

Fall 2009

## Neighborliness at the Co-op: Community and Biospheric Literacy

Diane Miller

*Pima Community College*, [dbmiller@pima.edu](mailto:dbmiller@pima.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Miller, Diane. "Neighborliness at the Co-Op: Community and Biospheric Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 31–47, doi:10.25148/clj.4.1.009452.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

## NEIGHBORLINESS AT THE CO-OP: COMMUNITY AND BIOSPHERIC LITERACY

*Diane Miller*

---

In this ethnographic study of an organic foods cooperative, I examine community through three different facets—the Voluntary Association, the Lifestyle Enclave, and the Neighborhood. I use fieldnote examples to show how each of these community facets corresponds with the three visions of discourse for social change considered by Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. Peck et al.'s most powerful discourse, community literacy, corresponds to the Neighborhood facet of community. The neighborhood holds promise for developing a Biospheric Literacy as developed by Anne Mareck in the introduction to this special issue. The kinds of meanings that she says acknowledge biospherically interdependent human and non-human community members are, I suggest, ritually enacted through neighborly communication. Further, it is through the cordial talk of neighbors that we communicate the kinds of understandings needed to affect positive social change and limit damage to our biosphere.

---

That our time is a period marked by economic collapse, political tension, and environmental catastrophe is difficult to ignore. Reports of desertification, threats of species extinction, and speculations about the rate of melting polar ice seem to be eclipsed only by the breaking news of one market collapse after another, while social and cultural differences continue to perpetuate political crises worldwide. The confluence of these emergencies brings to the fore the need to develop effective discourses with the potential to heal the planet—discourses that I argue facilitate and are facilitated by the expansion of our experience of community.

But what do we mean by *community*? There is no shortage of scholars still addressing this question more than fifty years after sociologist George Hillery analyzed ninety-four significantly different definitions of community. His conclusion: “all the definitions deal with *people*” (my emphasis) and “[b]eyond this common basis, there is no agreement” (117). Although the notion that community is primarily for people has been challenged in recent years, modern community scholarship continues overwhelmingly to assume that humans occupy the center of community. Perhaps this notion has prevailed in part because, from a communication point of view, the significance we assign to our own experience of community is what simultaneously comprises and represents community, thus granting human discourse the power not only to drive our ultimate understanding of community, but to create and maintain our experience of it.

It is this premise—that communication is constitutive of community—

that initially inspired my five-year ethnographic study of the experience of community in a rural Midwestern organic foods cooperative (the Co-op). A cooperative is especially appropriate for a discussion of community and biospheric literacy: Cooperative members buy equal shares of their common enterprise, which they expect to be operated according to international cooperative principles that specify democratic and economic participation, as well as concern for environment and community.

Because I had noticed that *community* seems to be what Richard Weaver calls a “god term,” or “rhetorical absolute,” an “expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and power” (235), a word whose rhetorical potency is increased because it is not used very analytically (238), I did not expect to arrive at an ultimate definition of community. However, as a result of my observing participation as an ethnographer at the Co-op (in which I spent more than 2500 hours serving as a board director, shopping in the store, and interviewing participants), I did develop a perspective of community that views community through the interdependent facets of Voluntary Association, Lifestyle Enclave, and Neighborhood. This tri-faceted perspective corresponds to and supports two approaches to meaning making that we must pay attention to on the community level if we are to effect social and environmental change, in this moment, on this planet: Community Literacy and Biospheric Literacy.

In this article, I explain how the Voluntary Association, Lifestyle Enclave, and Neighborhood—as three interdependent facets of community, each with its own communication style<sup>1</sup>—correspond with Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins’ exploration of the development of discourses used by people working together to effect social change (203-205). Using ethnographic fieldnotes from my Co-op study, I show how everyday communication practices in the Voluntary Association, the Lifestyle Enclave, and the Neighborhood create and are created by our experience of community as it aligns with Peck et al.’s discourses. I end with the Neighborhood, where everyday communication corresponds with Peck et al.’s most powerful discourse, community literacy. The Neighborhood is also the facet of community where I suggest that the civility of neighborliness and the interdependence of a shared place may hold promise for expanding our view of community in ways that help us adopt what Anne Mareck has termed Biospheric Literacy: “a literacy that represents the human animal as just one of the myriad members of the vast biotic community graced by the richness of our biosphere—the interconnected global system of ecosystems that supports life on the planet” (277). It is in the community as seen through the facet of Neighborhood that such an understanding—one that considers both human and non-human organisms as legitimate members of community—recognizes the impact of our everyday activities and perpetuates meaningful solutions to complex world crises.

