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Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia

Robert E. Brooke (Ed.)

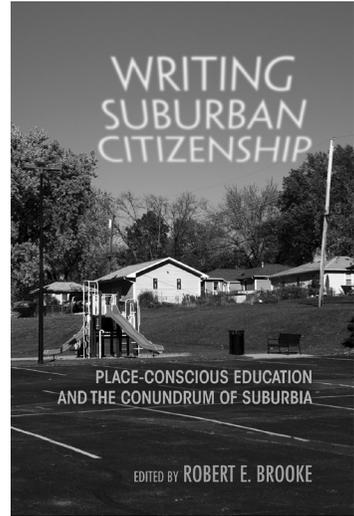
Syracuse UP, 2015, pp. 266

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Robert E. Brooke and his college and high school colleagues demonstrate the innovative, place-conscious pedagogies being practiced out of the National Writing Project (NWP) sites in Nebraska in the latest edited collection, *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*. The introduction of the book, written by Brooke, makes an impassioned case that suburbs—often overlooked by academics in literacy and writing studies, as well as critiqued for encouraging a lifestyle that is segregationist, ahistorical, and unsustainable—are indeed the communities where an active citizenry desperately needs to be nurtured (13). As of the 2010 census, the opening claims, suburbs are where most American youth live and are educated, and, as the 2016 election showed us, where people vote (2). Urban dwellers, and I would include myself as a New Yorker in this distinction, often too easily dismiss suburbia through pronunciations like, “all the houses are ‘made of ticky-tacky’ and the roads are lined with strips of chain stores and chain restaurants.” Brooke and the other contributors of the collection, however, are working against these stereotypes, making visible to readers (particularly other suburban educators) that suburban dwelling places have environmental, cultural, and historical concerns. These can and should be emphasized in the public-school curriculum in order to reveal to teachers and students meaningful connections between place, identity development, and political activity.

What is so impressive about this book, like its predecessor *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and The Teaching of Writing*, is the way it fosters a critical dialogue between high school and college teachers. The chapters serve as case studies for approaches to place-based curriculums and are written in an accessible style; the book would be useful, for example, in a course preparing and credentialing future teachers. The book well mirrors the National Writing Project’s motto of “Teachers Teaching Teachers.” In today’s public schools, maintaining this NWP stance is vital to authorize teachers as sound experts who can and should make decisions for the education of the nation’s children instead of allowing these decisions to be made by



textbook producers, state legislators, or the Secretary of Education. The book also puts forward the idea that place-conscious curriculums cultivate in teachers and students a sense of “belonging” that allow them to see the “‘heritage, values, and history’ that have brought [their] community into being;” Brooke and his colleagues believe that this sense of belonging creates a commitment to place through “a vision for its future, for a healthy sense of what the community can become” (27).

In the introduction, Brooke describes how the book is structured into two parts, grouping together author contributions that speak to the ecological (part 1) and cultural (part 2) concerns around place. Drawing upon the work of writer, farmer, and environmental activist Wendell Berry, Brooke frames for the reader how places are a “mutually interdependent system of relations” (29). These systems can further be defined as natural (watershed) and man-made (commonwealth): the watershed is “an ecological entity: a network of mutually interdependent natural systems that work together around a particular river system” and the commonwealth is “a cultural entity: a network of mutually interdependent cultural systems that work together within a particular political entity” (28). For the sake of the structure of the book, this sequencing works well. However, as many contemporary scholars in ecomposition studies have pointed out, the environmental and the cultural are not easily separated as they are part of a complex ecology through which they always work together. In other words, there are no “natural” spaces without human influence. The book’s separation of environment and culture perpetuates a binary, one that could have been unpacked more through the opening chapter of the book.

The first four contributors in Part One, ecological, bring to the forefront issues about water and its scarcity, climate control, and the development of community around local natural resources. Each contributor uniquely discusses the idea of making visible connections between communities and their environment.

Susan Martens in “Move the Writer, Move the Pen, Move the Mind, Change the World: Writing Marathons for Place-Conscious Teaching in the Suburbs” discusses how the pedagogical strategy of writing marathons, because they are located in communal spaces as an alternative to institutional and home settings, allows participants to “shift out of our everyday roles and take on the roles of writers” (49). She offers several questions that participants can ponder through writing in community spaces so that they can begin to make connections, such as: “connecting movement with writing, connecting places with memories, connecting thought with feeling, and connecting people with each other” (60). Martens’s analysis of participant reflections is very helpful in understanding the impact this practice has for learners.

The next two chapters, written by Sharon Bishop and Jeff Lacey, focus on units they developed for their high school classes that consider how human settlement impacts the watershed and the ways students can be led to see their individual and the community impact on the environment. The classes researched specifically how water is used in their Nebraska communities in order to make visible to the class the connections across different parts of their lives. Bishop explains these connections well when she writes, “This search turns into a study of water: water for our communities that make up our consolidated school district, water for the corn

and soybean fields that are the foundation for the agri-based industry that forms an economic base for the area, and water for the state of Nebraska—for industry, municipalities, and recreation” (74). Rather than assigning a research paper, both Bishop and Lacey discuss how students can be directed into inquiry through other modes, such as “photography, journal reflections, and nature poetry” with the end of creating a local public dialogue on water issues (76). Lacey is more detailed in his chapter, providing descriptions of assignments for a class portfolio; his discussions on the use of field journals in class may prove useful to those interested in doing environmental analysis with students (100).

The last chapter in the section, by Aubrey Streit Krug, writes to the college first-year composition audience about teaching watershed issues to students through the lens of campus and local community issues. She says that rather than framing ecosystem issues as scientific problems or through the lens of catastrophic weather events, students should be led to think of them as “cultural patterns” that can be revealed through the “writing, rhetoric, and arguments” produced by the community, in her case the area surrounding the campus (113). Developing an “ecological understanding of context” requires students to see the environment not only as natural, but also as a social construction (123).

