. Who wrote the local histories of the place they are writing about, and what assumptions are embedded in the kinds of histories they constructed? In what ways has public memory been formed and contested at the local level?

Asking students to write in memoir form about the tensions that exist within their local place, Charlotte assigns Molly Ivins's "Texas Women: True Grit and All the Rest," in which Ivins both embraces

and challenges womanhood in Texas: "Please understand I'm not whining when I point out that Texas sexism is of an especially rank and noxious variety—this is more a Texas brag. It is my belief that it is virulence of Texas sexism that accounts for the strength of Texas women. It's what we have to overcome that makes us formidable survivors, say I with some complacency" (699). In this brief essay, Ivins remarks on a variety of Texas stereotypes that students collectively mark, knowing from growing up in the state. Despite the laughter as the class begins to talk about Ivins's text and the images familiar to them, students either love or hate this essay (and usually the split falls down gender lines). First, the class listens and unpacks why most of the women in the room feel an affinity for the piece and why many of the men don't. Then Charlotte asks what isn't familiar to them about the essay, and many first name the fact that "as late as 1969, married women did not have full property rights" (702).

From reading and discussion to writing, students' own nonfiction pieces require them to wrestle with the kind of tension Ivins exhibits in her essay: "It may be possible for a little girl to grow to womanhood in this state entirely sheltered from the rampant sexism all around her—but it's damned difficult. The result is that Texas women tend to know how to cope" (703). Often students' first drafts either glorify or dismiss their home place and fall into binary thinking, but often there is even one line that complicates this notion, and this is what is examined, the underbelly of the essay. As Kim describes above, first-year students are poised to examine the tensions of their home place as they adjust to leaving home. For rural students who have been encouraged to dismiss their dying hometown but may feel otherwise, this assignment can be particularly productive; for rural, suburban, and urban students who glorify their home place, this assignment asks them to consider what they might have overlooked as they construct their place.

### Writing Assignments

As the course progresses, other kinds of assignments in addition to the place-based memoir continue to ask students to examine Texas

not just as a physical or ecological place but also as a social, cultural, economic, and political place. Since the beginning composition course at Texas Christian University requires students to use source material and to write in a number of different genres, exploratory essays and position papers allow students to incorporate both research and their experiential knowledge. As the class continues to unpack the Texas region and students select areas with which to focus their research, they can be provided with—and also provide—information that invites further investigation. For example, employing the Rural School and Community Trust Web site and its fact sheet on Texas can put rurality in context for the state:

More rural people live in Texas than in any other state, but they are a small demographic minority nonetheless, accounting for less than one-fifth of the population. But rural child poverty and minority rates are high, making rural education especially important in Texas. Despite low spending on school administration and transportation, moderate school size, and no better than average teacher salaries, the proportion of school spending that gets into the classroom is quite low. ("Why Rural Matters")

In a move toward thinking about sustainability, the focus for discussion and writing in connection to such material is again on mutual identification—why facts that seem decidedly "a rural issue" are also state, national, and global issues. The discussion can begin by asking students questions such as Why is this a significant statistic? How does it compare with urban statistics on education in Texas? Discussions like these raise issues like the so-called Robin Hood Law, in which wealthier school districts in Texas must share their tax revenue with poorer districts. While not expressly a rural/urban issue, it provides a springboard to study the situation in terms of what is at stake for various parties involved in this controversial law, as well as what assumptions emerge in the ways different contingents are described. Or the class might discuss the ways current issues are connected to Texas, such as the fact that Clear Channel Communications is a Texas-based

company that donated money to President Bush and also pulled the Dixie Chicks (a Texas band) from its radio stations after lead singer Natalie Maines made comments against Bush at a concert in London in 2003. Place, then, is the site for their investigations and writing, not just a descriptive and unexamined marker of identity.

Some students, new to Fort Worth and the campus of TCU, write about topics of great significance in their home place that have less importance in their new place. One student from Portland, Oregon, wrote about the disparity in attitudes about recycling, something she assumed was a given in U.S. culture until she came to TCU and saw the lackluster recycling programs for faculty, staff, and students alike. Another student who had used a bike as a mode of transportation before moving to campus noticed that few students rode bikes and seemed very dependent on cars (often SUVs at that), not unlike the situation in the city of Fort Worth. He first noted this as a passing comment on his way into class, and Charlotte asked him if he knew that Arlington, the city just east of Fort Worth, was the largest city in the United States without a public transportation system. The class talked informally about this for a few moments, and his paper advocating biking on campus to decrease car reliance by students built from there. In these instances, students could transfer their knowledge of one place in an effort to reinhabit another.

