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Rural Literacies.

Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell.

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Rural Literacies, a collaboratively written book by Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell, reflects a potentially rewarding turn in literacy research for all interested in community literacy. Following recent work such as Charlotte Hogg's *From the Garden Club* and Angela Crow's *Whistlin and Crowin*, *Rural Literacies* turns our attention away from traditional conceptions of community—situated in the city—and onto the variety of communities found outside the city in what gets wholly classified as rural. The book not only exposes stereotypes of rural literacies, but it also synthesizes a variety of research into a productive approach teachers and others might take when identifying, engaging, and reframing rural literacies.

The authors' collaborative process is reflected in the book's structure. Robert Brooke, the editor for the Studies in Writing & Rhetoric series, urged the authors to collaborate after hearing them deliver separate papers at the 2002 Thomas R. Watson Conference on issues of rural literacies. This collaboration is witnessed most obviously in the co-authored opening and closing chapters. However, the middle chapters, while reflecting the co-authors' input and feedback, are single-authored chapters, focusing on differing locations and research projects. Despite the unique personal locations and research approaches of the solely authored chapters, the book maintains a unified voice that transcends individual chapters.

In the opening chapter, the authors tackle directly the "rural literacies stereotype." A multifaceted definition of *rural* is offered, pointing towards the quantitative, geographic, and cultural aspects of the term. This definitional move attempts to disrupt the homogenous lens through which the rural—including rural students and citizens—are commonly viewed. As illustrated in the central chapters, the rural experience is diverse and complex. Therefore, when the authors define "rural literacies," they aim for a malleable definition that will reflect the variety of the rural: "Rural literacies, then, refers to the particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas or, to use Brandt's terms, to pursue the opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities" (4). As indicated in the definition, the authors are taken with the concept of sustainability, building upon the work of Derek Owens and its potential for the future of rural communities. This concept allows the authors to nod (in the

opening chapter) toward teaching—a public pedagogy—that will empower rural communities through democratic citizenship and social action.

Throughout the book, the authors critique a “rhetoric of lack” that surrounds rural America. For example, literacy research in the field of rhetoric and composition generally, and in community literacy in particular, is skewed toward the urban. The city metaphor figures prominently in composition, especially in the field’s engagement with space and place. Moreover, community literacy research is largely focused on urban sites, especially in as much as we conceptualize the “community” in opposition to the “university.” The authors argue that rural peoples and communities reflect the profound impact of “the differential circulation of capital, information, labor, and cultural resources” (18), yet they tend to be avoided due to “metropolitan biases.” Such a research bias results in a rhetoric of lack when dealing with rural issues, such as education, as witnessed in three consistent solutions to rural issues: modernization, preservation, and abandonment.

The central chapters both illustrate and criticize such solutions before promoting a sustainable approach, built on mutual beneficence, for researchers to engage with rural students, communities, and issues. Kim Donehower’s chapter investigates the perpetuation of the rural illiteracy stereotype, particularly in Appalachia. Beyond an analysis of academic and media-driven stereotypes, Donehower investigates literacy sponsors’ roles in such stereotypes through interview data of residents of Haines Gap—a small community in the mountains of western North Carolina. Donehower makes clear her personal ties to the community: “[I]t is where my family comes from” (56). Her research forges an alternative to the stereotype of rural people’s relationship to literacy; they are either “passive illiterates” or “active resisters” (68). Donehower cautions community literacy sponsors as well as teachers against stigmatizing rural populations by playing into traditional stereotypes.

The third chapter, “The Rhetoric of the Farm Crisis” by Eileen Schell, looks at the “farm crisis,” in particular the crisis of small and family farms in rural America. Schell maintains that the sustainability of rural communities is directly tied to the adoption of an alternative agrarian rhetoric fostered by a critical literacy. Schell’s analysis exposes the traditional “plotlines” of the farm crisis: “the pathos-driven narrative of tragedy and the progress-driven narrative of smart diversification” (93). Permeating much of this analysis is Schell’s own experience: Her family’s apple and pear orchard, operated for four generations in Washington State, ceased operation in January 2001. In her words, the traditional plotlines must be countered with a “rhetoric of mutual identification.” In my words, Schell hopes to replace “Save the Farm and Farmers” with “No Farms, No Food.” Ultimately, she introduces Farm Aid and an analysis of the organization’s homepage as a critical literacy sponsor.

Charlotte Hogg, in the book’s fourth chapter, relies on research conducted for her book *From the Garden Club* to address the question of “what opportunities for understanding and complicating rural literacies already exist in rural places” (120). Hogg achieves a “critical pedagogy of place” that

promotes an alternative to traditional masculinist narratives of rural life. This is accomplished, for Hogg, by situating local everyday literacies “not as relics but as a part of public memory” (130). She relies on interview data from older women (ages 78-100) in her hometown of Paxton, Nebraska, collected between 1997-2000. Underlying the typically rural town of Paxton and its residents, exist literacy practices performed by the participants which reflect “reinhabitation”: sustaining the town while moving it forward (143). This reinhabitation is witnessed in cemetery records and town histories as well as Rural Womyn Zone, a “technological network that seeks to critically educate rural women” (152).

In the final chapter, the authors move beyond the analysis of previous chapters and look to outline a “critical, public pedagogy” built on the metaphor of sustainability. Unfortunately for many working in community literacy, the pedagogy centers mainly on the composition classroom. Three different first-year composition courses involving units on food politics, media representation, and place are described. Recognizing that most current composition readers and textbooks fail to adequately engage with rural literacies, these approaches aim to introduce students to a variety of readings and research on rural communities and literacies. However, the production aspect of these approaches is limited or not fully described in the chapter. More attention is focused on analysis and interpretation of readings rather than the production of alternate texts, documents, and projects. Moreover, as noted, the pedagogies are intended for first-year composition courses as opposed to a variety of writing and literacy courses.

The public aspect of this chapter mainly involves shorter sections on the potential for compositionists as public intellectuals. Bridges between the classroom and community could have been further described. The field of composition has a rich history of service learning and community engagement, which would seemingly connect with the public pedagogy targeted here. In addition, composition as an organization and institution was absent from the closing chapter. Should not programs, academic units, and schools, as well as organizations such as NCTE or CCCC, work toward rural issues? Large conferences, such as CCCC, are held in large cities each year with attention paid to the surrounding urban communities; however, how much attention is paid to the suburban and rural communities outside of the cities? As public intellectuals, especially those interested in community literacy, we can work together to address issues, such as rural stereotypes and the farm crisis, as well as promote change.

Ultimately, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell offer a compelling analysis of rural literacies and push readers to consider the implications for those interested in community literacy. Teachers, graduate students, and community literacy workers would be well served by this book. We must remain open to the variety of experiences and locations possible within community literacy. As the authors note, the pressing issues of today—economic, social, cultural, and environmental—impact all of us, those living in cities of millions and villages of hundreds.