## Facets of Community

At its nascence, the Co-op looked most like a *Voluntary association*. Voluntary Associations are groups—such as Sierra Club local chapters, parent-teacher associations, or any grass-roots organizations devoted to public improvement—they bring people together because of what they might achieve for the common good. During the 1980s, however, the Co-op began to look more like a *Lifestyle Enclave*. Lifestyle Enclaves are affiliations such as chess clubs, book groups, garden societies, and football game tailgating—that unite people on the basis of their shared tastes and habits. In 2009, I see the *Neighborhood* coming to the fore as the predominant facet. By Neighborhood, I mean local public spaces—neighborhoods where people live, as well as other places that are outside of home and work, such as a local pub or park—where people are invested in a place, as Co-op stakeholders are.

Given their different roles, the Voluntary Association, the Lifestyle Enclave, and the Neighborhood each are characterized by a different style of communication—“purposive deliberation” among people who are working toward mutual goals in the Voluntary Association, “free and open” conversation that focuses on the shared interest in the Lifestyle Enclave, and the “cordial chat” that is necessary to get along in the shared space of the Neighborhood (Simonson 327-8). Each of these communication styles corresponds with the discourses<sup>2</sup> that Peck et al. categorize as dynamic in effecting social change: *The Literacy of Social and Cultural Critique* “openly addresses issues of power, defining social relationships in terms of economic and ideological struggle” (204). *Cultural Literacy* seeks to minimize difference among participants by creating a common discourse (203). *Community Literacy*, which Peck et al. consider the most viable and promising, is an alternative discourse in which conversations are restructured so that people “compose” themselves and solve common problems on the spot, together. (204-205). The following table summarizes the characteristics of each community facet and corresponding Peck et al. literacy.

Facet	Sociocultural Significance	Example	Emphasis	Corresponding Literacy (Peck et al.)
Voluntary Association	Empowerment to Resist Domination	Grass-roots groups	Democratic Participation	Literacy of Social and Cultural Critique
Lifestyle Enclave	The Formation and Expression of Identity	Garden Club	Comfort	Cultural Literacy
Neighborhood	Interdependence	Residential Neighborhood	Sense of Place	Community Literacy

In the following section I address the characteristics of the above facets and use fieldnote excerpts<sup>3</sup> to illustrate some of the ways community

is experienced in each one. I also show how each facets' communication corresponds with Peck et al.'s visions of discourse, and I examine the potential for social change and environmental recovery supported by Biospheric Literacy.

## Voluntary Associations

In the Co-op as voluntary association, Co-op participants—by virtue of their membership—share a common history of forming for the purpose of collectively resisting domination and acting for mutual benefit. Cooperatives have typically been formed by the less powerful members of society in order to resist domination or instigate social change. In fact, the principles that still drive cooperative activity internationally are derived from the Rochdale cooperative, started in England in 1844 in response to the common practice of selling overpriced, adulterated food. In addition, Co-op membership still represents the early 20th century American Midwest legacy of cooperatives extending credit to miners during labor strikes, as well as nurturing of dialogue about alternative economic systems, especially in the 1930s and 1970s.

As participants initially formed the Co-op in the 1970s to respond to corporate control of their food supply and to resist the promotion of unhealthy food practices, one of the Rochdale principles they kept in mind was the mandate to use democratic participation—the communication that is emphasized in voluntary associations. As Don,<sup>4</sup> a Co-op founder told me, “We were questioning everything in general back then, and we wanted certain foods to be available. I remember standing out on the sidewalk before the first meeting reading *Mother Earth News* on how to do co-ops. One of the original ideas was that everything was supposed to be consensus.” He told me that “whoever came made the decisions that month—and it might be a big decision.” It is because of emphasis on democratic participation that the Voluntary Association is generally considered to be the most powerful of the facets. Meanwhile, the democratic process as lived out in cooperatives is not without its discontents. For example, Craig Cox, who participated in the 1970s Minneapolis cooperative movement, documented the notorious “co-op war,” the dramatic dispute between the two prevailing co-op factions of that day. One represented “personal choice and freedom, spiritual awakening and liberation.” The other emphasized “electoral politics, distribution of wealth, class warfare” (11). The “war” involved bank account shenanigans, threats of violence, and a hostile takeover of the cooperative in dispute—not very cooperative.

To me, a significant amount of communication in the Voluntary Association hearkens to one of Peck et al.'s discourse categories, the Literacy of Social and Cultural Critique. The ways in which participants in this sort of literacy “deal with difference through tactics of resistance, supported by oppositional rhetoric” aligns with the ways in which democratic participation was sometimes historically enacted at the Co-op. Most legendary is a local debate that participants recall from the 1970s, a fundamental enactment of

the divide between factions. One prioritized the availability of affordable commodities—for example, canned food for “working class” families. The other was called to educate the populace about the political, social, economic, and environmental consequences of their food choices. The main question was whether the Co-op should sell white sugar—a product that does not promote health, and whose history is intertwined with environmental degradation, corporate hegemony, and human slavery.