### Outcomes

The goal of such assignments is first to help students become better writers, in part by challenging them to revise in ways that make more complex their controlling ideas and their prose itself. The objectives of a themed course on place do not sacrifice the emphases on drafting and revising to create complex prose in which a controlling idea dominates, and they are particularly conducive to helping students understand rhetorical analysis and sensitivity. This work is aided by critical discussions in class that seek to explore the interdependence of places within—and beyond—a certain region. These pedagogical descriptions of place-based thinking and writing employ the three tenets of negotiation. Kim demonstrates with media analysis: consideration

of the ways literacy can be utilized and valued, exploration of both teacher and student assumptions, and the relationship among rural, suburban, and rural people.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that the two aspects of a critical pedagogy of place—decolonization and reinhabitation—can be achieved in a semester-long composition course, but opportunities for them arise through the ingredients of mutual identification, critical research and writing, and encouragement to neither dismiss nor glorify the place. Students, prompted by other students with both similar and different experiences of the same region, examine, perhaps, what the term “oil” connotes to someone from an oil-drilling town like Odessa or to someone from the wealthy Woodlands suburb of Houston whose parent is a manager at Texaco and are then encouraged to research a variety of opinions on Texas oil in the global economy. The objective is to help students invite critical analysis, argument, and experiential knowledge into their writing by both valuing and challenging what they and others say about their place.

#### Public Pedagogies of Place beyond the Classroom

The need for public pedagogies to complicate place-based identities feels particularly great since the media, fueled by political strategists, classifies citizens as “red state” or “blue state,” as though the state one lives in defines her or his personality. Thinking more critically about one’s identification with place, and places themselves, should be an integral part of critical, public pedagogies that seek to help rural and nonrural citizens alike both celebrate and critique their place as well as gain a greater understanding of the interdependence of their place to regional, national, and global culture. In the conclusion to chapter 4, Charlotte describes how literacy work by rural women can move toward critical, public pedagogies by incorporating their meaning-making of local place more squarely into conversations and programs on place. In their hometowns and in on-line communities, these women create possibilities for or are already enacting decolonization and reinhabitation components of a critical pedagogy of place.

These kinds of work being done by rural women are a crucial part of rural literacies that get overlooked when celebration of place relies too heavily on preservationist thinking. Some kinds of place-based education being done in rural areas fall into such thinking, but at the same time, place-based education programs have much to contribute to the ways rural literacies are imagined in college settings and outside the classroom. As mentioned in chapter 4, many of the motivations for place-based education are conducive to the kinds of citizen participation we call for with critical, public pedagogies. Currently, place-based programs are primarily located in K–12 institutions, and the best of these programs deploy a critical, public pedagogy of place to effect change in their local communities. College educators as activist intellectuals, who have opportunities to partner with K–12 education, can help ensure that place-based programs employ a critical model.

The Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, located fifteen miles from the Texas-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley, is one such program. Students connected to the center hail from two of Texas’s poorest districts, where 91 percent of families have an annual income of less than \$10,000 (Higgins Null). According to its Web site, “The Center was formalized in 1997 with the assistance of the Annenberg Rural Challenge with the intent to bridge the gap between communities and schools by developing pedagogy of place curricula,” though local residents had been talking about rural development before the center was official (“Llano Grande Center”). The center’s work encompasses what one typically imagines for place-based education—oral history projects—but its Web site describes an active movement from story to action:

Together, Llano Grande researchers and informants are constructing the unrecorded social history of their economically depressed but culturally vibrant communities. [The stories of] older residents . . . have been recorded, transcribed, and archived by students . . . usually in Spanish. Students have also translated and edited the transcriptions into narratives for publication in both English and Spanish. They are now

being studied and used by children at all grade levels who have reworked them into fiction, artistic depictions, and even a television documentary which Edcouch-Elsa High School students produced for the local PBS station. (Higgins Null)

Students go through an extensive methodological process to gather this information in which the older residents are interviewed, establishing connections and confidences. A bilingual journal helped community members envision the project, and eventually community members were volunteering for the project. Most impressive, though, is the way the stories led to programs that make meaning of a significant cultural moment through literate acts. As described on their Web site:

Students, teachers, and community members . . . held a conference for those who had witnessed or taken part in a walk-out at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the spring of 1968. This pivotal event, protesting discriminatory practices throughout the local school system, hastened the end of "Anglo" dominance in local politics and local schools. The Anglo minority, who had occupied most positions of authority, moved away from the area over the next few years, creating new leadership opportunities for residents of Mexican descent. . . . Sharing reminiscences with other area residents as well as with a new, curious, and caring generation has been a way of increasing positive exchanges between communities inside and outside the school walls. (Higgins Null)

