

Prairie Town: Rural Life and Literacies

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Prairie Town, MN (population 5,067), a community on the rural midwestern prairie, is facing changes as the long-standing agricultural crisis and neoliberalism impact daily life and education in this town. This study, analyzed through a sociopolitical literacy lens, reports the conditions of life and work in this community as residents work to redefine and re-establish what it means to be rural.

Neoliberalism, a policy that “maximizes the role of markets and profit-making and minimizes the role of non-market institutions” (McChesney, 1999, p. 6) gained unprecedented dominance during Bill Clinton’s two terms as President. During his tenure, economic investment took priority over social investments and the results saw an increase in hyper-commercialism and a whittling away of the social safety nets for the poor and disadvantaged. Education (Giroux, 1999), welfare (Connolly, 2000), and agriculture (Greider, 2000) were only a few of the many sectors of American society that felt the consequences of neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism’s influence has meant a decreased investment in public goods and a move towards subjecting all noncommodified public spheres to the rules of the market. Schools, many with increasingly diverse populations, dwindling resources, limited budgets, and crumbling infrastructures, were vulnerable to Coca-Cola, Nike, and a host of other business deals that would bring money to their coffers. At the same time, for-profit schools (such as Edison) and vouchers moved market logic into the general public’s thinking about education. Meanwhile, the federal government’s indirect, yet powerful influence (for example, through the Reading Excellence Act’s block grant allocations to states) attempted to align schools and curriculum in particular ways for districts willing and able to seek such funding. By the end of the 1990s, it seemed difficult, if not impossible to resist these outside influences.

The following story of “Prairie Town,” MN (population 5,067) and its school, analyzed through a sociopolitical literacy lens, provides a poignant example of a town that is critically questioning these influences. Like many other rural communities, Prairie Town transitioned from a traditional agricultural base around the end of World War II to serving industrialization and capitalism (see Theobald, 1995). During this time, the school increasingly prepared

students to leave the area as it inculcated them with urban values and goals (see DeYoung, 1994). By the end of the 1990s, individuals in the town were questioning this trend and their subscription to neoliberalism, and some community members began working to shift the focus of schooling toward a new rural literacy that would refocus education on the community and some long-standing traditional values. The story of Prairie Town and its school should resonate with many throughout the nation who may feel their self-determination and representation has been lost. My hope in making this story public is that other rural communities facing similar circumstances will identify with Prairie Town and at some level will find hope for the future of rural America. Ultimately, they might share in a public dialogue that will help to create a new cultural model that allows residents the freedom to choose to live in rural communities.

Theoretical Perspective

From a sociocultural lens, literacy is a social practice in which language (oral, written, semiotic) is used to mediate and produce culture. More than an autonomous literacy model, which defines literacy as an individual, psychological act unconnected to social and cultural conditions (Street, 1995), a sociocultural perspective provides a means for understanding how groups of people who are members of particular Discourse communities¹ come to read the world in addition to the word (Friere & Macedo, 1987). This view of literacy is grounded in understanding the values that people bring to bear on negotiating their position within societal power structures. In other words, the social, situated aspects of literacy offer a way to understand how individuals who are members of particular Discourse communities come to mediate their world and their position within it at particular times and in particular places (see Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000).

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¹I use Discourse, consistent with James Gee’s work (2001) to reflect a community of practice, rather than discourse as language in use.

More specifically, James Gee (1999) defines literacy as the mastery of a secondary Discourse. He explains that Discourses are identity kits that attune individual's actions and language within particular contexts that are ever-changing:

Discourses have no discrete boundaries because people are always, in history creating new Discourses, changing old ones, and contesting and pushing the boundaries of Discourses. (1999, p. 21)

Literacy as the mastery of a secondary Discourse then is likewise changing as individuals read and negotiate their new and changing Discourses within the broader contexts of society.