Co-op veterans Garrison, Sam, and Bettie talked to me about the contentious communication that characterized some of the early days. While they all now express disappointment that high-input participatory democracy has been replaced by a more formal representative system of board directorship, they also know that the Voluntary Association was not perfect. According to Garrison, “There was endless bickering—would we carry sugar or canned goods or everything organic. I got burned out on long meetings and endless debate. We didn’t get anything accomplished.” Based on these disagreements of more than thirty years ago, Sam says, “There are still people in this town that I will not talk to.” Bettie, meanwhile, characterizes the debates by saying that the Co-op has a history of “chewing people up and spitting them out.” Of course, these scenarios do not in and of themselves negate the Voluntary Association’s power to develop participants’ civic proclivities. Yet, these Voluntary Association dynamics correspond with Peck et al.’s assertion that the polarized relations often accompanying the Literacy of Cultural Critique do obstruct creative problem solving (205). In addition, in the case of Sam’s and Bettie’s testimony, Michael Schudson’s observation that the kind of talk we call democratic can be potentially contentious, competitive, and uncomfortable (299) seems to be an understatement. In short, while the Voluntary Association does enable agency, at the Co-op, its rhetorical capacities can also be counterproductive and divisive. Enter the Lifestyle Enclave.

## Lifestyle Enclaves

In the 1980s, as the term “lifestyle” was gaining currency, cooperatives began to cater to upscale tastes and sell what Bettie calls “fancy stuff.” In addition, as individual cooperatives became more established, their structures became more formal and included managers and boards of directors. The participatory democracy of the early days was replaced by representational democracy—an ostensibly more efficient system that accompanied what Bettie describes as a “loss of cooperative spirit.” Yet she also says, “The Co-op is my community—it’s not perfect, but it’s a place where I belong and feel loyal...I could not live without this Co-op.” This experience of belonging is characteristic of the Lifestyle Enclave. Because conversation in the Lifestyle Enclave does not focus on political empowerment, but rather regards participants’ shared activity or interest as it is enacted most visibly through consumption, the Lifestyle Enclave does not empower individuals politically.

Lifestyle Enclaves, even as they are sites of consumption, are also where individuals form and express their identities, and these enacted

identities, as they are developed and struggled with, communicate a sense of belonging. Our identities in the Co-op as Lifestyle Enclave are formed by our shared consumption patterns and fleeting shopping interactions. Thus, even as we form our sense of belonging, the talk is light and the pursuit is one of individual satisfaction. In the Co-op as Lifestyle Enclave, for example, participants who look at their purchases as extensions of their connectedness cite and appreciate the initial face-to-face interaction that accompanies their purchases, even as their talk seems to conflate community with consumer culture.

Meanwhile, Lifestyle Enclave interactions are less contentious than Voluntary Association interactions designed to reach a decision or facilitate political agency. Ironically, as Schudson claims, the sort of sociable conversation that I associate with the Lifestyle Enclave enables people to feel freer to express their ideas than does democratic conversation, and he ultimately claims that the reasonableness that is required for the “democratic” conversation may be at odds with the conversation characterized by the absence of a political agenda and the presence of comfortable-ness (302-303)—which I have observed in the Co-op as Lifestyle Enclave. Participants claim that this talk is satisfying—it’s usually what they’re referring to when they describe the “sense of community” they experience at the Co-op.

I see Lifestyle Enclave interactions as corresponding with Peck et al.’s “Cultural Literacy,” described as relying on a “shared language and literate practices” that can “instill pride and a sense of identity within a group” (204). As Peck et al. point out, even as this sort of discourse seeks to minimize difference and create unity, it can also impose particular privileged discourses, as well as set up dynamics of exclusivity (203-4). In the Co-op as Lifestyle Enclave, everyday experience of community is complicated by the ways our Cultural Literacy is expressed through our shared habits. In the following example from my fieldnotes, my own shopping experience reveals some of the ways that our consumptive habits can constitute the literacy through which we make meaning of our community experience in the Lifestyle Enclave.

When I am preparing for company, or otherwise buying things at the Co-op that are unusual for me, I feel a little “off,” as if I were not myself. I am choosing groceries today that my guests will like when they visit for dinner. Along with the usual apples, broccoli, and bulk tea, today there are potato chips and ketchup in my cart. I don’t eat meat, but today I choose chicken sausages with habanero peppers. At the beer cooler, I grab a six-pack of my favorite beer—made by a regional microbrewery. My guests prefer a different brand, and I look for it in the cooler: I hesitate, then slide a “tailgater fridge pack” of Miller Lite into my cart. The 12-pack costs the same as the 6-pack. I’m glad that the beer cooler is close to the checkout, and that the store is not too crowded. I’m embarrassed that I’m embarrassed to be buying this beer. I tell Bonnie, the cashier, that I’m expecting company,

that I won't be drinking this beer myself. "I understand," she says. As I pay for my groceries, I have a decision to make. Which is more embarrassing, to be seen carrying the fridge pack to the car, or to use a paper bag that is unnecessary? I decide to carry the fruit and vegetables and chocolate in the transparent string bag I've brought along, and I hold the microbrew by its handle. The cashier is surprised when I reach for a large paper bag for the Miller Lite, potato chips and ketchup. "Diane, you never take a bag," she says. I'm not sure what to say. It's not because I can't carry the goods without the bag, but I want to hide the products. I do not know who will see me in the parking lot, and I do not want to be visually represented by potato chips and a Miller Light fridge pack. These are products that I do not normally buy; while the Co-op does carry them, they are also products that do not represent a Co-op lifestyle or communicate environmental responsibility.

