Critical Rural Pedagogy

Connecting College Students with American Literature

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Prologue

This book began as a dissertation, which I finished in March of 2015, and then put away expecting to come back to it in the summer. Summer came and went, and before I realized it five years had passed. But in the supercharged political intensity of the COVID-19 year of 2020, I began to recognize that the heart of this book was not only important, it was also needed. At a time of such a divisive urban-rural split, this book proposes using a pedagogical approach that ensures rural community college students become engaged, recognizes the power of their experiences and voices, and makes visible a space for them in the academic world. At a time when a split between urban and rural is at the center of so many discussions, this approach to teaching American literature also does something else. It may, at times, provide a way to seeing all people's experiences as valuable. The academic world is lesser if rural students do not bring their particular perspectives to it. The academic world benefits from learning that this rural perspective is multifaceted and fascinating, certainly not monolithic.

This book hopes to bridge that cultural gulf, in some small way, so that the complexities of rural experiences may be welcomed and sought after in the community college classroom. Perhaps, with the confidence built from these experiences, rural students will see their place in the larger academic world.

Centralia College, Central Campus, 23 October 2014.

Introduction

This book first developed from experiences and interactions with students in my American literature classes at Centralia College, a rural community college in Washington State. Located halfway between Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, Centralia is in a vast rural, often heavily forested, landscape. The photo above was taken on central campus in the afternoon, when most of the two-thousand-plus full-time enrolled students are either in lab, have gone back to a local high school, or are at work. The busiest hours of the day on campus are between 8:00

a.m. and 12:00 noon, and then again after 5:00 p.m. until about 9:00 p.m., when the night classes run. Even before the shift to remote instruction in March 2020 due to the pandemic, there were numerous students taking classes through online and hybrid modalities who accessed the campus resources, faculty, and staff through the internet. The campus is three blocks long by two blocks wide. Most students live and work "nearby," which in a rural area means within fifty miles. Because of the small size of our student population and our comprehensive mission—"Centralia College is committed to student success, academic excellence, and supporting our community in an inclusive and equitable learning environment" ("Centralia College Mission")—most of the faculty members at Centralia College teach in several related disciplines, although each has a specific area of specialization.

I teach literature, composition, and humanities courses, and I began to notice a surprising pattern in all my classes but most obviously in my American literature survey course. When examining texts that are set in rural locations or have overtly rural characters, students whom I initially defined as "rural" were nearly invisible in class discussions. I expected their rural backgrounds to have added complications and layers of meaning, had those students chosen to highlight that knowledge. Instead, they "blended" into the rest of the class, choosing to remain silent. Rarely, a student who was well known as part of a rural community—for example, a student who was the county dairy princess or whose family held significant land and was already "known" for ties to agriculture—would proclaim this information but only in private writing to me. Generally, students were hesitant to show their expertise on rural issues. Even the composition student who was writing a research paper about the use of supplements in cattle raising would only share her work with the class if I asked her directly. What I would come to understand through this project was that my own image of a rural student was biased. I had internalized a rural student definition that assumed that all rural students are exclusively agriculturally based, with the student serving as a representative of a relatively homogenous culture. My definition was wrong. And because I was working from a set of incorrect assumptions, my concerns for students who seemed to be marginalized in my classroom did not result

in changes to the ways students interacted in class discussions or in their written assignments.

When working and talking outside of class, in my office, or in the writing center, students would identify themselves as "rural," at least according to my initial narrow definition of a rural student. I had defined a rural student as a person who had direct experience with farming or ranching. They would reveal themselves, however, only when they saw and heard me refer to my experiences growing up in rural Iowa first. It was almost a secret to be shared with another "rural-identified" person who was hiding out in the academic world. They did not want their rural backgrounds to make their classmates think less of them or to think that the rural students did not belong in an academic environment. I was surprised that students who were engaged in agriculture directly, or who had strong family connections with farm or ranch life, were so hesitant to share their experiences in the classroom. I was so blinded by my own stereotyped definition of rural students that I assumed rural students would be *more* likely to share on a rural campus, not less. I assumed that nearly all the students had some degree of rural background, some portion of their identity tied to the local Centralia community, a small town in the middle of agricultural lands, national forests, and logging companies. I was surprised that these students expressed their feelings of being outsiders, people who did not really see themselves on a college campus nor think they had much to offer to the larger academic discussion. How could their knowledge of goats and land-use taxes be relevant to college conversations? My work to understand and ameliorate this problem led to this book. I hope to make a case for theorizing rural literacy and to develop critical pedagogical approaches for rural students in my community college and, by extension, for rural students in higher education, and to do so without reifying what it means to identify as rural.

This book is one attempt to address this disconnect between my expectations, some of my students' decisions not to participate fully in my American literature course, and my hope to improve the classroom experience, to better support my students in improving their skills, knowledge, and connection to the academic world. First, I needed to alter my misconceptions of rural students.

I came to understand that the term "rural students" is problematic at best but can be useful if I adjust my understanding rather than reinforcing a stereotype. For the purpose of this book, all students who are attending a rural community college are rural. They may have life experiences that reflect farming, or ranching, or logging, but not all do. What they all do have in common is that they currently live and attend college in a rural community, where distances between people and services may be significant. The digital divide is prominent, for example, with limited availability of Wi-Fi and high-speed internet. They also have direct and current experiences that call into question the ways that the rural is represented in the American literature texts we study in class.

As I will develop further later, the work of Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell points out that there are culturally embedded representations of rural places and people that assert that the rural is missing aspects of urban life, or is lagging behind the times, or is an idealized location that projects a fictionally happy past (*Rural Literacies* 1). Rural students often have internalized the dominant culture's impressions, and despite my attempts to use Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, I was not as successful as I'd hoped in providing an American literature classroom space that encouraged and supported rural students in developing their analyses of texts and language. By making a case for theorizing rural literacy and developing critical pedagogical approaches for rural students in higher education, I hope to engage rural students in richer, more significant explorations of American literature.

Prominent Concerns

I address several prominent concerns in this book. First, I needed to find a way to conceptualize a pedagogy that students could use to bring their experiences and expertise to the study of language. Second, although I was using critical pedagogy in my classes, it was not operating as successfully as I had expected with my student population, so I had to identify what was not working and reconceive a critical pedagogy in my classroom that would better connect my students' lives with the course content. Third, I had

to clarify and resolve my own misconceptions and perceptions as I approached defining rural students. Finally, it was important to me that this work be of service to others in the field. Although I approached these concerns with my own students, this context is replicable. Professors working in small, rural community colleges can use the theoretical insights I share and build on the practical applications of these theories in their classrooms. As I approached these four key concerns, my first turn when looking for a way to restructure my pedagogical organization was to composition scholars. Because of the small size of my institution, everyone in the English department teaches primarily composition courses and then additional specialties, which for me includes American literature. Working across fields has brought me into contact with composition scholars' student-centered emphasis, and I have often found the ways that compositionists approach language to be useful in the literature classroom.

Some compositionists pay particular attention to critical pedagogies, ways of being in the classroom that explicitly triangulate the confluence of language, power, and place. Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005), David Fleming's *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America* (2008), and Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan's edited collection, *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices* (2003) all explore the gaps between what urban students bring to higher education and the expectations for their use of language in this new space. The challenges faced by urban students who bring a set of particular perspectives, experiences, and linguistic structures to the university setting has been a rich area of study, highlighting the tensions that emerge when the public space of higher education, with a formal set of conventions for writing, comes into contact with differences in social discourse. However, composition studies has paid less attention to the rural as a location from which students bring a knowledge set that may not translate easily and obviously into their experiences as critical scholars in higher education.