Dominant discourses disseminate ideologies, or world-views, which readily become accepted as rational or sensible (Brodkey, 1992). Likewise, dominant literacies, or commonly accepted ways of reading the world, are similarly affirmed as reasonable ways to make sense of particular events, agendas, or situations. Often these dominant literacies reflect a selective attention (James, 1987), or the notion that individuals' choices do not always reflect a conscious consideration of alternatives. In other words, dominant literacies variously enable or constrain the possibility for change as ideology influences attention, either consciously or unconsciously directed toward or from particular issues, alternatives, and solutions (Giroux, 1983). These literacies, these ways of reading the world and their corresponding Discourses, in turn represent cultural models, or what James Gee (2001) describes as everyday theories about the world. He explains:

Cultural models tell people what is typical or normal from the perspective of a particular Discourse (or a related or aligned set of them). . . . Cultural models come out of and, in turn, inform the social practices in which people in a Discourse engage. Cultural models are stored in people's minds (by no means always consciously), though they are supplemented and instantiated in the objects, texts, and practices that are part and parcel of the Discourse. (Gee, 2001, p. 720)

In other words, literacy, the ways in which we read the world, reflects the various, sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing Discourses to which we belong. In fact, Gee (1999) reminds us that sometimes individuals work to have their various Discourses recognized all at once, suggesting that at any given time there are multiple Discourses circulating in and around each of us. Mikhail Bahktin (1981), in his discussion of language, similarly suggested that utterances represent multiple, competing discourses that

struggle for dominance. This heteroglossia, as he referred to it, indicates that Discourses are sometimes tension-filled as contradictions between the past and present intersect and potentially create new possibilities. In Prairie Town, these tensions and contradictions are evident as some community members draw on literacies of the past and present to imagine what may be best for the future.

Ultimately, these Discourses embody social practices that are part of a cultural model for certain groups of people. For this reason, I have used this conceptualization of literacy in this study to better understand how individuals in Prairie Town come to read their world in ways that ultimately inform cultural models of rural life. These cultural models, in turn, either limit or constrain the ways in which residents of Prairie Town imagine the possibilities for sustaining a particular way of life on the prairie. As such, Prairie Town's rural literacies enable residents to define what it means to be rural, to refocus political agendas, and to set their own parameters for dialogues, debate, and consensus.

Method

Research Methods and Participants

The data (observations, interviews, and documents) for this critical ethnography were collected between August 1998 and May 2000. Thomas (1993) describes critical ethnography as a "way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry" as it offers a "more direct style of thinking about the relationships among knowledge, society, and political action" (p. vii). In other words, a critical ethnography is a method for considering the value-laden social and political influences on a given situation. A critical ethnography, instead of focusing solely on description, purposely asks "what could be" in an effort to be both hermeneutic and emancipatory (Thomas, 1993, p. 4).

Data Sources and Analysis

The participants in this research were all residents of Prairie Town, and each represented various discourse groups in the town. Twenty in-depth, open-ended interviews (see Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) were conducted with classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, the school principal, the school librarian, the district superintendent, parents, local business owners, and town officials (including the mayor and economic advisor) in order to better understand the literacy each group employed. All participants agreed to an initial interview and a brief follow-up conversation to clarify any questions that arose after transcription and coding of the interview.

Data from the interviews were triangulated with observations of town meetings and events, newspaper ac-

counts, and historical documents. Primary coding was denotative (see Barthes, 1967), with this initial, broadly descriptive analysis evidencing three dominant literacies—traditional rural literacy, school literacy, and a new emerging literacy. Second level coding was connotative, involving interpretation within these three core categories. The interpretation involved the identification of values and their connection to broader semantic fields (see Hall, 1997). As one example, the emphasis that Prairie Town's teachers placed on standards and testing, as evidenced in their language, instruction, and curricular goals, reflected a larger, neoliberal value of efficiency. Member checks were conducted to validate the findings of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings and Discussion