During the above episode, as I was responding to my own awareness of the power of expectations related to Co-op member identity, I remembered that Peggy, a founding Co-op member, mentioned in a short, casual conversation that she recalled a potluck from more than thirty years prior: "George and Carol<sup>5</sup> actually brought Doritos to their first potluck!" she told me, indicating that the Co-op expectation to represent the Co-op lifestyle, and the breach of these expectations, can become legendary. In fact, it took the couple some time to establish credibility after showing up with Doritos. In the above example of my own effort to identify with one aspect of the Co-op lifestyle, I contradicted one set of convictions in order to preserve another aspect of my Co-op identity. Here's what I mean: I have a policy, which is compatible with Co-op ideology, of not using disposable grocery bags. But I was faced with a difficult choice as I prepared to carry my groceries across the parking lot in full view of anyone who might be approaching. Do I expose my purchases that represent neither my taste nor the Co-op's ideal? Or should I carry the goods in a disposable bag—a practice that neither the Co-op nor I want to promote, and that represents—and inflicts—harm on the natural world? My decision to take the low road on this particular day illustrates how the pressure to express one aspect of identity within the collective can actually eclipse efforts to take meaningful action, such as modeling, and more important, enacting, environmental responsibility. When belonging is based on lifestyle, this belonging seems to be dynamically questioned, affirmed, and denied—as we decide whom to include, or exclude, we ask who's authentically living the lifestyle and who's not—who gets to belong? As the following short fieldnote example illustrates, in the Lifestyle Enclave our criteria for making these decisions is powerful in its superficiality.

In the coffee aisle, Lena, a Co-op worker, is crouched on the floor in front of a cardboard box. The product she pulls out of the box in handfuls is unfamiliar to me—shiny golden

packets a little bigger than the palm of her hand. She's arranging them on a lower shelf below the coffee grinders. When she sees me she begins to move so I can access coffee. "What is that stuff?" I ask.

"Coffee," she says. "But you don't want it," she tells me. "It's not organic or shade grown or fair trade, and there's all this packaging. We sell a ton of it though—this stuff flies off the shelves because it's cheap."

"I've never noticed it before, but evidently somebody's buying it," I say. Then, at the same time, we both say something like, "Yes, but we're sure it's no one we would hang out with!" and "Who do we know who would buy that?" with affected haughtiness, and we laugh at our own joke.

We laugh, but a multi-leveled realization comes to the fore. Coffee, the second most transported commodity in the world,<sup>6</sup> is a powerful semiotic field. For example, when a September 2008 National Public Radio poll determined that Starbucks' customers were more likely to vote for Barack Obama while Dunkin' Donuts customers were more likely to vote for John McCain ("Voters"), the message seemed to be that the act of consuming either Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts coffee represented a distinct lifestyle. The political affinities tied to coffee are collapsed around our different identities. And we use those identities to connect with each other even as we refer, albeit jokingly, to the ways our habits set us apart from other people.

Likewise, at the Co-op, say in the coffee aisle, when members fill their own reusable containers with organic, shade-grown, free-trade coffee, the

---

The Neighborhood is where communal relations and civil order are enacted through everyday rituals, cultural celebrations, and symbolic representations.

---

semiotic value of the constructed identities is completely separate from the material reality of the taste of the coffee, or whether the label on the variety we choose is truthful in its claims, or even whether the person ultimately drinks the coffee. And it certainly

ignores the larger issue of whether drinking coffee at all is a responsible practice that can be sustained in our limited biosphere. In the Co-op as Lifestyle Enclave, the appearance of a lifestyle (our habit) is what connects us. We operate from a "What will the neighbors think?" mentality, rather than considering the effects of our actions *on* our neighbors. The connections can be comfortable—but lifestyle politics are fleeting, and our habits are often enacted at the expense of the natural world with little regard to its human and non-human inhabitants: our neighbors.

## Neighborhoods

On the outside, the Co-op is an early 20th century, slightly shabby, but freshly painted building. The side of the building that faces the street has five separate arch-shaped alcoves that look like they once housed windows. Inside each of these five alcoves is a painted mural, about four feet wide and eight feet high. The murals' pools and dots of color don't really look like stained glass, but they could be trying to pretend they do. Each of the murals features a gatherer or grower standing triumphant and carrying, for example, a catch of fish or a bundle of grain. Surrounding the main figures, a number of workers gather or grow food, some separately, some in pairs or groups. Men and women collect sap from buckets, or milk cows by hand, or watch corn shoot from a mechanical harvester. Some load fruits onto a conveyer belt and some hoist huge baskets of grapes. Some tend rice paddies. One wears a hard hat. A bare-chested man in a canoe raises a spear. These figures work in front of old-fashioned windmills, mountains, palm trees, lakes, streams and fields. What is this place?