This book addresses that gap, with a special focus on rural students in university-level American literature courses. I turn to composition theory and practice because both the structures of critical pedagogy and the role that writing and rhetorical skills

can play in literature courses are directly useful. I have built on these ideas of the interrelationship of power, place, and language to promote a critical literacy that embraces the experiences and knowledges of rural students. While I draw on my own campus and literature classroom as a case study in my book, the ramifications of this disconnect between how rural students conceptualize and share their expertise when problematizing rural representations apply to anyone who shares my concerns. This book expands the scholarly conversation for those who are working with similar students and within similar learning communities, as well as for those who seek to empower students from rural places in the classroom or in the world of higher education writ large.

Composition theories and pedagogy are useful critical thinking in my American literature class, and I see a space through which to approach my concerns about students not fully engaging all of their resources when deconstructing and analyzing literature. I want students to both participate more fully and to take a great degree of ownership in and connection to their studies. For me, empowering students means that they see themselves as legitimate participants in academic conversations. Empowered students understand that their experiences have value and that their contributions to class discussions enhance the discussions and activities. They recognize that they "belong" in higher education and engage with it. It is my hope to encourage them to connect their lived experiences with the classroom experiences while examining American literature texts. For my rural students, when those literary works include explicit representations of the rural and the people living in that space, thoughtful critiques of these texts are potentially fertile locations for more in-depth exploration.

One notable exception to compositionists' minimal focus on rural students is Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell's book *Rural Literacies* (2007), which argues that individuals writing about the rural have built a version of the rural that suits their own needs and biases. Along with Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's later edited collection *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy* (2012), this text offers perspectives on literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy

in rural communities. My book adds to this conversation by using compositionists' concerns with hierarchy, hegemony, and language to equip students who come to higher education from rural spaces with rhetorical structures that enable them to push back against representations of the rural they encounter in introductory American literature courses. By building on their written rhetorical skills, I assert, when grappling with American literature texts, rural students will recognize the problematic and contradictory depiction of the geography, cultures, and people they know well.

In *Rural Literacies*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell call for a closer examination of the traditional misrepresentation of rural places as locations for only "lack, lag, and the rosy past" (1). These misrepresentations assert that the rural is missing important economic or cultural attributes, is slow to follow the improvements of urbanized neighbors, or is the site of sweet memories of a fictional farm life where daily tasks are easy and simple and build moral character. I examined how these concepts play out in introductory American literature courses when framed as topoi, or rhetorical commonplaces, keywords and ideological formations that circulate in a social space. Topoi are commonly understood beliefs and understandings that provide a starting point for more complicated analysis. Through the tracing of and strategic use of these topoi, students may begin to understand how the images and representations in a work of literature do not reflect an absolute reality, but instead create merely one author's vision of rural places, which may or may not have clear connections with rural life.

As ubiquitous commonplaces, these three topoi of rural places provide a jumping-off point for students as they interrogate the extent to which rural spaces are or are not represented as places that lack cultural and economic resources available in urban spaces, as places that are behind in their cultural and economic development, or as places that represent an idealized, and perhaps fictionalized, past for urbanites (Donehower et al., *Rural* 1). My book uses these topoi as a framework from which a pedagogy that is critical in its stance calls all students to examine how representations of the rural may be revealed, obscured, altered, and created. Because topoi are commonly understood in the

larger culture, they serve well as a beginning point for rural students to contest, challenge, resist, and orient themselves within the depictions of the rural that appear in American literature texts and public discourse more generally. They provide both the context and the structure for students to work from an uncritical acceptance of what appears in a work of literature to a more nuanced and complicated understanding of what that representation might achieve, what it might hide or minimize, and how literature is constructed by the author.

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's contention of "lack, lag, and rosy past" is strongly evident in the work of previous scholars, as well as in United States government publications that focus on the rural. Repeatedly, those who do not live and work in rural areas use a particular construction of rural life in order to further their own agendas. Urban dwellers may scapegoat or oversimplify the rural to create an illusion of the superiority of cities, politicians may use a rural-versus-urban dichotomy to influence policy development, and those who have left a rural environment for an urban one may want to depict their choice as liberation from a diminished location and lifestyle. This clear connection supports my use of lack, lag, and rosy past as topoi, as these ideas are clearly in circulation.

Other scholars set the context and the prior conversation on repeated and familiar representations from which I have built a pedagogy that makes use of students' awareness, critique, and strategic deployment of these topoi. These conversations include Henry Nash Smith's mapping of shifts in imagery surrounding "domesticated" rural spaces; Leo Marx's work on what it means to be an American and how these areas may be considered in relation to other, quickly urbanizing areas; and Allen Batteau's statement that "Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination" (1), which constructs a rural space that needs to be "filled" with the superior economic wisdom and culture of the urban. Further, I explored Mary Louis Pratt's conception of the "contact zone" (5–9) to discuss the rural as a contested space constructed though language. Pratt's ideas are useful to illustrate how students who have lived in these rural contact zones may engage in "autoethnographic expression" to "talk back" to the dominating powers outside of their communities (9). Talking back

is critically important to me because, in this book, I explore how students from rural spaces can use their expertise with the rural to develop their own critical thinking skills, as well as to add to the richness of ideas present in their college classrooms.

This book adds to the conversation by considering what it means to develop critical pedagogies and envision critical public work within dominantly rural or small-town locations. Understanding rural literacies and developing pedagogy out of an understanding of students' prior literacy practices and rhetorical skills can help to connect rural undergraduates to their rightful place as engaged voices in the academy. A critical rural pedagogy can then be leveraged to enhance pedagogy in undergraduate American literature courses. My overall goal is to develop a practical embodiment of this theoretical call.

Purpose and Scope

As I mentioned above, rural topoi such as lack, lag, and rosy past may become points of argument from which students can discover how the language around these concepts controls, focuses, or defines experiences. Part of the aim of my proposed critical rural pedagogy is to ask students to engage in the historical genealogies/sources/legacies of these core topoi and how the topoi appear in literature. Because American literature offers an excellent vehicle for exploring the circulation of these topoi historically, I also briefly explore the extent to which these representations of the rural are included without critical interrogation in texts and ancillary materials students encounter in standard college literature readers. As part of my proposed critical rural pedagogy, students in rural places may read within and against these topoi and are well positioned to do so in interesting ways. Literature courses can also expand their critical discussions to ask students to pointedly locate themselves, their experiences, and their surroundings within the rhetorical structures and topoi they are reading that pertain to the rural. When instructors do not have firsthand knowledge of the rural, students from rural backgrounds can encourage, question, and develop contestations of the texts.

The use of the three topoi provides lenses for exploring everyday life for these students, an aim of a more critical pedagogy.

This book explores three main questions. 1) How can rural literacies be used strategically to enrich the teaching of American literature texts, especially when the term *rural literacy* is already highly contested? 2) How does the current theoretical structure, based in the topoi of lack, lag, and rosy past deployed in literature, complicate the ways students define rural peoples and places and their relationships to other Americans? 3) How might I develop a critical pedagogy, using composition theories of language, power, and place, that helps to build on and enhance students' rhetorical skills for deployment in the interrogation of and intervention in these texts in a rural classroom setting, and empower these students to use their expertise in rural life as a critical focus when examining texts?

In answering these driving questions, I also learned there are concerns that had to be included in my theorizing and application of theory. I will discuss them in greater detail in the chapters that follow, but I will summarize several of these points here. The term *rural* is contentious and defined by multiple governmental and educational entities to serve an often urban organizational and economic structure. Also, lack, lag, and rosy past have purchase throughout the dominant culture. These three topoi are stable points for contention; they appear in texts, and their use reflects deliberate strategies or culturally embedded attitudes. Students can explore how these terms are controlled, deployed, or perhaps resisted.

The concept of what constitutes rural literacies, as well as how and why one might go about promoting such literacies, is also contested. Students from rural areas bring a variety of literacies with them to the college classroom. Since the dominant discussion about rural pedagogy occurs at the K–12 level, those pedagogical techniques, strategies, or theories that use students' locally lived experiences as the basis for building knowledge and skills may inform working with rural students at the college level as well. An awareness of previously encountered rural pedagogies should better prepare professors for using the students' expertise as a basis for critical interrogation of representations of the rural.