In Part Two of the collection, the next four contributors bring to the forefront issues of culture in the American Midwest, such as the dynamics surrounding class and race. These chapters highlight the changing landscape of work as rural communities become suburban, relying less on the agriculture industry and more on nearby city jobs for economic survival. The writers also bring to the forefront the indigenous Native American populations of the area and the ways that their history and cultural contributions have been “whitewashed” by communities, and by extension, school curriculums (210).

Mary Birky Collier’s chapter discusses how Nebraska communities are changing from rural to suburban and how this impacts students’ senses of self. Her curriculum, which focuses on literature written by local authors, intends to make students more critical of the negative consequences of this new suburban identity. Students explored feelings of discomfort through their writing around issues such as “replacing our fields with suburban expansion neighborhoods” by “acknowledging isolation and loneliness behind the doors of these quiet suburban houses, and resisting the generic molds offered them by suburban idealism” (147). Cathie English’s chapter in Part Two pairs nicely with Collier’s as she moves her high school students’ focus from analyzing famous local authors to asking students to interview elderly community members about their work histories. This project reveals to students how the town of Aurora, where her school is located, is moving from an economy based in local agriculture to a service economy that involves commuting away from the town to work in cities. English discusses how she wanted the work ethnographies to tie students “to the men and women who work in their community. I wanted them to be aware that they are influenced by the places we inhabit (by human beings, fauna, flora, and geography)” (205). The oral histories sparked a

dialogue between students and the older generations of Aurora residents about the future of their town and economic sustainability.

Daniel Boster, in his chapter, discusses how his high school curriculum focused on demystifying the colonization of America by Columbus and brought to the forefront the awful actions and truths about the so-called “discovery” of America. Students became upset that they did not learn the truth sooner about Columbus, who they had been taught was a benign explorer who sailed the seas and, by accident, discovered America. Boster’s curriculum inspired students to question the previous ways they had been educated, considering how history curriculums are formed, what texts are chosen, and by whom (170). Boster’s curriculum led to the students seeing how history is often written by the victors and, in the case of America, elides Native struggles. The high school students were then asked to develop a mini-unit for a middle school class about the topic of Columbus; Boster says this was a “public act of composing and developing,” which allowed students a space that spoke back to official school discourses (179). The chapter’s discussion of the projects the high school students came up with for the middle school students (175–77), such as a reproduction of the “Game of Life” with the players cast as either Native Americans or Colonists, shows the ways that creativity can be brought into the classroom to learn course content.

The last chapter of the section, written by Bernice Olivas, is one of the most critical and self-reflective pieces in the book. Olivas asks teachers to consider how educating students through a lens of place-consciousness is not only about creating identification with place to ensure a commitment and a future for the community. It is also about a realistic assessment of America’s historical injustices to communities of color, and the present whitewashing that is, in some ways, a continuance of that colonizing history. A place-conscious education needs to bring to the forefront “the history of displacement, loss, and injustice lived by communities of color. By its very nature, learning about place, learning to love our places, demands we account for the legacy of racism and colonization in those places” (210). Through asking her students to read the literature of indigenous peoples, Olivas begins a critical assessment of the contemporary American Midwest as place. She weaves together past injustice of moving Native populations to reservations with present issues of homelessness as well as water and land disputes in Lincoln to convince readers of the importance of addressing race as a part of place-consciousness (214). Her chapter, through its description of teaching indigenous literature and thought, fosters what Olivas calls “a different rhetoric, a Native rhetoric” as she “teach[es] the literature through the traditions of storytelling as a mode of teaching empathy and building unity in a community” (220).

Through the introduction and several chapters in the book, Linda Flower’s model of community engagement and types of agency (speaking up, speaking against, speaking with, and speaking for) in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* is invoked and applied. This use of Flower’s work provides unity among the chapters and a clear connection to community scholarship in rhetoric and writing studies, which is a sound approach for a collection of this scope. In some ways,

however, the reliance on Flower's book is an Achilles' heel. There was not enough discussion as to how and why the Nebraska suburban curriculums were adopting and applying a theory that came out of an urban context, specifically Pittsburgh's local public schools and communities. Brooke's edited collection—through its inclusion of high school teachers' writings and its focus on suburban communities—is accomplishing something unique and different from Flower's book. Including an additional discussion, either through the chapter contributions or by Brooke in the framing, outlining what suburban agency is and how it is enacted in comparison to the types of urban agency Flower and other scholars in the field have already identified in their work, would have further distinguished the book's contribution to the field of community writing.

Robert Brooke's conclusion for the book, "Afterward: Place-Conscious Education in an Age of Assessment," offers a passionate stance against the standardization of public school curriculums; educators can easily adapt his argument when advocating to administrators for an emphasis on place-based writing in their local contexts. As secondary and college educators, Brooke says that we must push back against the current model of education that puts too much emphasis on "National standards and a core curriculum [that] serve[s] a migratory, placeless model of education serving a largely migratory business sector" and instead consider "a place-conscious education system [that] serves [as] an educational model of an active citizenry" (235). This "active citizenry" Brooke describes imagines students as becoming more aware of issues in their local community and involved in processes of decision-making in that community. Education, then, is one way to create further opportunities for identification with place and communities within it in order to build sustainable futures. The important message from this book is that when students learn to investigate and write about their places, and see themselves as members of communities, then their education becomes more meaningful to them—leading to success in school and in opportunities for community-building outside of it.

Works Cited

Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Engagement*. Southern Illinois UP, 2008.