Most of the time, I view the Co-op as a *placed* community. Place typically refers to both physical locale and an existential situatedness in the everyday experience of community. Especially, a placed community draws attention to material, semiotic and sensual aspects of proximate relations. Hence, I argue that a placed community is best understood through the facet of Neighborhood. In a community as Neighborhood, relations are determined by proximity, civility, and interdependence. The Neighborhood also has to retain the sensual, embodied, ritualistic details of a physical place in which face-to-face interaction<sup>7</sup> occurs among stakeholders—both human and non-human. Because participants' fate is bound up with the condition of a place in which they all invest, they are interdependent, and their interactions are civil—their communication is not designed to express their political views (as it is in the Voluntary Association) or reveal their intimate feelings as they express their identities (as it is in the Lifestyle Enclave). Rather, in the Neighborhood, communication maintains overtly cooperative relations so members can continue to share a place. Indeed, community as Neighborhood invokes a ritualistic understanding of communication that highlights the emplaced experience of community life, and it is through this emplaced experience, enacted ritually, that I believe Peck et al.'s discourse of Community Literacy gets its power.

Communication theorist James Carey says that ritual communication is a “projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form” that “operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process” (19). The Neighborhood is where communal relations and civil order are

enacted through everyday rituals, cultural celebrations, and symbolic representations. From a ritual view, we appreciate not only how the Co-op murals symbolize community values and inspire rituals of cooperation and celebration, but also how, in their church window-like alcoves, they reinforce a cultural sense of place, even a sense of sacred or hallowed place<sup>8</sup> in which relations are sacred among the stakeholders depicted in the windows.

A Co-op participant's comment about the murals' "irrelevance" illustrates the significance of the murals as ritual communication at the Co-op, and introduces the idea that attending to the power of ritual may ultimately be a part of effecting social change. One evening, after the murals had been hanging for three years, a group met at the Co-op to talk about promoting local food in response to current economic and environmental crises. Simon, who has been active in Co-ops since the 1930s and has been recently working diligently to promote local gardening and seasonal eating, made this comment: "Our local food work kind of makes the murals irrelevant, doesn't it?" I understood his point. Our work that evening was toward the vision that the area would someday be able to sustain itself on food grown in our own backyards, school gardens, and neighborhood community plots—not the rice and oranges that are included on the murals. These are foods that have been adopted into our food culture but whose continued consumption does not show an understanding of how their use affects our limited biosphere.

When Simon made his comment, the dozen or so people around the table were quiet for a moment. Then someone spoke. "No, the murals still show how linked we are, how we all work together." Heads nodded in agreement. "And they show diversity. They show who we are as a Co-op. That will never be irrelevant." The murals were not about the individual representations of wheat and fish and rice. They were about what it means to be a Co-op community. That is, regardless of how accurate they are, the murals will never be irrelevant as cultural projections of the Co-op's ideals as a community, in which shared commitment to place creates an interdependence that frames people's relations. This aspect can be captured in part through the concept of neighborliness. At the same time, the concept of community needs to be problematized to include non-human relations, and to acknowledge the permeable ways in which neighborhoods are (not) necessarily bounded. In my conception of the neighborhood as characterized by these flows, where place is not contained by arbitrary circumscriptions, neighborliness is much more expansive.

In the Neighborhood, participants are united by proximities that catalyze relations over time. Neighborhoods have histories during which alliances are built (and conversations sometimes fail) as participants organize (Peck et al. 2005) around the intrinsic concerns of their shared place. Taking a broad historical overview, the relation of Neighborhood and food can be seen in the context of social and economic relations, environmental changes, and biospheric understanding. During each of the historic moments of major upheaval created by the agricultural, industrial, and technological

revolutions, prevailing conceptions of Neighborhood have shifted along with the relations between locale and food. As each of these historic upheavals created sets of conditions affecting new understandings of Neighborhood, these understandings reconfigured individuals' everyday experience of community. For me, the Co-op as community is bound up in the shifting historical contexts that shape relations of food and Neighborhood, which include humans and the many other forms of life on which we depend—and whose lives also have value separate from our dependence on them.

The quality of human life before the agricultural revolution is a debated topic among anthropologists, many of whom believe, as Marshall Sahlins claims, that foraging supported “the original affluent society...in which all the people's wants are easily satisfied” (qtd in Lewin 190). It is easy to imagine that in such a society, satisfaction depended on the people's wants being relatively simple. Carol Lee Flinders also makes this point, as well as an additional one that has implications for community: “Since foraging people were not inspired to accumulate possessions, or hoard more food than could be easily eaten or carried; there was no reason not to share” (15). It occurs to me that although they did not likely incorporate in a recognizably modern way, these societies were the original cooperatives. If Neighborhood can be thought of at all in this context, it is as pure proximity—that which is near, close, familiar, whether human or non-human. Food and Neighborhood were intimately related—food had to be found in the Neighborhood.