Critical Pedagogy in Rural Community Colleges

Critical pedagogy is important to me because I work with community college students, a group who are often portrayed as less successful in the world of higher education. The American Association of Community Colleges' *Fast Facts 2022* points out that 65 percent of students attend part-time. Additionally, 40 percent of the students attending are taking noncredit courses. Despite the lower tuition and fees at community colleges, $3,800 annually versus $10,740 at public in-state four-year colleges, AACC also reports 56 percent of students are receiving financial aid. Additionally, most students, 62 percent of full-time and 72 percent of part-time, work while attending classes. I was not surprised to see that of those working, 21 percent of full-time students are also working full-time, with the rate of concurrent full-time work jumping to 38 percent for part-time students (*Fast Facts 2022*). According to the 2005 *TYCA Two-Year College Facts and Data Report*, partly funded by a 2004 CCCC Research Initiative grant, in the 1999–2000 academic year, "89 percent of all two-year college students are defined as . . . nontraditional, compared with 58 percent of public four-year students" (5–6). These statistics suggest a general marginalization of community college students (perhaps exaggerated within rural contexts) and the challenge of successful integration of these students into the world of higher education. Additionally, Centralia College is officially designated a public, rural-serving, medium-sized institution for federal Stafford loans. According to the college's accreditation report in 2011–2012:

> The college has a current enrollment of approximately 2,600 full time equivalent state supported students (FTEs) who are taught by an average of 117 full time equivalent faculty (FTEs) . . . . Centralia College is the nexus of higher education in District 12, Lewis and south Thurston counties, offering opportunities for higher education to the citizens of an essentially rural service district. Within this 2,400-square-mile district, numerous communities combine for a total population of approximately 75,000 people. The city of Centralia, where the college is located, is the most populous city in the district with a population of about 15,000 people. . . . Like many

> rural communities, the college's district has seen substantial changes in its workforce and economy. Lewis County has struggled with its shift from an agricultural, timber, and mining based economy to a service based economy. The Lewis County unemployment rate was 14.6 percent in February 2011, the highest in the state. (3)

Rural students at my community college are clearly working against and through stressors that may impede their success in higher education and in my literature classes, more specifically. I looked to the work of Freire in critical pedagogy precisely because he calls for the empowerment of students who are marginalized in some way. I wanted to use his theoretical work to provide my students with experiences and skills that allow them to push back against a hegemonic structure that places them in a position of powerlessness, voicelessness. I had hoped by using critical pedagogy my students would learn to speak back to power.

Why critical pedagogy? As Joe L. Kincheloe explains, "critical pedagogy works to help teacher educators and teachers reconstruct their work so it facilitates the empowerment of all students" (*Knowledge* 9), and I hoped this move also helps rural students attach to the university as a community where they belong and are valued. Aspects of critical pedagogy that are especially important for my students and this project include the facts that critical pedagogy is

- [g]rounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality . . .
- [c]oncerned that schools don't hurt students—good schools don't blame students for their failures or strip students of the knowledges they bring to the classroom . . .
- [c]oncerned with "the margins" of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation . . . [and]
- [a]ttuned to the importance of complexity—understands complexity theory—in constructing a rigorous and transformative education. (10)

Kincheloe points out that working through texts using multiple or changing lenses is important because

> "[i]diosyncratic readings protect students from 'correct' interpretation and fixed meanings, as they, in the process, gain practice in recognizing the ways dominant power is attempting to shape their consciousness. . . . This is why critical teachers will study the same texts in different ways in different classes or in different semesters" (31).

While Kincheloe is talking about K–12 classrooms here, I had the same goal for my students at the community college. And despite the complications of working with students who occupy positions of marginalization and positions of power, sometimes concurrently, as I discuss more deeply in Chapter 2, by using a reformation of critical pedagogy, a critical rural pedagogy, it is possible to harness the transformative power of multiple perspectives when working through an American literary text and having students create rhetorical responses to that text.

On the Rural

As part of the need to clarify and resolve misperceptions, I interrogate the concepts of the "rural" and "rural literacy" in much greater detail in Chapter 2. To introduce these ideas, here I establish a baseline from which to work. Let me begin by clarifying the term "rural." Doing so is critical because definitions of the "rural" are problematic. The concerns that underlie this book are revealed when examining who defines the rural, for what purposes the rural is defined, and how rural geographic space is delimited. In defining the "rural," I seek to avoid reinforcing perceptions that minimize or perpetuate stereotypes of rural peoples and experiences; rather, my understanding of the rural seeks to illustrate the complex lives of people who live in the American rural.

There is not a singular rural experience or homogenous population. Instead, rural students bring with them varieties of home cultures and language, unique sets of experiences currently in the rural space. The rural is not a static location. Instead, the rural encompasses ranges. For example, some people in rural spaces remain in one location for long periods of their lives, but there are others who move in and out of rural spaces and for

varying amounts of time. To generalize them as having the same understandings of the world, and to further diminish rural peoples by suggesting they are not aware of or in touch with the rest of the world, is incorrect.

Defining the rural, or defining any geographical space/landscape, has long proven problematic. Krista Comer, who theorizes the intersection between gender and geography in the American West, asserts that "landscape is not an empty field of vision (the premise of perceptual geography) but rather a brimming-full social topography that creates and enacts the various cultural assumptions and power struggles of the age" (13). Building on her statement, the mechanisms and imagery through which the rural is identified or seen in context against other landscapes/spaces highlights "cultural assumptions and power struggles" (13). A definition of the rural then must and should illuminate, and engage in, these struggles.

Despite Comer's call, there are multiple definitions highlighting what the rural is not rather than what it is. A consistent definition would seem important for the many government agencies that regulate and monitor activities in the rural, but even those agencies operate with different definitions. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) points to the problem of defining the rural in their updated publication "What Is Rural?": "many people have definitions for the term rural, but seldom are these rural definitions in agreement" (Reynnells and John). While I agree that there are multiple definitions, I disagree with their solution, which is to define the urban/suburban based on population density, and then to call anything that drops below a certain number rural. The second federal agency I consulted, the General Accounting Office, identifies areas designated metro/urban, and "nonmetro/rural is then defined by exclusion—any area that is not metro/urban is nonmetro/rural" (Reynnells and John). The urban is the space to be highlighted, and then whatever is left out must be rural. A third government agency, the Bureau of the Census, defines urbanized areas by population, specifically as having "a population of 50,000 or more and a population density generally exceeding 1,000 people per square mile . . . all urbanized areas with a population of 2,500 or more that are not adjacent to identified urban areas are also considered urban population.

All others are considered rural" (Reynnells and John). There is no call to define the rural on its own, or to define the rural first so that what is left is urban or suburban.

A fourth governmental entity, the Office of Management and Budget, uses the Bureau of the Census definitions to carve out "metropolitan statistical areas [MSAs]," and "any county not included in an MSA is considered nonmetro" (Reynnells and John). The name suggests a hierarchical structure with the urban holding greater value and importance, so much so that anything outside this classification is a "non" or not important / not normative / not valuable / not worth spending the time and effort to isolate on its own. Each of these four agencies defines the rural, an "othered" classification—as what is left over, what is outside of the organizing system. Additionally, these classification systems suggest that all rural areas are perceived flatly, patently identical in their great lack of the urban.

Surprisingly, even the USDA picks up terminology that foregrounds what is missing in rural areas, using a sliding scale that designates 0–3 metro, whereas areas that score 4–9 are "nonmetro . . . [until] 9 = completely rural or urban population of fewer than 2,500, not adjacent to a metro area" (Reynnells and John). Strikingly, within their definition, the USDA refers to an "urban population," which supposedly does not exist in the rural. And then to be the most rural, if there is a gathering of 2,500 people, they must also be at a distance from, or at least not right next to, an urban area. The rural is defined by default, lack, and separation from the urban.