In Prairie Town, individuals live within a context of a declining rural population largely precipitated by the ongoing agricultural crisis (see Davidson, 1996; Elder & Conger, 2000). The school district superintendent offered the following explanation in the local newspaper:

Currently, the city of [Prairie Town] and its neighboring communities in the western corridor of Minnesota are facing severe economic challenges as a result of declining population throughout the region. Members of the community, particularly parents of school age children, local business leaders, and representatives of key groups need to understand the impact of enrollment decline in the district. More important, these groups need to work together with the School Board to develop strategies that will address the consequences of population decline in relation to the larger goals of the region. (Lina, 1999, p. A1)

The superintendent's call for all members of the community to come together to decide what might be done, not just for the school but for the region, was answered in two ways. First, a long-range planning effort for the school district was conducted during the 1999-2000 school year. Community members, parents, teachers, town officials and business leaders attended a series of meetings and discussions in which needs and goals for the district were determined. Around the same time, a Blandin community partnership² was initiated to determine how to best sustain life in the region, addressing issues that both overlapped and extended beyond the parameters of the public school. These efforts have resulted in sometimes interesting and sometimes perplexing options (at least to outsiders). More importantly these efforts, coupled with the ethnographic data collected for this research, offer insight into the literacies and the potential for change in rural Prairie Town.

Broadly defined, there are three rural literacies that circulate in and around Prairie Town. Each of these literacies—traditional rural literacy, a neoliberal school literacy, and an as yet ill-defined new rural literacy—are described in what follows.

Traditional Rural Literacy: Land, Community, and Place

Prairie Town's early settlers read value in agricultural work, homogenous communities, and a commitment to place. Traditionally, rural midwestern communities were sectarian in nature, subscribing to a "political localism" that was often defined by religious groups and was typically exclusionary (see Bloom, 2000; Theobald, 1995). The goal of many early settlers included a hope to pass on an inheritance of land ownership to their children.

Prairie Town's early residents often retained their native language and customs. In fact, it was as recently as World War I that Prairie Town's German and Norwegian communities began to conduct school and religious services in the English language (Busch, 1976). That so many retained their own native language, rather than learn and use English, was of concern to leaders of Minnesota. So much so, that the *Minneapolis Tribune* ran an article in 1918 which stated:

There is absolutely no need of perpetuating a Germany, or a Norway, or any other country in America. People have left there . . . because this land of opportunity will enable them to gain a position they never could have attained in their European home, and why, then, should that European country be held up to the detriment of America through the medium of the public school? Pass a law prohibiting every language but American in our schools . . . then enforce it. (Gjerde, 1997, p. 322)

Learning English wasn't necessary for the early settlers, primarily because store clerks and others with whom they conducted business or religious events spoke their own language.

Community was an important component of rural life in Prairie Town's early days. While traditional interpretations of rural midwestern communities often emphasize the individualistic, isolated nature of the settlers, Theobald (1997) points out that these analyses often fail to account for the strong commitment many early settlers placed on

²The Blandin Foundation has provided financial resources through the Blandin Community Investment Partnership to support this rural community as it works to revitalize the town. The foundation provides technical assistance, meeting facilitation, assessment tools, resources materials, and financial assistance.

community. The commercialization of railroads, the industrialization of American life, and other factors often led to the formation of alliances and cooperatives that bridged differences among individuals. One important purpose of these alliances was to reinsert community as a dominant value in American culture, primarily out of concern that individualism would erode “any propensity to consider matters democratically” (Theobald, 1997, p. 29).