The Agricultural Revolution, which reduced nomadic territory and eventually restricted families to individual farms, reconfigured Neighborhood in these ironic ways: First, people began to invest in a particular piece of land; meanwhile they lost the close relationship with the earth that hunting and gathering people knew before they began to own land. Flinders observes, “people's time and attention were taken up considerably less now with relationships (with other people, animals, land, and Spirit) and considerably more with things” (75). Now that land could be owned, it was something to be subdued, controlled. Thus, people no longer worshiped or revered the earth, but enlisted it for their own desires and treated it with less respect than they did before they owned it but depended on it in different ways. Surplus food made increased population possible, and increased numbers made farming imperative. Second, because of this changed relationship with land, people had options—they could accumulate material goods now that they did not need to carry them. They also could work more in order to increase their buying power. Thus, their increased options resulted in less leisure time for cultivating relationships, as well as less perceived need for doing so. Third, as people focused less on the extended relationships that were critical for hunter-gatherers, and more on their sons that would inherit their farms, social affiliations privileged their own nuclear families and, as Flinders points out, social inequalities became more acceptable (75). Neighborhood, in this context, can be thought of as based in the inequitable interdependencies of feudal economics, agricultural production, and kinship allegiances.

By the time of the Industrial Revolution, England's enclosure laws had reduced the amount of land available to common farming. Industry began to seduce people away from farms and into the cities, where many landed without kinship supports and lacking the sensibilities and resources necessary to negotiate modern terrain. This is the period during which the first formal cooperatives emerged—former farmers who moved to the cities for factory jobs needed alternatives to inferior food sold by unscrupulous shopkeepers. The Industrial Revolution also eventually led to the increased quantity, as well as the decreased quality, of food through factory growing practices and commercialism. During this time dependence on outside food sources accelerated and perceived efficiency in regard to food practices began to be prioritized. Neighborhood, in this tumultuous context, began to be shaped by urbanization and industrialization. Social relations based in mutual dependencies became more pronounced, the proximity of strangers rather than kin became more routine, and civility became critical to maintaining social order, particularly in the teeming, conflict-ridden neighborhoods of engorged urban areas. Food distribution and consumption became critical to maintaining urban Neighborhoods; local food production became specific to rural areas.

Today, the Technological Revolution continues to alter human relationships with food (as well as the genetic structure of the food itself). Technology reroutes relationships with space and time, reducing immersion in the life of local Neighborhoods and abstracting Neighborhood from material localities altogether. During a period at the beginning of my study, the Co-op carried kiwi shipped from New Zealand. Organic apples grown 400 miles away were categorized as “local” at the Co-op (non-local apples traveled four times that distance). That the average meal now travels 1500 miles to reach the dinner plate has become a cliché. With the advent of agribusiness and the decline of small, local farms in America, we have been growing less food per acre (but more per dollar) in the U.S. (McKibben 68), and we rarely sit down together to eat it (Pollan 4, Bellah 93). When “local” food is disconnected from locale, and Neighborhoods depend on extensive food distribution networks, their inhabitants are distracted from their physical world, and less likely to maintain the kinds of interactions that acknowledge their interdependence. This is a critical point.

At the Co-op, Neighborhood—the emerging facet of community that is defined by its place in the biosphere—relations are based on proximity, and interactions need to begin to acknowledge interdependence among all its various stakeholders. As Laurie Whitt and Jennifer Slack point out, “Among ecologists...a community is typically regarded as an assemblage of species occupying a given area, or a network of interacting populations” (17). I want to use the following example to help make my case that the Neighborhood is indeed a helix of intertwined, shifting dynamics that not only describe human interaction, but can also attend to questions about responsibility toward the other stakeholders with which we are interdependent.

I'm at the checkout. Behind me are Patrice and Jerry, a married pair of retired academics whom I enjoy talking with at the Co-op. While Fiona, a cashier I love to talk to, is scanning my groceries, Patrice slides an impressive pair of mittens out of the pocket of her parka. They're made mostly of animal hide, and are trimmed with a wide band of fur that looks like it came from a coyote. I am hoping the fur is faux. She notices that I am looking at the mittens. "Coyote fur," she says, petting it. I don't say anything. Jerry and Fiona simultaneously announce, "I hate coyotes." I wonder if they are joking. "They eat chickens," says Fiona. "They eat grouse," says Jerry. All three of these people are serious. They are claiming to hate animals because these animals eat the same kind of food that they themselves eat. This isn't making sense to me. Patrice, Jerry, and Fiona are all looking at my face, where the trauma I am experiencing must be registering. "You're mad at me now; you're not saying anything," Patrice teases, smiling. Then she announces, "I hate mink, too. They're mean. They'll kill anything. If I saw a mink, I would kill it on the spot." Again, she is claiming to hate an animal for exhibiting the same behavior—killing—that she admits to wanting to engage in. Three days ago, I talked with Patrice about the animals that she previously studied when she worked as a scientist. On that day, I was thrilled that she seemed to be protective of frogs. How could she not want to protect coyotes too? How could she, and her husband, and Fiona "hate" any animal for its natural qualities? It's time for me to go. "Don't worry," she's calling after me; I didn't kill any animals from your neighborhood."