Given this repeated use of the urban to define the rural, I offer the following definition of the rural, which does not reinforce a hierarchy with the rural at the bottom or as a space that is empty of people, power, or cultural value. When I use the term "rural," therefore, I purposely reflect an expansive definition that seeks to honor the multiplicity of peoples, cultural structures and contributions, and relevancy of the spaces called rural.

Rural areas are geographical spaces where inhabitants have developed a variety of connections that work with and around significant physical distance, either between residences or between individuals who work and interact with one another as a community. Accounting for much greater distances makes

rural spaces substantially different from urban spaces. This greater distance influences how people interact, what resources are or are not available, how property is used and valued, and the circumstances under which social bonds are built and maintained. Rural areas are constantly under change due to shifts in the global market and the need to communicate effectively over distance. This pressure of constant adjustment requires flexibility in worldview, economic base, and interactions with those outside of each rural area. Each rural location has unique dominant challenges related to geography, immigration patterns, etc.

In keeping with this clearer understanding, I widened my own definition of rural students. For this book, I assert that all the students who attend classes through my campus are rural. The rural includes tremendous diversity, and my students are reflective of this. They include people of a wide range of ages—from fourteen or fifteen up through mid-sixties—people who come from multiple ethnic groups, people who speak English often, but just as often have a home language or two that is not English, and people who are from a range of economic classes, social identities, abledness, ethnicities, and gender identities. My students experience various degrees of success as they transfer on to larger four-year universities to complete degrees or as they move on to work in the wider community after completing associate's degrees.

On Rural Literacy

There is tremendous contention around the term *rural literacy*, and my book clarifies the existence of that contention in current knowledge and practice. The use of the term is important in this book because knowing what literacies have been emphasized for students who are now attending a rural community college provides a starting point, and a common set of skills and abilities, a baseline for building a critical rural pedagogy. However, the scholars I consulted developed their definitions from disparate perspectives, leading to a multitude of literacies loosely collected under the umbrella term *rural literacy*. I explore this conundrum

more fully in Chapter 2, but I present a brief overview here to illustrate the range of meanings of this term, as it is currently being used. To cite just a few of these scholars, rural literacy has been defined as "literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas" (Donehower et al., *Rural Literacies* 4); or as a way to "read" rural spaces and peoples (Edmondson 63–66); or as missing memorization skills in elementary school children (Petrosky 65); or as an expertise in using resources available to rural peoples (Hautecoeur 9–19); or finally, as the ways women in Appalachia maintain their nonacademic dialect when writing in academic situations (Sohn 5). The range of their definitions of rural literacy was surprising.

I did not discover a consensus in content, structure, purpose, or object for the term *rural literacy*. However, it is clear that rural literacy has multiple threads that a critical rural pedagogy needs to consider and attend to. Rural literacy is tied to a particular geographical location, in which an individual needs to successfully operate linguistically. Next, rural literacy includes the ability to use reading and writing to form identity and place within a rural community and discourses that circulate within that community. Finally, rural literacy may be a vision of what students should know or be able to perform, based on the needs of outsiders who want to control the rural for their own purposes. This definition may serve as the basis for resistance, and for a critical pedagogy that will allow students to enact a richer response to texts. My proposed critical rural pedagogy considers these varying threads and determines how to use them to empower rural students in college American literature classes to participate in critical conversations that have meaning for them. It is my hope that this will help them recognize the importance of their presence in and contribution to higher education not only in my classes but in similar settings.

Critical Pedagogy and the Rural

Because critical pedagogy is important to both empower students and engage them in classroom interactions, in this book I have

theorized a variation of critical pedagogy that is more likely to engage rural students. I have called this variation *critical rural pedagogy*. In order to build this variation, I first explored the forms of pedagogy that have been advocated for use with rural students, and I have anticipated constructing a form that would connect with useful pedagogies that rural students may have encountered in their previous years of formal schooling. However, just as rural literacies turned out to be a slippery term in practice, so too are the pedagogies used in rural settings.

There are numerous pedagogical discussions that do not connect seamlessly with each other, and most of the discussion is focused on students in grades K–12. Pedagogical conversations tend to focus on curriculum rather than on teaching strategies. The discussion of pedagogy that specifically targets rural students also tends to homogenize students into a single cultural or ethnic group, and this works against the diversity of students I encounter in my rural community college classroom. Despite these concerns, it was vital to determine whether there is a rural pedagogy, and if not, to determine how the pedagogical concerns of teachers and instructors might illustrate concerns I need to consider when creating a critical rural pedagogy.

An overview of the current pedagogical discussions around rural students and rural issues illustrates the ways pedagogy may be an attempt to control the rural, or to create a vision of the rural that creates a particular set of values that may or may not be connected to the current local rural culture. While a more complete discussion of these pedagogical calls appears in Chapter 2, what follows is a distillation to illustrate the perspectives presented by scholars of rural pedagogies. David Orr calls for a "re-ruralization," or a curriculum that assumes rural people do not move from a specific location (231). Meanwhile, Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal envision a special rural "lifeway" that gives priority to "deeper bonds with family, friends, and the world around them" (vi) rather than material gain. In a separate text, Nachtigal calls for the elimination of consolidated schools and a return to smaller numbers of students per school so that local context can be highlighted rather than following statewide curricular mandates ("Theme V" 309). Interestingly, one of

the few pedagogical pieces to focus on rural students in higher education calls out how misunderstanding is not only possible, but likely, when professors are often "cosmopoles [. . .] a class of transient exotics" (Zencey 16), who are not in a position to understand the value of connection to a specific place because they themselves have moved away from their places of origin.

In short, this book makes clear the wide-ranging use of the term *rural pedagogy*. And, specifically, this project takes a critical tone in examining the ways rural pedagogy is used as a "stand-in" for curricular choices and the consequences of controlling terms for students in rural contexts.

Toward a Critical Rural Pedagogy

Given a definition of the rural as constituted of diverse people, practices, cultures, and geographies, this book offers a concept of *critical rural pedagogy* that is responsive to this diversity and to the aims of critical pedagogy. In developing and theorizing critical rural pedagogy, I put forth the following key characteristics of such pedagogy.

First, acceptance and problematizing of students' use of language based in rural experience is required. Rural students bring dynamic, situated vocabulary and language patterns that are not generally acknowledged in a higher education setting. For example, terms to denote specific ages, genders, and uses of livestock befuddle those who live in urban spaces. This complicated, rich understanding of animal husbandry is often mysterious to professors and classmates who have not lived in rural areas. As another example, the distances rural students travel for everyday activities, often driving miles between grocery stores, religious services, school, and work, has a powerful effect on how students see themselves in the geographic space of the rural. Going "over" to visit a friend has both a social and a time element embedded in the language choices students make to articulate this multilayered concept. Freire's thoughts on the teacher-student relationship, along with his criticisms of education as a bank rather than as transformative experience (72), provide

a way to approach this gap. Creating a classroom dynamic where students are elevated from the oppressed to a position of some partnership in their learning, according to Freire, should enhance their learning experiences, and would encourage them to share their rural knowledge and insights.

David Bartholomae is a composition theorist who provides deeper insights on the distinction between academic language and the language practices that students bring with them. He laid important groundwork when he pointed out the difficulties students entering higher education face in learning academic discourse. The problem of "power and finesse," according to Bartholomae, lies in students' awareness of audience (595). From my experience, students from rural locations generally have an awareness of the assumptions about rural and urban that are carried in the university environment. They are cautious about bringing their previous experiences into play in a college classroom, where urbanized space is constantly assumed to be "normal," making the rural students' background, by comparison, abnormal. Urban-focused academic language does not include Carhartts, cattle squeezes, or distance as a factor in getting to stores, schools, and friends. Instead, a critical rural pedagogy creates curricular ways to include students' rural experiences, makes links between their experiences and the representations of the rural in literature, and develops critical thinking skills as they push within and against rural topoi they encounter in literature and their everyday lives.