The center recognizes and values the importance of oral histories and narratives on how life used to be, and if it stopped there, it would be recognizable through the preservation metaphor, where the ideas and stories raised seem fixed in the past. What marks the center's activities as a critical, public pedagogy that moves toward sustainability is the way in which the collection of oral histories is not the end of the literacy endeavor but the beginning. Economically, the program has developed partnerships in order to create job opportunities, one

of which is transcribing oral history records on a contract basis for various Texas universities and historical sites. It has also produced a strong alumni network, used, among other ways, to foster mentor relationships and other contacts. The center asks rural people to use literacy to appreciate and cultivate their community while also working toward awareness and change; for Llano Grande students and facilitators, residents may stay or return to their home or they may leave and teach others of their home place. The center has also been highlighted by the Rural School and Community Trust, a nonprofit organization that works to help communities and schools gain strength together by working "with a network of schools and community groups striving to improve the quality of education and community life and to improve state education policies" ("About the Rural School and Community Trust"). The program is an excellent example of public pedagogies as local residents play a key role in the development and enactment of the work being done.<sup>6</sup>

The work of the Llano Grande Center provides a model for the way a community can integrate a critical pedagogy of place into its school system, valuing local knowledge and public memory work. Creating liaisons among such K-12 programs, colleges and universities, and communities like the center fosters openings for all constituents to contribute to education about local place and the ways place affects and is affected by others; compositionists are primed to cultivate such opportunities. By situating themselves in their local place as activist intellectuals in the ways we've described—participating in public media critiques, becoming involved in networks and conferences involving food politics, and seeking out partnership programs such as the Llano Grande Center—compositionists can revise perceptions of rural literacies. A number of community-linking opportunities such as these could be pursued to encourage a connection to and familiarity with the organizations and groups that perpetuate rural literacies associated with sustainability. Students could also be asked to participate in on-line or face-to-face discussions with community leaders, workers, and advocacy organizations associated with rural development and urban-rural partnerships such as the Rural Womyn Zone or the CFSC.

### Working toward a Multiplicity of Rural Literacies

In the three pedagogical examples we delineate above, our goal is to provide generative rather than prescriptive course plans that can be shaped depending on local and academic contexts so that classes can analyze and investigate rural literacies and issues of sustainability from the vantage point of a critical, public pedagogy. Exploring and renegotiating the relationships among rural, urban, and suburban people as members of a global citizenry is a key component of critical, public pedagogies within and outside a classroom that lead toward sustainability. As we cite in chapter 1, "Public pedagogy . . . becomes part of a critical practice designed to understand the social context of everyday life as lived relations of power" (Giroux, "Public Pedagogy" 355). In each of our examples, rural literacies, rather than discrete content to learn about, serve as a site of inquiry about broader issues of literacy and power that lie at the heart of critical, public pedagogies. Furthermore, we point toward models of critical, public pedagogy that have been initiated outside the classroom by advocacy organizations and other citizen groups.

Throughout this volume, we have analyzed the social, political, and material issues that shape rural literacies. In doing so, we have worked to initiate a broader dialogue within the field of rhetoric and composition studies about the context, issues, and literacies of rural residents and communities—literacies that connect across geographic, economic, social, and cultural boundaries. We hope the questions that we have posed will be useful to literacy researchers, rhetoricians, writing program administrators, and teachers of writing as they consider how to design research projects, curricula, courses, and community engagement projects that represent a range of literate action and experiences in multiple contexts: rural, suburban, and urban.

Our ultimate wish for readers of this book is that the phrase "rural literacies" will come to have a rich and nuanced set of associations for you, informed by certain demonstrable realities about the state of rural America. "Rural literacies" should conjure images not of an abandoned one-room schoolhouse on a featureless plain or of a news special on the failures of rural education. While we have provided

alternate images—of a woman opening a resource center, of a Web site fostering social change, of a discussion of *Fast Food Nation* in a composition course—we actively resisted simply replacing one set of specific images with another. Our goal is to work toward realities of rural literacies that are multiple and that encourage mutual identification among rural, urban, and suburban citizens. Indeed, the phrase "rural literacies" should suggest reading and writing as social action that supports and sustains diverse communities trying to cope with complex, often interlinked economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues. Addressing these interconnected issues through literate action and sponsorship of literate action is the responsibility of us all.