That this encounter with incoherence highlights my own discomfort would not be important, except that it suggests the larger consequences of the ways in which we imagine our Neighborhoods to be anthropocentrically coherent. First, the fact that Patrice's comment may have been posed as a joke stretches our understanding of civility in the Co-op. Patrice was clearly enjoying herself as she watched me struggle to know how to react appropriately, civilly. She evidently found it pleasing to shock and challenge me when I was unprepared to respond and was in an environment in which I was expected to react civilly toward her and the two other people who agreed with her. In this way, the encounter shows not only how participants cannot always count on the familiar, but also how our efforts sometimes lead to our own oppression of each other in the Neighborhood. This leads me to second level of analysis that has even larger consequences.

When we imagine our Neighborhoods to be bounded, as when Patrice tells me she did not kill any coyotes in *my* Neighborhood, our expectations of coherence are complicit in the kinds of oppression that ultimately result from efforts at containment. For example, Patrice does not seem to acknowledge that coyotes and mink are members of the Neighborhood; she does not seem

to see that they might flow in ways that do not need to consider her personal definition of Neighborhood. That is, to consider a Neighborhood as bounded and contained targets some members of the neighborhood for oppression. These could include not only the coyotes and mink that she mentioned, but also the animals with which they interact—the frogs she spent much of her life studying, as well as the plants that provide food for all of us, the insects that help perpetuate plant life, and the microbes in the soil on which the other members also depend.

The interaction with Patrice underscores the urgent need for a conception of community as Neighborhood that enables us to respond not to only the impending destruction of our immediate neighbors, but also to larger exigencies, for example, the devastation of species and life-supporting ecosystems. How can we effect interventions? What is our responsibility to intervene?

The discourse that Peck et al. endorse is Community Literacy—an alternative discourse that has four key aims. First, it supports *social change* that addresses the problems of places that people share (205). It is a discourse of problem solving, but it is different from the discourse of social critique in the Voluntary Association because it is less dependent on the entrenched political positions of people who show up to argue about white sugar or canned goods for example. Instead, it is used, as Peck et al. say, to “compose” one’s self for action (205)—as I argue we can learn to do, civilly and on the spot—through neighborliness that considers all human and non-human neighbors.

The second aim of community literacy is for *intercultural conversation*. While Peck et al. emphasize writing, which they say is “inseparable from dialogue between allies, stakeholders, constituents and neighbors,” I suggest a movement toward a transformation that allows us to “restructure the conversation itself into a collaboration in which individuals share expertise and experience through the act of planning and writing about problems they jointly define” (205). We can restructure the conversation through meaningful ritual in the Neighborhood as opposed to the feeding of our habits in the Lifestyle Enclave. For example, to view communication as material evidence of what we are as a community—a rich biotic community rather than consumers of products—is to begin this conversation.

Further, I suggest that we consider the non-humans—such as coyotes, frogs, and the various plants on which we depend—as stakeholders. The *strategic approach* that Peck et al. offer as a third aim suggests that rather than look at the resolving of differences, we look for new ways to see diversity as a way to inspire new strategies (205) such as could be inspired by a more expansive and inclusive conception of community that acknowledges and honors humans and non-human members: Biospheric Literacy. I also think of an assertion by Whitt and Slack. They suggest that there are members of community—human and non-human, who may or may not be cognizant of this membership—“human infants, comatose or mentally disabled humans, many other species and much that is non-human” who can all “participate

in, or be part of a community in that they are bound together by relations of significance, although they are (actually or potentially) unable to affirm this” (19). Whitt and Slack suggest that it is up to those of us who “can recognize or experience community, to affirm solidarity with those who cannot” (19). While this is a good starting point, I suggest that it may be anthropocentric to assume that we can determine with certainty who is and who isn’t experiencing community. Rather, whether their experience is obvious to us or not, we should affirm interdependence with all beings with whom we interact and honor their role in the complex relations that comprise our biosphere.