Second, giving students an opportunity to develop tactics and skills for building writing skills and critical thinking is necessary. Activities, classroom discussion, written assignments, projects, and creative output in a critical rural pedagogy require instructors to design assignments that "provide the opportunity for engagement and growth" (Tinberg and Nadeau 116). Michel de Certeau's construction of strategies versus tactics is informative, providing possibilities for rural students to operate against the strategies of the larger educational structure (34–39). He points out that "strategies" are official rules and practices of government and cultural institutions (thus, are transparent, unchanging, rigid, etc.), so capturing the fluid moments of a more tactical response

allows rural students, who may be described as marginalized, to enact a powerful reaction to their situation in college classrooms. This book explores how and when rural students can use their prior knowledge to push back against simplistic understandings of the complicated, messy, and at times error-filled representations that appear in specific works of American literature and broader public discourses. For example, when Emerson waxes poetic about cattle lying down as peaceful symbols, rural students need a strategy that helps them share what is basic knowledge for a rural child: a "down" cow is a sick cow, a serious situation for the animal and for those who are hoping to sustain a living by raising cattle. As a second example, when James Russell Lowell ties the imagery of rural fields and his idyllic childhood to a flower in his poem "To the Dandelion," rural students can bring a more complex understanding of the landscape Lowell describes.

Third, a rural critical pedagogy would need to contextualize rural students who occupy multiple hegemonic positions, as they may align themselves with dominant American culture, and at the same time be marginalized and othered. The persistent and dominant representations of the rural, which foreground what is missing, what is lagging behind, or what is connected with a fictionalized, mythic past, are forced upon rural students by government agencies, urban curriculum developers, and others. However, creating pedagogically sound activities and writing assignments that embrace the multiple positions of these students is imperative for exploring the richness of the texts and students' positions in relation to them. The feminist pedagogical movement has significant insights into working with marginalized topics and peoples to offer here, especially when there are issues of power hierarchies and enshrined cultural attitudes. As one example, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz writes specifically about "teaching across difference" by using multiple lenses in the classroom to destabilize dominate theories, cultural constructs, and individual biases (281). She models ways for rural students to express more problematized interpretations of representations of the rural in texts and in their written analysis of such texts. Example activities in Chapter 3 build on feminist approaches.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 addresses the concern that students in my rural community college American literature classes often do not engage their experiences and knowledge about the rural when the studied texts provide a flat, one-dimensional, or awkward construction of rural places and people. It is important to have students who not only are willing to complicate their understanding of these texts but bring their perspectives as rural students into the classroom. I next identify common patterns of representations of the rural in American texts: as locations that lack substantial aspects of urban/suburban life, as locations that lag behind, or as locations that represent a rosy past. Those culturally embedded, commonly reproduced patterns are then not only appropriate, but also ideally suited, topoi for structuring the tensions that exist around rural representations in texts and ways students might argue back to, or complicate, these representations.

Chapter 2 explores how rural literacies currently in the culture are or, more frequently, are not employed in current pedagogy used with rural students. I also examine rural pedagogy, a contended term, and how it has been used by teachers, policymakers, and scholars. Much to my surprise, my search for rural literacies and how they are enacted in rural pedagogy revealed that despite the rich and productive use of varieties of literate skills and situations in rural areas, current pedagogy makes scant use of students' literacies, either as a baseline to work from or as a set of skills and knowledges students can enact in the classroom. Later in Chapter 2, I argue for a variation of critical pedagogy, which I call critical rural pedagogy. I argue for a critical rural pedagogy and suggest aspects of that pedagogy that are central to working with rural students in rural settings. Just a few of these aspects, which I will discuss more fully in Chapter 2, include the claims that a critical rural pedagogy needs to encourage and support students when they use their previous rural language experiences, helps students develop tactics and skills to reveal the biases that limit representations of the rural, and recognizes the concurrent and multiple locations these students occupy within hegemonic structures of the dominant culture, economic class, and geographic location.

Chapter 3 completes this move to classroom application by using rural critical pedagogy, as outlined in Chapter 2, as a basis for classroom activities, assignments, and techniques. Due to space constraints, I limit this discussion to the works of four American literature authors, Robert Frost—Flannery O'Conner—Henry David Thoreau—Alice Walker, and the ways their works are contextualized in the ancillary materials found in anthologies. I am also interested in how anthology editors reflect the echoes of the three topoi—rural people and locations as places that are without cultural importance, places that are hopelessly behind urbanized locations, or places that are heavily mythologized spaces to be kept as idealized locations. I chose these four authors' works because they are commonly taught in introductory courses and because of their explicit focus on rural locations and peoples. I end the chapter with specific examples of activities and assignments to use when exploring these same four authors' works to enact a critical rural pedagogy. These activities serve both to illustrate the use of critical rural pedagogy and to create a starting point that other scholars and professors of American literature may build upon.

Chapter 4 concludes with lessons learned from this project and makes suggestions about the next steps that I and others can take in further developing critical rural pedagogy.

In sum, this book seeks to directly address the ways that rural students are not empowered, not fully engaged by critical pedagogy, in my American literature survey course at Centralia College. Instead, I argue for the use of a variation of critical pedagogy that explicitly addresses the multiple positions of power and marginalization rural students occupy, and that enact the topoi of lack, lag, and rosy past as scaffolding that empowers rural students and develops structures for students to enter into conversation with these texts in ways that build on multiple perspectives on the rural. I share activities and written assignments to model critical rural pedagogy as it can appear in my classroom and to serve other American literature professors. It is my expectation that my peers in other rural community colleges will further build on these activities and engage in a continued conversation around the issues I have raised for American literature students.

Chapter One

Seen but Not Seen: Who Is Rural?

As described in my introduction, I explore representations of the rural in American literature texts and how these representations, created by authors for their own purposes, serve to distance rural students from the academic world. I believe these representations, when viewed through the lens of a critical pedagogy, and more specifically of a critical rural pedagogy might be leveraged to facilitate the academic empowerment of rural community college students enrolled in American literature introductory survey courses. I begin with a closer exploration of how and why critical pedagogy falls short as a theoretical and practical tool when used with my rural students. Then, I explore the ways the rural is represented by the dominant culture and how those ways can be leveraged as topoi, providing students a possible structure to work through when questioning and exploring those dominant representations in their American literature readings.

Dominant Rural Representations: Lack, Lag, and Rosy Past

Vignette: Challenges to Critical Pedagogy in a Rural Community College

It seemed a typical day in my American literature survey course at Centralia College, a community college with a little over two thousand full-time enrolled students, located in a rural community halfway between Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. Students arrived in class, unpacked their books and notes, and began discussing the day's reading,

Emerson's "To Each and All." This poem, first published in 1839, is an exploration of the persona's return to a rustic retreat, a rural hermitage, where he can become reconnected with a "perfect whole" (McMichael and Leonard 581). In assigning this text, it was my hope that students would become familiar with the work of a major American literary figure, continue to improve their practical skills in close reading of poetry, and finally, question the imagery of the poem, both in purpose and in impact. As dictated by the course outline, we were exploring texts that are generally recognized as part of a traditional literary canon. We began class, as usual, by working from questions students had developed about the reading before the class session.

Most of my students are not English majors. My campus offers only one American literature course, a general survey, which is taught once or perhaps twice each academic year. Students choose this course from a list of required options to fulfill a three-course humanities requirement for the associate of arts degree. For most of my students, this is the first and only college-level literature course they are likely to take. Because my community college is the primary access to higher education in the county, my students include traditional age first- and second-year students, but the age range expands decades beyond this narrow group. There are "running-start" students (dual-enrolled local high school students) who have chosen the course because it also meets their requirements for a high school literature course. Even younger students, often fifteen or sixteen years old, have come to the college after completing their homeschooling programs.

