

Review:

Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia

Edited by Robert E. Brooke

Charlotte Kupsh,
*University of Nebraska-
Lincoln.*

Americans are becoming increasingly mobile. As it becomes common to frequently relocate for work, suburbs have sprung up to accommodate transient families (Brooke 2015, 11). More students grow up in communities created for temporary, mobile populations, which as a result are often disconnected from their cultural and physical regions. This emerging population of students poses a challenge to place-conscious educators, who strive to foster students' participatory citizenship by connecting them to their localities. By grounding the curriculum in local environments and cultures, place-conscious educators believe students' knowledge will "spiral outward," connecting them to the larger world (Brooke 2003, 13). But how can educators engage suburban students to become effective citizens when their students often feel only a tenuous connection to their communities? *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*, edited by Robert E. Brooke,

takes on this question. At a time when America's political attention is increasingly concerned with suburban voters, this book explores the problem of fostering rhetorically aware, civically engaged citizens.

The nine contributors, all Teacher Consultants for the Nebraska Writing Project, offer pedagogical strategies for engaging suburban students in place-conscious literacy while also providing a rhetorical framework to understand suburban places as meaningful sites of community engagement. A central premise of the collection is that students and teachers must learn to envision the world around them, and they must become aware of their locales as they currently exist while also developing "a critical, informed idea of what [their] place can become" (31). Brooke applies this concept of *vision* to Wendell Berry's notion of places as both ecological and cultural; envisioning a suburban place requires attention to ecological watersheds and cultural commonwealths. Drawing from the concepts of rhetorical agency and engagement that Linda Flower describes in her 2008 *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, the contributors provide strategies for developing this vision and learning to "speak up," "speak against," "speak with," and "speak for" suburban communities (qtd. in Brooke, 40). Each contributor highlights methods for creating engaged citizens, whether in traditional suburbs, edge cities, exurban areas, or "the new urban penurbia" of college campuses (32).

A key issue in suburban place-conscious education, Brooke argues, is that suburbs are "constructed environment[s]" whose artificial nature can make it difficult for students to envision the material realities of their regions (37). The first section of the book, "Writing from the Watershed: Claiming Local Place as Natural and Geographic Space," focuses on projects that develop students' awareness of their natural environment as a first step toward rhetorical engagement. For example, Susan Martens adapts the National Writing Project's idea of a writing marathon to develop place consciousness among suburban students. In a writing marathon, small groups of writers freewrite in a place for a set amount of time, share their work aloud, and walk to a new place to repeat the process. Martens argues the physical and sensory processes of "walking, sensing, noticing, writing, and telling" in writing marathons combine with the intellectual

processes of “mapping and connecting” to ultimately “immerse writers in their physical surroundings in a way that helps them see landscapes and relationships that might otherwise remain invisible” (44). Aubrey Streit Krug’s chapter builds on fostering this vision of the material world. She describes a “perennial pedagogy” in which first-year college students learn how local problems in their material watersheds are part of larger ecological patterns (111). Rather than engaging in temporary and transactional ways, students learn to pay attention to local issues, connect them to global patterns, and take steps toward solving “perennial patterns” through public writing (125). Martens and Krug highlight the interconnectedness among vision, ecology, and action. By making suburban students aware of their ecological watersheds, teachers can encourage students to develop place-conscious orientations toward their communities and model habits of engaged citizenship.

The isolated nature of suburbs that distances students from the natural environment often also separates them from their cultural locales. The pervasive individualism inherent in suburban communities can leave little room for civic and social responsibilities. Section two, “Writing from the Commonwealth: Claiming Local Place as a Cultural and Economic System,” highlights projects that bring suburban students into conversation with community histories, cultures, traditions, and civic practices. Contributors engage Flower’s concepts of rhetorical agency alongside the notion of rhetorical space that Nancy Welch describes in her 2008 *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. According to Welch, “ordinary people *make* rhetorical space through concerted, often protracted struggle for visibility, voice, and impact” (qtd. in Brooke 137). For example, college instructor Bernice Olivas points out suburban spaces are at risk of “creating an oasis of sameness within fenced borders” and obscuring contact zones where students can engage meaningfully with difference (211). Echoing Brooke’s call for vision, Olivas argues for a “pedagogy of seeing” in which students contextualize larger issues, such as the marginalization and oppression of Native Americans, by engaging with them in local spaces (210). In doing so, students address what Flower calls their “contested agency,” or their positions as privileged citizens learning to stand in solidarity with marginalized populations in their communities (qtd. in Brooke 219). The contributors in the remainder of this section take up the call

to teach students to build rhetorical space, from developing critical awareness of civic issues in AP high school literature classrooms (Mary Birky Collier's chapter) to recording oral histories from the local workforce (Cathie English's chapter). "By becoming aware of the long-existing histories and cultures of our local spaces," Olivas writes, "place-conscious education acts to create exigency, a desire and need, to speak to the concerns and issues that were once hidden" (233).

"This book presents a challenge to American education," Brooke writes in the introduction to *Writing Suburban Citizenship* (1). The challenge, readers of this collection will find, is twofold. First, this book calls on educators to help suburban students develop a place-conscious vision of their community and its future potential. The contributors to this volume provide a wealth of strategies to help students become apt rhetorical agents and engaged citizens. The second challenge underlying this collection is for scholars and educators to learn to see suburban America in a new way: despite the fact that they are often perceived as empty, placeless, and disconnected, suburbs are worthy, rich sites of study. The contributors create a seamless argument for the ways that suburban students can contribute to their communities and develop deep, authentic senses of belonging. Their work makes this book a must-read for all educators and scholars concerned with the task of helping America's growing suburban communities become places of participatory citizenship.

REFERENCES

- Brooke, Robert E., ed. 2003. *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*. Teachers College Press.
- Brooke, Robert E., ed. 2015. *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*. Syracuse University Press.

Charlotte Kupsh is a teacher and PhD student in composition and rhetoric at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her work on ecocomposition, place, and displacement has appeared in *Writing on the Edge* and is forthcoming in Tessa Brown's *What Graduate Students Do: Ethics, Exploitation, and Expertise*. She also serves as an Assistant Director at the UNL writing center."