This brings me to Peck et al.’s fourth aim, *inquiry*. To adopt Biospheric Literacy is to participate in Community Literacy on yet another level. To Peck et al., the fourth objective of Community Literacy is to “examine the genuine conflicts, assumptions, and practices” that we bring to our partnerships, while we examine how we use our literate practices in meaning making. Since a literate person can mediate his or her world by orchestrating meaning from a known knowledge base to a new one, I suggest that we can make change through ritual communication. That is, as literate, conversant

---

The interaction with Patrice  
underscores the urgent need  
for a conception of community  
as Neighborhood that enables  
us to respond not to only the  
impending destruction of our  
immediate neighbors, but also to  
larger exigencies...

---

members of multi-faceted communities, we can learn to move away from making decisions in a context that, in the Voluntary Association, may be primarily contentious and driven by political position, or, in the Lifestyle Enclave, is determined by one’s habits as they are displayed by individual desire and consumption.

We can move toward understanding what our communities are, a move that Jim Cheney says “is one in which an understanding of self and community is an understanding of the place in which life is lived out and in which an understanding of place is an understanding of self and community” (130). In community experienced through the facet of Neighborhood, our agency can be lived out through the simple act of acknowledging our diverse, interdependent neighbors—those we encounter in the grocery aisle, those we support with our purchases, those we see in our backyards. There is still a role for the political clout of community as Voluntary Association. We need the belonging we experience in the Lifestyle Enclave even as we consume. We can also begin to develop a literacy that ritually communicates biospheric understanding—through the simple act of neighborliness.

## Notes

1. I am indebted to communication scholar Peter Simonson, who views the voluntary association, the lifestyle enclave, and the neighborhood as distinct, separate types of community (Simonson 327).

2. Peck et al. define discourse as “not only language but the available roles, motives, and strategies that support a transaction” (203).

3. In my study I used autoethnography, a genre of ethnographic writing that allowed me to include my own experience as a member of the culture, along with my observations of other participants.

4. To protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms throughout this work.

5. George and Carol (pseudonyms, as I have indicated) grew to be influential, core members of the Co-op.

6. Oil is the most transported commodity.

7. Virtual neighborhoods, for example, in which relations are not shaped by proximity, do not inform this discussion.

8. The importance of ritual communication in the cooperative movement is quite evident at cooperatives I have visited throughout the country, as people enact recognizable rituals of communal consumption and each co-op claims its own special “sense of place” (even though cooperatives often share similar physical layouts and other attributes). In addition, the ritual homage to a sacred sense of place is enacted hundreds of times each year when Americans make pilgrimages to Rochdale, England, the site of the first successful modern cooperative, where the principles modern cooperatives still use were developed in 1844. In a British news article from 1994, one of these visitors refers to the Rochdale cooperative site as “hallowed ground” (International Cooperative Information Center).

## Works Cited

- Bellah, Robert, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper, 1985.
- Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Cox, Craig. *Storefront Revolution: Food, Co-ops and the Counterculture*. Rutgers, New Jersey, 1994.
- Flinders, Carol Lee. *The Values of Belonging: Rediscovering Balance, Mutuality, Intuition, and Wholeness in a Competitive World*. San Francisco: Harpers, 2002.
- Hillery, George A. Jr. “Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement.” *Rural Sociology* 20 (1955): 111-123.
- International Cooperative Information Center. “The Massive Movement That Grew From Rochdale’s Tiny Store.” University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives. <http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/ivic/orgs/ica/pubs/review/vol-88/movement.html>.
- Lewin, Roger. *In the Age of Mankind*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1988.

- Mareck, Anne Faith. "Acquiring Biospheric Literacy: Discursive Tools, Situated Learning & the Rhetoric of Use." In P. Goggin Ed. *Sustainability: Rhetorics, Literacies and Narratives*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- McKibbin, Bill. *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. New York: Holt, 2007.
- Peck, Wayne Campbell, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community Literacy." *CCC*. 46.2 May 1995.
- Pollan, Michael. "Lost in the Supermarket: Michael Pollan on How the Food Industry Has Changed the Way We Eat." *The Sun*, May 2006. 5-11.
- Schudson, Michael. "Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 1997. 297-309.
- Simonson, Peter. "Dreams of Democratic Togetherness: Communication Hope from Cooley to Katz." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. 13 (1996) 324-342.
- "Voters who prefer Starbucks back Obama, while Those who Shop at Wal-Mart Support McCain." National Public Radio Poll. [http://www.npr.org/news/graphics/2008/sept/poll\\_starbuck\\_walmart.gif](http://www.npr.org/news/graphics/2008/sept/poll_starbuck_walmart.gif)
- Weaver, Richard. "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric." *Essays on Rhetoric*. Ed. Dudley Bailey. New York: Oxford UP, 1965.
- Whitt, Laurie Anne, and Jennifer Daryl Slack. "Communities, Environments and Cultural Studies." *Cultural Studies* 8.1. 1994.

---

Diane Miller is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan. Her research interests include cooperatives, community, and environmental communication. She lives off the electrical grid on 15 acres, which she shares with a variety of community members, including cranes, owls, snakes, coyotes, black bears, and sometimes, three visiting grandsons.