My oldest students are typically in their late fifties, returning to school after years away or attending for the first time. My classroom is also populated with veterans, working single parents, recent immigrants, and the occasional international student. Although the vast majority of students are white, a larger number of Latinx students are coming to campus each year. There are also international students from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Economically, some of the youngest students may come from privileged homes, and

they are taking advantage of the running-start program to get ahead on their general requirements before heading to larger universities. However, most students at Centralia College are paying their own way, working part- or full-time jobs and managing family responsibilities. Their drive to improve their economic lot is central to their motivations for going to college. To generalize, my students pursue most of the majors and areas of emphasis offered across campus, ranging from physics to political science, music, and criminal justice. Quite a few students are also working toward completing a variety of transferable "upside-down" degrees, which allow students who wish to transfer into identified majors (such as welding, biology, early childhood, or business) to concentrate on their discipline-specific courses while at the community college. In other words, students are focused on their chosen area of study, which is most definitely not American literature.

For the students in class that day, parsing the meaning, structure, patterns of construction, and metaphors in the text before them was not at the top of their list of priorities. As first-year college students, they would be able to improve on whatever skills they brought with them for critical reading, textual analysis, and writing. I realize that generalizations are fraught with oversimplifications, but I have learned to expect several reactions to the course. A small number of students are avid readers. While not necessarily English majors, they have a powerful love of written texts and look forward to "digging in" to new works. I also know there will be students who have done quite a bit of close textual analysis through their religious affiliations, having parsed important wisdom literature over their lives, most often the Bible and the Book of Mormon. However, most of my students are somewhat bemused. They do not walk into the classroom expecting course content that will be directly applicable to their lives or future professions. American literature is yet another course that some distant authority figure determined is a required hoop through which they must jump to earn a degree. Common reactions include mild interest, boredom, and/or concern centered on earning a particular grade. If

some students have enrolled in my section of American literature because it is the only class that "fits" their schedule requirement, I may be confronted with outright hostility.

In class that day, we worked our way through discussions about the construction of the poem, the line lengths, and the use of stanzas. We discussed whether rhyme was necessary to qualify this text as a "poem" in their understanding, as well as questions about pronunciation of words that seemed to be "not quite right" rhymes. Finally, we were about to dive into the more critical conversation about how the poem's construction created specific meanings, perhaps for a particular reason, by a particular author, to attain some specific cultural, political, or economic gain. Because class members have usually lived in rural places, I assumed they would willingly share insights that would break open that discussion on the differences they noticed between the ways the poem depicts the rural and their experience-based understanding of rural life in especially fruitful ways. I was wrong.

I thought that because some students were familiar with cattle, having grown up on or near farms, lines 3 and 4 of Emerson's poem, "The heifer that lows in the upland farm, / Far-heard, lows not thine ear to charm" would provide material that students could relate to and that could open a critical conversation. Persons who have worked with cows would see that Emerson's imagery is not a realistic portrayal. I thought students who grew up in rural settings might notice the disconnect between their experiences and the poem right away. I foolishly assumed they would leap to point out that a single heifer seemed odd, as well as the sound Emerson ascribes to the animal. Cattle do make a low, grumbly sound sometimes referred to as "lowing," and most obviously this term calls to mind hymns sung around the winter holiday season most students would be familiar with ("the cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes; but little lord Jesus no crying he makes"). However, single heifers, cows that are older than one year but have not yet had a calf, are noticeably and dependably quiet unless there is another cow they are

communicating with, there is food arriving in the form of additional hay or grain, or they are in some sort of distress. None of these instances fits the scene created in the poem—a solitary horseman is riding through the area, noting the peace.

Here, I thought, was a clear, easy way to identify the distinction between the constructed world of the poem and the real world it purports to illustrate that also draws on students' situated and cultural knowledge. Here, I thought, I have found a way for my students to connect the reading of literature to their everyday lives. This distinction would help students to draw on their personal experiences, based on my understanding of the goals that develop when using critical pedagogy. While an awareness of the distinction between the world shown in a poem and students' lives is not necessarily constituted as a negative, in a first-year literature course, noticing this distinction is an early and important step in helping students critically evaluate texts, not as mirrors of truth because they are in the textbook, but as rhetorical constructions that are created by an author for a specific purpose and in a specific cultural and historic context. Interrogating the difference between students' experiences of rural places and the constructed rural world they encounter in the poem provides a starting structure for a critical examination of the entire poem, including the historical context in which it was created and the agents who would gain from this created image of the rural world. Discussions of hegemony, political stratification, economic practicalities of publishing in the time of the poem's creation, and connections to dominant movements in poetic theory and cultural attitudes are all available for further exploration once students grasp the fact that each text is constructed for a purpose by a person or persons with a number of aims that may or may not align with readers' expectations.

I assumed that students from the local area would notice that Emerson's representation did not match their experiences and speak up. I assumed that their familiarity with life in a rural community and their already developed rural literacy would give them not only recognition of this gap but the

language to speak back against Emerson's simplistic, and clearly fictional, imagery. However, my attempts to use prompts, hints, exercises in exegesis, imagery identification, and questions about the possible interpretations of the poem all led to similar dead ends. Students were unwilling to see the poem as anything but Emerson's "truth." Because his work is located in the textbook, they were unwilling to question the work's accuracy in the rural context.

I was concerned by this unexpected nonresponse initially but became more concerned when this same pattern was repeated when we read other selections from American literature that highlighted rural imagery that did not match rural life as my students had experienced it. When we read Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, they were silent as Jefferson extolled the greater virtue of people who work the land, as "the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breast he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue . . . [who] keeps the sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth" (297). My repeated questions about whether people who farm are morally superior, in their experience, were avoided. Later in the term, students did not bring their expertise into classroom discussion when we parsed the description of the Van Tassel farm in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," an impossibly productive and valuable homestead. My attempts to draw them into recognizing the dichotomy created by Nathaniel Hawthorne between the village and the forest in "Young Goodman Brown" were met with equal resistance. My students were steadfast in their reluctance to discuss the ways that Henry David Thoreau describes the cultivated countryside around Walden Pond. This self-silencing was especially odd because my classes tend to be quite talkative, with students eagerly bringing in references to popular culture, urban experiences, and the news of the day.

It is important for students to connect their college experiences with the larger world, and I had thought texts with rural imagery would allow students to take advantage

of what I believed was an obvious connection. Along with the cultural value of shared texts that an American literature class can provide, there is value in using these texts to build students' skills and confidence in working with complicated written works. Encouraging students to become active participants in their learning, as well as helping them to see their concerns, ideas, and interpretations as valuable in the academic world, is an important goal. I thought that if I provided students with a way to push back against dominant representations through techniques developed out of critical pedagogy, they would be able to empower themselves and see their place in the academic world. My intentions may have been well placed, but clearly my understanding and execution of critical pedagogy were lacking.

It was my intention to use critical pedagogy to encourage students to interrogate texts at multiple levels, with a significant focus on the purposes of these texts for the author, for the readers, for the larger culture, and for students in the present time. It is my observation that students navigating the world of higher education can be well served both in my classes and beyond by developing an empowering critical stance. As explained by Henry Giroux, "critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as particular subjects and social agents" (31). I want my students to see themselves as active participants in the larger social context that extends beyond the classroom. By exploring the power structures that underlie which representations of the rural are developed and repeated by the dominant culture, they may be able to shift from a passive, nearly silent position in the classroom to a more active position. Giroux's assertion that critical pedagogy helps students believe they have the ability and power to "shape [democracy's] outcomes" addresses exactly the concern I have for my self-silenced students (33).