Today, elements of the traditional rural literacy remain, although this it does not always reflect a dominant ideology. This traditional rural literacy sometimes surfaces as nostalgia for the past and a commitment to return to life as it was in the early days. One community member’s recent comments in the local paper help to exemplify this point:

. . . I thought of how this prairie country is gobbling up the men who settled it, and tamed it and farmed it and built this community; and as the old ones disappear from this land, so too are their farm places disappearing, and the groves and every sign of habitation disappearing too; and even today, kids don’t know about places like “Muehlbauer’s,” “Martin Shelstad’s”; and “Thielke’s grove” is only a geographic location which marks a good place to hunt deer. (Brustuen, 2000, p. A4)

To this individual, progress has done away with a valued way of life. Meanwhile, his lament that “only hills last forever”³ is limited to recognition of men who shared a common European ancestry and a commitment to hard work.

Those who still value the traditional rural way of life often struggle for recognition as other Discourses have come to dominate life in Prairie Town. Prairie Town’s high school vocational education teacher, as one example, has struggled in his efforts to support a high school agricultural club. Depleting funds, coupled with a lack of prestige, has meant that enrollment has dwindled and activities are rarely, if ever, given local newspaper or radio coverage, particularly in comparison to the sports and academic clubs. Few, if any, of Prairie Town’s high school graduates, like those in similar rural communities, plan to assume positions on local farms (Elder & Conger, 2000). For those who do, the expectation is often that failure is imminent.

This traditional rural literacy, or way of reading rural life, reflects a broader cultural model that has a history in this particular community. In a sense, this literacy sometimes works “behind the backs” (Giroux, 1983, p. 133) of the town’s people as it constrains understandings of issues and possibilities for change by limiting the Discourse to a focus on homogeneity that is consistent with the past. Per-

haps some of the most poignant accounts of recent influences of this traditional literacy surface as long-time residents discuss the establishment of a nearby university in the 1960s. There was, and still remains, a distrust of the university faculty and staff by many in the community. Prairie Town’s mayor explained:

There were those that thought that we certainly didn’t need to bring those kind of people in here. They were too smart. They knew things. And they had different ideas than our rural setting does. And it was kind of threatening and scary at the same time. And I thought that possibly, we’ve had one generation actually now, that that would have disappeared. (Mayor, personal communication, March 8, 2000)

While the university has brought some economic benefit to the community, as well as possibilities for various cultural and athletic events, there remains a division between the town and university. Some people in the town have never set foot on the university grounds, and some university people have never made it to Main Street (Economic advisor, personal communication, February 28, 2000; Mayor, personal communication, March 8, 2000). In fact, based on an employment survey conducted through the economic advisor’s office, roughly half of the university faculty and staff lived outside the county.

Neoliberalism and the Rural Marketplace

A second rural literacy that circulates in and around Prairie Town involves the goals and values of the market. The community, while geographically isolated, has not been immune to the influence of neoliberalism, which subjects individuals to capitalistic market forces without social safety nets or other protection (see Chomsky, 1999; McChesney, 1999 for detailed explanations of neoliberalism). As one example of neoliberal influence on policy, the Clinton Administration’s 1996 Freedom to Farm Act (dubbed “Freedom to Fail” by many in agriculture), provided aid to farmers based on crop yields. As a result, the bill sent money to wealthier farmers as Congress worked toward phasing out support for all farmers over the 7 years of the bill (The Farm Aid Fake, 2000).

Public education was not immune from the influences of neoliberalism (see Table 1), particularly as Bill Clinton proposed education, beginning with the ability to read, as a way of securing American economic success in the new global marketplace (Clinton, 1996). For many schools across the nation, this new emphasis on the economy manifest itself through an education success equation that proposed students were human capital and would need to be lifelong learners in order to succeed economically in an

³This was the title of the editorial.

