

Book Review



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Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing, Robert E. Brooke (Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press, 240 pp., ISBN 0807743658.

Reviewed by

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The University of Iowa is located in what most would call a rural place. When our state's "Fields of Dreams" marketing efforts meet the media spotlight during our quadrennial Presidential caucuses, we're pictured in tableaux of friendly-scale cities, smaller towns, and a fading quilt of family farms spread across the natural and leveling influence of Middle America. The gist of these reports rarely varies: things "rural" must be cast in repose against the clangor of national and international controversy. Even the bland, pastoral backdrop of network news footage glosses a significant irony. Per square mile, the introduction of steel plow to prairie has created the most altered and "unnatural" environment of all the 50 states. I mention this to my students in the first weeks of their arrival on campus, to poke at their sense of location and to argue for an open-minded scrutiny of where they are "from" or where many have only recently arrived.

In *Rural Voices*, Robert Brooke has edited an impressive collection of articles on the teaching of writing through the more encompassing pedagogy of "place-conscious education." The task of mapping an approach to any *place* is difficult: How do we author such a document, one that will allow for real-time navigation by the reader?

How can a two-dimensional, static medium in remove, reveal what is experienced first-hand as a dynamic, three-dimensional environment?

When we begin to define a map of rural by its most common narrative landmarks, we risk reliance upon comforting familiarity: what is rural is also old or traditional.

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Dramatic change is at work in rural America: the demise and consolidation of social institutions, the not-so-slowly aging demographic, the cost-benefit equations being made elsewhere about maintaining roads and bridges, let alone a new roof for the middle school or the desperate need for an ESL program. How do we draw a map that honors both origin and change? How do we make this map both recognizable and revealing? The contributors to *Rural Voices* take up this challenge and their voices define an argument for literacy-of-place, one we hope capable of responding to the demands of a landscape where dynamic change remains as certain as geology and as sharp as the edge of any plow.

In Chapter 2, Phip Ross argues the approach as an outward, concentric ripple from the confluence of "I" and place.

The more I understand about myself and my immediate place, the more I understand the outside world and the better I can interpret it. We grow outward, like a tree, increasing our growth rings from the tight center of "I," which has a home, a town, a state, a country, a planet. From that center we reach out to understand the ever-expanding circles of experience. But first, we need to start in those places closest to our hearts. (p. 45)

The direction here echoes the Amish Farmer's Rubric often cited by notable rural essayist, Wendell Berry, where actions good for the field are also those that best serve the farm, the valley, the region, and the larger world. The connective process that Ross details is navigational and deftly claims the necessity of grounding students in an immediate location, to reassure them that they are "not lost in the wilderness," and that a path does indeed lead from where they are to the much larger and more complex universe that both confronts and surrounds them.

The contextual flavors of mapping presented by its contributors are what give *Rural Voices* its own collective sense of place. These experiential pieces triumph the use of narrative histories, storytelling, and primary research that is dynamic and cooperative, as well as successive invita-

tions to students to “join” their community as literate and informed citizens. Sandy Bangert and Brooke note that, “Children, like adults, need ways to connect their literacy to the world around them—to the places, people, and interests that make their world personally meaningful” (p. 23). All this is in the service of expanding their ability to appreciate and value their world, albeit one that might appear fixed and conveniently small. Yet these facilitative approaches also risk serving the mostly reassuring, though fictive gloss that often supplants a more informative scrutiny.

It is worth questioning what inspires us to teach *place*, let alone *rural place*, with notions of both urgency and agency. The educators represented in these writings reveal a substantive dedication to serving their communities, to providing the tools of inquiry to their students and enabling them to note the paths before them. How many of these paths lead away and how many might return them to a working map of home is a tricky question. The steady changes in rural demographics, of economic displacement and the rise of same-same consumerism at the expense of local color, may be held partially in check by raising the value of local narratives. Or, we may be drawing historical landmarks on a map no longer practical for traversing even the smallest of towns.

For 11 years, I have taught a course that encompasses writing, critical reading, and public speaking, all under the larger pedagogy of “mapping controversy.” In 1993, over 60% of my classes were composed of Iowans, though only half were from small towns and less than 10% had been raised on farms. Today, my students largely arrive from suburbs, bedroom communities, neighboring and not-so-neighboring states, or school systems so repeatedly consolidated from ever-widening geographic circles that they no longer represent a distinct, home-town flavor. Some school districts have been forced to dispense with names entirely, adopting an ever-lengthening parade of capital letters. (In an attempt at humor while taking attendance, I’ll ask, “Any graduates of LMNOP High?”) The suburbs all appear to run one into the other in their respectable tax-base sprawl. The small towns close enough to urban centers become extensions of parental commutes and longer bus rides for the kids. The small towns beyond the existing economic centers are withering and increasingly vulnerable to the transplant of industries that, in turn, require the importation of a largely immigrant workforce.

The progression of essays in *Rural Voices* is similar to the syllabus I’ve adopted for my own courses. It begins with an invitation that defines writing as a physical and personal act, one capable of transporting both writer and reader on an arc of discovery. The second section of essays argues the necessity of grounding the student in research that is local, probative, accessible, connective, and contextual. The collection’s last section takes up the broader implications of a changing rural landscape and the challenges this creates for connecting literacy to regional citizenship.

The closing chapters that speak to an emerging citizenry speak most directly toward the mapping of rural in a contemporary and, frankly, urgent context. Our national mythology is rife with tales of departure and arrival, of the re-invention of self that is promised by transit from one place to the next. We live, after all, in a nation where a house on wheels (Winnebago from Iowa, Airstream from Ohio . . .) is called a “recreational vehicle.” So investing in a clearer sense of “from whence we come” is only part of the story being taught and told. Small towns once awash in the immigrant tongues of German, Norwegian, and Dutch have become the economic destination for those who speak Spanish, Bosnian, and Lao; whose parents work the lines at a MegaCorp packing plant and whose children arrive with their own budding narratives in need of charting.

When the discovery of a place also investigates origins in controversy, and its living, public expression, then the maps we teach can acknowledge their inherent limitations and allow those who use them a more adept translation of their dynamic surroundings. *Rural Voices* is an honest, engaging and developing discussion of place-conscious education that connects a closer, self-examination to a much broader social landscape.

My students are presenting their final major assignment one day in the last week of classes, arguing positions of advocacy before a hostile or indifferent audience. Our classroom is in the basement of a building normally dedicated to physics, and so we’ve talked about persuasion in terms of inertia and bodies in motion. Lucy is one of my more articulate and accomplished students, the sort you identify in the term’s first days as having been raised in a family where books matter, where ideas are to be pursued with vigor, and simple occupancy has never been an option. In many ways she represents her own stereotype. She is bookish, driven, derailed only by her own perfectionism. She is also Chinese, born in the northern provinces and brought as an infant to America, to rural Iowa, by parents in search of more fulfilling career opportunities.

Lucy’s fluency and engaging expression begin to gather her audience from their circadian torpor. She prompts them to note where they “are,” to triangulate their place on her map of controversy and consequence and, finally, to understand how their literacy is an act of implication. They are entwined, connected, woven into the very threads that warp and weave the larger social fabric. Mere occupancy of place, perhaps especially this rural place, is not an option. “If you are from here or if you have only come here for an education, if you want to make Iowa your home or if you’ve already started counting the days to your departure, we are all here now and from this point and place we become accountable.” This, she concludes, is the defining promise of what it means to be a literate citizen, the promise we begin to make when parsing tentative phonics, and when another’s hand helps us navigate the cursive, outward shape of our first, capital “I.”