However, I had stumbled on a concern that was not fully addressed by the theories within critical pedagogy. As

succinctly summarized by Joe Kincheloe, "critical pedagogy is interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and marginalization" (*Critical* 23). My rural students in agricultural production, who may live and work on family farms, are certainly marginalized by dominant culture, as I will explore in much more detail later in this chapter, but there are profound ways in which they may not see themselves as members of an oppressed or marginal group. My students tend to align themselves with the dominant culture in the United States. They are nearly all white, their belief systems are most often Protestant, they describe themselves as middle class, and nearly all of them speak English as their primary, and often only, language. They are able to hide their knowledge of agriculture, farming, or ranching by altering what they are wearing and avoiding sharing their rural knowledge. I was thoughtlessly unaware that they would be subjected to stress when asked to reveal their expert knowledge of rural experiences, issues, and outlooks, or to identify with oppressed groups or perspectives. My students were not necessarily looking to be empowered, at least not in the way I was initially imagining their empowerment. Additionally, the students in my rural community college classroom include students from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and ages. This further complicates my attempts to treat them as a homogenous group of marginalized students, making my use of critical pedagogy further problematic. My pedagogical aims hope to speak to this diversity and these tensions rather than smooth them out.

After the class discussion of Emerson's poem, I spoke with several of the students I know who raise cattle. They live on small farms and have participated in the county fairs, showing heifers, bulls, and calves. Each one expressed surprise that I expected them to bring their rural and agricultural expertise into class discussion. When I pressed my students, insisting that their rural experiences can be a valuable source of information for work in the classroom, they were universally reluctant. They did not want their classmates to

know they were "country" people. They expressed concern that such a label would also suggest they were not as bright, or not as aware of the rest of the world, as their classmates. I was familiar with the stereotypes, but I was stunned that my students seemed to have internalized these ideas to such a significant degree that it silenced them. They assumed that classmates would cast them in a negative light, despite the fact that there were people in the class who knew full well that they lived on cattle farms and had shown livestock at agricultural fairs. What I did not realize at the time was that I was also reflecting a biased representation of rural peoples as based in agriculture and perhaps a long tradition of agricultural endeavors. I was painting myself into a corner, reinforcing the very stereotypes that limit these students' understanding of their voices, their importance in the academic world.

They expressed a vision of two distinct worlds, the world of college and the world of home. I was reminded of David Bartholomae's work on the need for students entering the university system to learn to use unfamiliar discourses that do not correspond to their previous language use, either in their homes or in K–12 academic experiences. He points out that "the student needs to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do" in multiple academic genres and discourses (589–90). I began to see a possible theoretical construct, a way to consider the ways students position themselves in separate physical and intellectual places that might help me address this disconnect among their multiple worlds. By understanding how similar gaps operate in the ways students do or do not see themselves belonging in higher education, I can formulate class activities so that students might be able to push back against their self-imposed silence and develop a willingness to voice their perspectives in questioning texts or the representations that minimized their participation in my class and in society. Later, in Chapter 2, in addition to Bartholomae, I will be following the concerns raised by scholars who explore the gap between students' previous experiences and the requirements of a college setting, including Eric Zencey and Valerie Mulholland. This theorized gap is illustrated by my rural community

college students' reluctance to connect their already acquired rural knowledge with analysis in a college classroom of texts that have rural imagery.

Complications with Applying Critical Pedagogy

My training and time spent working in composition had certainly prepared me for students who do not see themselves as full members of the academic world, but I had not for a second considered the possibility that rural students might have an equally powerful sense that they do not belong in higher education, or that they would consider their experiences prior to and parallel with their college courses as useless in academic discussions. Certainly, I had never considered the possibility that these students did not want to be identified with their rural lives. My classes are populated with students from all sorts of backgrounds, but I had not considered the ease with which students whom I would classify as having "rural" experience would hide that background. I had considered students who have lived in rural areas, or who have worked on family farms, or for whom hunting and spending time in the outdoors is not just recreation but part of a culture, to be rural. They may not currently be living in a rural setting, but they have grown up with a different set of expectations for family, for their connection to community, and for how they see themselves in relation to specific geographic locations. They can easily "pass" for urban or suburban students when they wish. They can easily dress, speak, and act in ways that hide their rural knowledge for short periods of time, for example, a class period. However, I came to realize that students without agricultural backgrounds who attend my rural community college are also "rural." They are living and working in a rural space, and that geographic location provides them with a perspective that has significant distinctions from suburban or urban students. All rural students have an awareness of the richness and diversity in the rural. They understand the challenges and gifts of living and working in a place where distance is both significant and a driver of choices, for instance when there is no bus service, and

a car or a friend's car is the only real transportation option. All my rural students' input and perspectives are important in the academic world.

I consider all the students who attend classes at Centralia College to be part of the complicated tapestry of the rural even though not all of them come from rural backgrounds. I realized early in the work for this book that my own understanding of rural students was flattened, not comprehensive. I was considering only those students who lived and worked on farms and ranches as "rural." This misconception on my part certainly did not help my students, and explains, in part, why my previous efforts to bring students into fuller conversation were fraught with disappointment and unfulfilled good intentions. Once I thought more deeply about this question, and looked at just who is enrolled in my classes, I realized that I needed to update my previously held ideas about rural students. Although my definition is also incomplete, at this point based on the students who attend my rural community college, I have developed a working definition. All my students are rural. They attend a rural community college, and they include individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds, interests, economic positions, cultural connections, and experiences. They occupy multiple positions of power, often at the same time. Many white students see themselves clearly aligned with the dominant culture, but they are also, in some ways overtly and others more subtly, othered or marginalized because of the place they live, work, and attend college. In the same classroom, students of color, and students from historically marginalized populations, may see themselves as additionally marginalized due to where they live and work. Students on a rural campus are also different from students at suburban and urban college campuses because they can call on their perspective as persons who are in the rural when confronting representations of the rural. Their daily interactions in a rural space give them a chance to use an awareness heightened by their everyday lives.

Each student is a unique configuration of these shifting and parallel alliances and identities. One example is Alexis. She first came to Centralia College after graduating from her local high school, W. F. West in Chehalis, Washington. The high school serves 950 students in grades 9 through 12 ("W. F. West"). Alexis lived

outside of town, actually physically closer to the smaller Napavine School District, which only serves around 750 students in grades kindergarten through 12 ("About Our District"), so she would drive ten miles each day in to the larger town's high school. She enrolled at Centralia College to complete an associate of arts degree with an intent to transfer on to a university after two years. She lived with her parents and brother on a small acreage outside of town limits. She began classes with some awareness of her white privilege but also a keen sense of economic divisions. She needed to pay for her classes, so accessing financial aid, working while going to school, and living at home were included in her strategy. Raising rabbits was her passion, and she had advanced from simply raising rabbits to judging rabbits at the local and state fair levels. She traveled across the state extensively and developed a large network within the bunny world. She had also traveled to Italy on a trip sponsored by her high school that included recent graduates and community members. Initially unsure of her major, Alexis began to take the standard core courses for an AA, and she focused her electives on courses in creative writing and English. She began to work in the writing center. Each student in my rural community college brings similarly complicated and interesting lives with them into the classroom. Because these students occupy a rural space, they are in a position to contest representations of the rural that are not equally complicated and multilayered.

I needed to find a way to bring rural students into discussions and activities in my American literature classes so that they would both add to the complexity of the entire class's deconstructions of texts and empower rural students. One possible solution is to bring rural students' knowledge into a place of importance when the class content calls for it. When American literary works represent rural people and places in ways that are limited, rural students are in a unique position to call out, to identify, and to lead the class in more sophisticated understandings of these texts. In my attempts to understand my students' disconnect with the academic world and the usefulness of their life experiences, I turned to critical pedagogy. However, despite the clear connection to critical pedagogy, certainly in the sense that I had characterized my students from rural backgrounds as marginalized, somewhat silenced students who are responding to a negative portrayal

of themselves in the dominant culture, there are problems with applying critical pedagogy seamlessly to the situation that arises in my classrooms.