Table 1
Characteristics of Neoliberal School Literacy

Primary Values	
Neoliberalism	Academic Success
Economic progress	Education success equation
Efficiency	Accountability
Equity	Equal opportunity through education
Community	Shared values
(see Edmondson, 2000; Fowler, 1995; Shannon, 1998)	(see Edmondson & Shannon, 1999; Sehr, 1997)

ever unpredictable job market (Smith & Scoll, 1995). One result was an increased emphasis on accountability through standardized curricula and high stakes tests (Marshall & Tucker, 1992; Sacks, 1999). Meanwhile, public education was still held up as a way to equalize the playing field across racial and economic differences, in spite of increasing evidence that high stakes accountability perpetuated differences (Ohanian, 1998; Sacks, 1999). These continuing disparities included higher drop out rates among minority students (Giroux, 1988; Keller, 2001), differentiated resources, particularly for urban and rural schools (Molnar, 1995), and other infrastructure and human disparities (Kozol, 1995). For those who held fast and true to the tenets of neoliberalism, there was a belief that sharing in the same values and same goals would lead to the American dream (Clinton, 1996). In what follows, each of the primary values of neoliberalism will be discussed as they were manifested in the value for academic success forwarded in Prairie Town.

Education Success Equation

Given the challenges posed by neoliberalism's inability to support those deemed less efficient (i.e., small family farmers, small schools, etc.), some began to question the dominance of school literacy and the consequences it held. Prairie Town's economic advisor was perhaps the most vocal in raising these questions:

I've seen what educators do, and I've been involved in that environment where educators are really proud of the number of students they get to go to college. And that's a good thing. I mean,

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I mean, it's great that we get kids to college. But are we losing something by sending everybody to a 4-year degreed school? . . . I think that parents here in rural Minnesota have really gotten in their minds that their kid has to go to college to be successful. (Prairie Town Economic Advisor, personal communication, February 24, 2000)

The tendency to send the best and brightest away from rural communities in search of a more economically rewarding life elsewhere is not unique to Prairie Town (Elder & Conger, 2000). The dominant literacy of many rural communities gravitates toward what Prairie Town's economic advisor referred to as "the brain drain," with little to no other consideration of alternative ways to define success for adolescents in the region (see Gray, 2000).

In spite of the fact that many parents and teachers encouraged their children to leave Prairie Town, they have opted to remain in the community. One teacher explained:

We've chosen to live here. And when we moved to Prairie Town 23 years ago . . . we kept thinking we're going to be here 2 years and we're moving on. This is just a step on to bigger times. And then [my husband's boos], we told [him] that, and "Why," he said. "Why do you want to leave Prairie Town? Why would you ever want to leave Prairie Town?" And I said, "Well, I [hate] Prairie Town. It's so away from everything." And he said to us at that time, "That's good . . . to be away. You'll see it when your kids are teenagers, and you'll see the difference in clothing styles and values, and you know, money and status symbols, peer pressure, everything. That kids can't go to the big concerts, you know all those things are going to totally distract them." And at that time, I thought, no way. I mean . . . I [wanted] to get back closer to the cities so we [could] do that stuff. But [now] I really think he's right, and I have so often thought about that. (First grade teacher, personal communication, January 18, 2000)

Many continue to struggle with decisions about sending their children away or encouraging them to participate in the rural life they had committed to living. One parent pondered:

Although we love the idea of living in rural America, we are telling our kids move on to bigger things. Will our grandkids have a better life? Or lose something because education is changing the shape of small town life? Or will all the things I hate to hear from my father such as "you should

be working harder” and “no vacation until your work is done” be passed on to my kids and turn them into rural residents? And give them the toughness or stubbornness to live with less, but gain more in the heart! (Parent, personal communication, September 4, 2000)

For some, like this parent, there is a value to life in rural America that does not have a price tag.

