

Review

Donehower, Kim, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell. *Rural Literacies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 233 pages.

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In *Rural Literacies*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell critically read popular and scholarly representations of rural education and life, positing the classroom as a site for challenging commonplaces of rural literacy. That summary—not to mention the book’s title—might suggest the text has a narrow scope and a limited audience. However, this outstanding volume emphasizes inter-connectedness, effectively demonstrating why we all have a stake in understanding and dispelling rural mythologies and promoting sustainable rural communities. *Rural Literacies* is especially valuable for compositionists interested in social class, critical pedagogy, and ecocomposition, as well as WPAs invested in place-based pedagogies and outreach initiatives.

The first chapter, collaboratively written by the three authors, defines rural literacy: “particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas, or, to use Deborah Brandt’s terms, to pursue the opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (4). The writers draw on Brandt’s notion of literacy sponsors to argue for a critical pedagogy in which literacy workers collaborate with local stakeholders to create sites of debate and advocacy. They point out that place-based pedagogies and literacy scholarship tend to overlook rural sites in favor of “the city,” resulting in an anemic understanding of what constitutes “rural literacies.” The writers argue that ethical correctives to this urban bias (such as scholarly, teaching, or advocacy projects related to rural literacy work) foreground strategies that promote sustainability.

In the second chapter, Donehower thoroughly analyzes stereotypes of Appalachians as rugged heroes and/or barbarians, making a compelling

argument that such iconography has led regional literacy initiatives to adopt one of three objectives: “modernization,” historic/cultural “preservation,” or “abandonment” (42–43). Using data culled from interviews with long-time residents of Haines Gap, North Carolina, she suggests that informants have a critical understanding of literacy as a “tool to establish hierarchies of class” (63) and use literate activities to negotiate multiple “social networks” (69) in their communities. These findings point toward literacy’s potential to serve as a resource for communities to reject calls to modernize, preserve, or abandon, and instead become more sustainable. Donehower’s call to challenge the modernize/preserve/abandon paradigm becomes a recurring theme throughout *Rural Literacies*.

In the next individually written chapter, Schell shows how farm crisis rhetoric generally fits into pathos (tragic stories) and logos (arguments about capitalist progress) appeals—both of which justify imperatives to modernize, preserve or abandon rural communities. Schell argues that logocentric arguments for modernization, for example, obscure the environmental impact of agri-business and the public policy implications of granting corporations patents on centuries-old farming practices. The advocacy organization Farm Aid stands out as a model of activists transcending “relief,” establishing mutual identification between those in rural and non-rural contexts, and using diverse rhetorical strategies to fight for sustainable rural communities. Schell’s rhetorical analysis of the Farm Aid website stands out as one of *Rural Literacies*’ particularly useful engagements with a primary text, a model of how to look at literacy sponsors in generative and productive ways.

Next, Hogg critiques rural education initiatives that uncritically reproduce exclusionary and gendered notions of community. One of the impressive aspects of Hogg’s chapter is the breadth of her analysis; she demonstrates why place-based rural literacy work at K-University levels and within community literacy sites all ought to challenge simplistic “celebrate rural life” ideologies in favor of a critical pedagogy rooted in sustainability instead of nostalgia. She writes, “The act of both celebrating and critiquing local place should be an integral component of a critical, public pedagogy that moves toward sustainability” (128). Hogg interviews women in Paxton, Nebraska, and outlines how literate work like writing community newsletters, maintaining genealogies, and keeping historic records at sites like cemeteries can not only reveal material conditions and challenge patriarchal elements of rural life but also “contribute to decolonization and reinhabitation” (132). She suggests that the literacy experiences of these women demonstrate how critical pedagogies of place might challenge dominant culture in agrarian settings. I would have appreciated a little more textual evidence in this

chapter so that I could see precisely how the literacy artifacts challenge the patriarchy. Still, Hogg's chapter is extremely engaging and nicely connects the book's broader arguments to issues of gender.

The fifth and final chapter, collaboratively written by all three authors, focuses on teaching ideas that enact a public, place-based pedagogy and situate teachers as "activist intellectuals" (159) engaged with both local concerns and the connections between local and global conditions. This is the chapter that WPAs and composition teachers should find most practical. One sequence of classroom ideas in Chapter Five focuses on media representations of rural life, using key concepts like class, culture, intelligence, and literacy as notions to illustrate how meanings are shifting and context-contingent. Another sequence looks at the politics of food, using popular texts like *Super Size Me* and *Fast Food Nation* and supporting students' inquiry into broad concepts like globalization, animal rights, and public health. The writers stress that these pedagogical ideas are not meant to be models as much as examples of how the classroom might become a site that engages the ethically problematic rhetorics discussed in prior chapters. They want their readers to take part in "literate action and sponsorship of literate action" (193). In other words, *Rural Literacies* leaves its audience with a call to envision both teaching and advocacy as interventions, opportunities to promote more sustainable communities—in rural settings and beyond.