Accountability

Schools were one area that was increasingly turned over to the market throughout the 1990s. As Minnesota’s legislature mandated standardization of programs and testing emphasizing academic learning directed toward college preparation (Edmondson, 2001), Prairie Town’s educators struggled to keep adequate resources and personnel in their school. Declining enrollments in Prairie Town and other rural Minnesota communities meant that schools received less money from the state⁴. Prairie Town’s elementary school librarian reported having one-half less budget money than she did when she began working for the district in the 1970s. With rising costs for books, book repair, and equipment, she could purchase significantly fewer texts for the school. Meanwhile, several of Prairie Town’s teachers faced losing their jobs as they worked in a climate that for some teachers was demoralizing at best. One teacher explained:

Well, declining enrollment. I guess I have to think about that . . . but I don’t. But I probably should . . . because we settled our contract last night, and it was stated at that point that there just isn’t money available because the students aren’t here, and that we’re going to have major cuts. Well, I am the second to the bottom on the seniority list in our elementary school. . . . I asked [the principal] this morning, you know, what is the deal? And he said, major cuts. So, I guess it is possible that I could lose my job because of it. (Second grade teacher, personal communication, January 18, 2000)

During the time of this study, Minnesota’s new state standards, called the Profile of Learning, were in their first two years of full implementation. In spite of increasing stan-

dardization of curriculum, resources for Prairie Town and neighboring rural schools were typically substandard. One teacher explained:

. . . I think we’re so limited even with multiple copy books and updating those. And literature books all around. I don’t know. I just think, you know, in your bigger school, you just have more money. You’ve got a lot more spending going on . . . we have an old school and old desks and I don’t have enough books even to teach my kids social studies. (First grade teacher, personal communication, January 18, 2000)

While the new libertarian governor Jesse Ventura stated that education was vital to healthy communities (Schunk, 2000), he told rural Minnesotans, “You’re on your own” (Peterson, 2000).

Education as Equal Opportunity

For many, education is viewed as a means to provide equal opportunities for all (see President Bush’s education plan, “No Child Left Behind,” as one example). Often these considerations fail to account for social structures that have long discriminated based on race, class, gender, and other issues (Giroux, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Marshall, 1997). The dominant belief that education would equalize the playing field for students from all backgrounds was part of the liberal ideology of many of Prairie Town’s educators. One first grade teacher explained:

Our children out here are going to be competing, and I don’t like the word competing, but they are going to be working with people from large settings, and our children need as good of an education as they are getting (First grade teacher, personal communication, December 20, 1999)

There was an acute sense that resources in rural Prairie Town were less than those available in the suburban and urban regions of the state. Some teachers likewise mentioned struggling with a lack of access to museums and other resources that they felt would enrich the lives of their students. However, all noted that the education students received in Prairie Town was of high quality; indeed, over 95% of the students went on to postsecondary educational institutions upon graduation from high school. In effect, to the teachers, the fact that students were educated in a rural town did not place these students at risk. One parent even openly questioned the federal government’s connection between poverty and Title I services:

⁴Minnesota funds its schools based on a per pupil formula. As populations decrease, so does the available money for schools. During the time of this study, efforts were made to change the funding situation for small and rural schools by introducing a “small school” allotment to the state’s complex formula. A report of this effort can be found in Thorson & Edmondson, 2000.

The Title I money, and I'm sure you know, is based solely on free and reduced lunch, which I think is the most idiotic thing the state has ever done. I know several families, and mine's included, I'm a single parent, we qualify for free and reduced price lunches, and my kids are all on "A" honor roll. So how does the one correlate to the other? (Parent, personal communication, March 20, 2000)

The question of what it means to be at risk (see also Ladson-Billings, 1999), and correspondingly who education might equalize the playing field for, was not immediately evident in Prairie Town.

Shared Values

Neoliberalism rewards those who share common values (Clinton, 1996). In other words, those who will work and live in particular ways are expected to achieve financial success for themselves and for the country (Reich, 2000). However, this overarching view of material success does not always match with the values of rural communities, many of which have eschewed financial gain in search of different values and lifestyles (Elder & Conger, 2000). Because of this, Prairie Town's officials struggled with striking a balance between helping the town survive and compromising core values of rural life. The mayor explained:

That meeting I was at this morning . . . was on tourism and agriculture, and one of the things that was mentioned was that we've got to sell our, not only what we're doing here, but our way of life. And that should be one of our big components that would make people want to come here, because of our lifestyle and the values are different than they are in many places . . . and you don't think about that, and it really is. And it's up to us to sell that, I guess, and let people know that. (Mayor, personal communication, March 8, 2000)

The town had a history of resisting big business, particularly agribusiness and larger industries because of the potential changes (which town members expected would be mostly negative) they would bring to the community. Instead, they focused (and continue to focus) their efforts and monies on supporting local business people. This resistance, coupled with the resistance to outsiders (see also Bloom, 2000), make the promotion of tourism in the area seem a less likely option for the community. Instead, the community focused its strategic planning efforts, both through the Blandin Foundation and the school planning, on recognizing that (a) their greatest resource is people, and (b) leadership, diversity, improvement, and cooperation are central

themes that need to be addressed. The work around these issues is just underway, but the efforts provide hope as the community seeks to redefine its position in relation to ongoing agricultural and rural crises. There is broad consensus in this group that rural life is worthwhile; in other words, there is cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1999) that is of value in these rural communities. Perhaps these discussions, indeed this newly emerging cultural model, will broaden to consider aspects that move beyond economic solutions and will lead to the sustenance of Prairie Town and other rural communities in rich and diverse ways.

A New Rural Literacy

This newly emerging rural literacy reflects a growing restlessness in the community that stems from dissatisfaction with both the traditional rural literacy and the dominance of neoliberalism. Neither are sufficient to meet the changes facing this rural community (see also Greider, 2000), and community members and school officials alike are faced with the challenge of identifying new ideals, indeed new literacies, for the future.

Sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (1887/1963) wrote of the differences between traditional, rural communities (*gemeinschaft*) and modern society (*gesellschaft*). Tonnies attributed the growing trend toward *gesellschaft* that he witnessed in his own rural province to industrialization and urbanization, a trend that has been similarly evident in Prairie Town. However, Tonnies felt, like many participants in this study, that not all needed to be compromised to the capitalist endeavors of modern times. In Prairie Town, a strong commitment to *gemeinschaft* remains; that is, there is a belief that rural communities and traditions are worth preserving. This belief is tempered with caution about the ethnic and racial discrimination of earlier times, and some groups in Prairie Town are working to move the community toward inclusiveness (see Lina, 2000).

As a new rural literacy begins to emerge, one that will ultimately inform a new cultural model for rural life, community members raise important questions about the dominance of school literacy, particularly as it is aligned with neoliberal agendas. Within this context, there are those who are working to make the rural lifestyle a viable option for young people by providing jobs and living wages. While the focus tends to remain narrowed to economic solutions, it has begun discussions about who should live in Prairie Town, how their life might be, and why.

Each of Prairie Town's literacies are situated in unique ways, and within the context of a democratic society, they each have the right to be recognized and to participate in the development of alternatives. At the present time, the hold that neoliberalism and corporate culture has on much of the policy and rhetoric of American society makes it appear to be overwhelmingly powerful. However, not voic-

ing concern about the dominant neoliberal rhetoric gives silent subscription to school literacy as the default literacy in Prairie Town and other communities. While this literacy may serve some residents and their children well, it may not be the best option for all.

Neoliberalism is not inevitable (Bourdieu, 1998), neither are the fears of diversity and difference in American society or the demise of rural America. We find hope in Prairie Town as community members begin to question neoliberalism, economic inequality, and the meaning of community. Prairie Town residents recognize, at least at some level, that these issues are social constructions that have ordered their lives (Lemert, 1997), shaping their sense of reality and identity (Mills, 1997) perhaps in ways they don't always choose. For many of us, it is difficult to imagine that life could be different. Prairie Town's story reminds us, however, that not everything can be bought and sold, and perhaps more importantly that disidentification with societal structures and dominant Discourses are possible within a participatory democratic society.

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