Kincheloe's definition of critical pedagogy, which I noted earlier as a pedagogy "interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and marginalization" (*Critical* 23), on the surface seems to provide an entry point from which to explore the empowerment of my rural students. However, a closer examination of the scholarship in this area reveals a series of highly contested terms and approaches that may not operate as hoped for when applied to the student population at Centralia College, because they are not homogenous. They are not all white, or economically challenged, or from a particular religious background, or familiar with animal husbandry. They move constantly between and among identities that are concurrently powerful and powerless.

Compositionists have long had an interest in critical pedagogies that explore the intersection of power, place, and language in the writing classroom. One subfield within composition includes finding moments of critical power for students in the gaps between their experiences and the intellectual tasks they participate in once they enter higher education, and though this seems a promising avenue for possible parallel solutions for rural students, there are unresolved tensions with the theoretical work that has already been completed. It would seem that this work ties marginalization to geographic locations in ways that might also be extended to theories about rural students, but interestingly, these theorists also tend to exclude or minimize the rural in favor of the urban.

Compositionists have explored urban spaces to problematize disconnects for students who come to higher education from urban environments. The city is commonly envisioned in composition studies as the rich site of democratic publics where a diverse population comes into tension as it wrangles with difference in the larger social discourse. Three examples include Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005), David Fleming's *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America* (2008), and Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan's edited collection, *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices* (2003). Fleming's text, in fact, does acknowledge the

existence of a space beyond the city, but the rural serves as an oppositional location, and Fleming calls for the city to be "an anchoring social scene capable of helping us invigorate our political lives and develop more centralized, integrated, and equitable public spheres: *commonplaces* that could balance our often-conflicting needs for unity and diversity, accessibility and power, belonging and anonymity" (180). To be fair, the text clearly identifies "contemporary metropolitan North America" (15) as the context and location for a discussion on rhetoric and political and cultural engagement, but Fleming's analysis does not make a connection with rural areas, which seem to be at best an opposing location in his discussion.

Fleming's work highlights the gap between theories that focus on the urban exclusively and the question of how these concerns play out for the issue of engagement in rural areas that I have identified. Fleming argues that "the case study at the heart of this book [Cabrini Green, Chicago] has presented strong evidence for a close relationship between physical location and individual and social welfare in our society and thus good reason to think that place and rhetorical well-being are linked as well" (184). However, if place and rhetorical well-being are linked, they must also be linked in rural environments. For example, Fleming identifies "*density*—the regularity with which community members are thrown into informal contact with one another" (190) as a "rhetorically powerful" (190) factor. But how does density play into rhetorical engagement in rural settings, when people are together repeatedly at family gatherings, religious ceremonies, school sports events, the local grocery store, and the feed store? This is but one example of how compositionists have developed structures of analysis and study of urban locations, and I see their work as useful but not a smooth fit for the students and the context of the rural community college. Therefore, theorists who explore the difficulties for urban students who enter higher education offer only partial help to address my concerns. Other than to suggest a geographic context for marginalized students, their work does not provide much that is directly applicable when working with rural community college students.

Although there is more attention being paid to rural students in the last ten years, prior to that, composition studies paid less

attention to the rural as a location from which students bring a knowledge set that may not translate easily and obviously into their experiences in higher education as critical scholars. Students with rural backgrounds whom I have worked with find themselves minimized in higher education, and their personal knowledge may be described by others as irrelevant to the university. As I have pointed out, critical pedagogy provides a lever through which students may be empowered to both create their own critical voices and speak back against oppressive cultural constructs, but, as currently structured, the theory and practice do not quite meet the needs of my students because they are not solely marginalized. As I have previously pointed out, they often occupy multiple positions of power and marginalization at the same time. I hope to address the need to better serve rural students with a special focus on rural students in first- and second-year American literature courses.

There are additional concerns when applying critical pedagogy to rural community college students. Critical pedagogy developed from Paulo Freire's desire to empower Brazil's oppressed peasant students more than fifty years ago, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). Freire's targeted students do not match my rural students in a number of important ways, and this causes friction points when utilizing his pedagogical framework with my students in rural Washington State. These points of disconnect are not minor and are similar to the concerns others have raised when working with students who are not Brazilian peasants. First amongst the difficulties is the fact that most of my rural community college students identify with the dominant culture, those Freire labels the oppressors. Those students do not seem to want to see themselves as marginalized or connected to a marginalized group.

There have been numerous attempts by others to parse out how white students, or perhaps students who identify as "white," may not be served well by critical pedagogy. Should these students even be part of the focus in a class that is dominated by critical pedagogy? Is it possible to alter the oppressor through critical pedagogy? And is the oppressor-oppressed binary applicable in all situations? Is it possible in the modern world that students may identify with multiple, overlapping identities in ways that

complicated Freire's two options? Is there a way to imagine the aims of critical pedagogy as having relevance for privileged students? For example, older students may have occupied a series of positions in the dominant power structure over the course of their lives. They may have been fully aligned with the powerful dominant culture and then through unemployment, or a geographical move, or a family crisis, lost that position. What part of their identity is still connected with their previous position in society and what part of their identity is co-located with their current, less powerful circumstances? Although critical pedagogy is a well-established methodology in the college classroom, there are points of contention within the theory and practice that illuminate my concerns in using these ideas with rural students who identify with the dominant culture, at least in part, in my American literature survey classes. What follows is a brief overview of these challenges and why using critical pedagogy is not a perfect solution for my concerns yet still stands as a foundational touchstone.

Critical pedagogy does not always empower all students. As bell hooks has repeatedly stated, "privileged students are often downright unwilling to acknowledge that their minds have been colonized, that they have been learning to be oppressors, how to dominate, or at least how to passively accept the domination of others" (102). Supporting her statement, Caleb Corkery's discussion of white racial awareness in Millersville University, Pennsylvania, points out how "critical pedagogies trained on enlightening white students of their privilege are prone to backfire" (250), and I agree. The situation becomes even muddier because my rural students occupy at least two situations concurrently. Most of them are white, a position of racial privilege, and many are also part of a rural subgroup that is routinely marginalized economically and culturally. Corkery advocates for an analytical approach, asking students to approach the hierarchy of power without giving up their privileged position, rather than asking them to engage emotionally with the oppressed, in order to "mitigate student resistance by allowing students to retain their subject positions as they encounter new materials that might challenge their power relations to others" (252).

Critical pedagogy traditionally defined as a method for empowering only "othered" or marginalized students may create barriers when used in my rural community college classroom. Students who align themselves with urban or suburban perspectives, despite their rural backgrounds, might read this approach as hostile. As bell hooks noted, they may not recognize the ways that their acceptance of urban normality and rural marginalization has been deeply engrained by the dominant culture. Rural students, just like other marginalized students, want to place themselves with the powerful, not the powerless, and challenging students' views brings their identities and values into question. I had not considered the seriousness of this challenge to students' worldviews when I pressed students to engage deeply with the literature in my class.

hooks's concerns are explored further, and more specifically with respect to white students, by Jennifer Seibel Trainor. She has concerns about constructions of whiteness that limit white students to racialized conversation that marks them out as the oppressor. She notes that "characterizations [by professors of white students] contribute to static, stereotypical pictures of white, middle class students and their values and beliefs" (632), which leads her to be concerned about a "troubling disdain for students that is anathema to critical pedagogical goals and to the respect for students that has been a core tenet, especially, of composition's disciplinary identity" (632). Trainor's concerns are clearly articulated in two dominant concerns: first, white students in a "multicultural critical pedagogy" become essentialized and politicized in ways that are destructive to the goals of critical pedagogy, and, second, the instructor has created a "rhetorical space" that blocks the possible position of "an antiracist white identity" and therefore limits the ways white students respond to critical texts and pedagogy (634). Trainor's concerns map out areas to which I need to attend. The majority of my students identify along multiple positions of power, so the either/or dichotomy of oppressed or oppressor does not give them a way to explore these concerns of marginalization and power that match their location. As I develop a pedagogy that will be more effective, it is clear that there must be a way for rural students to choose another path, perhaps, as Trainor has suggested, through

a white identity that includes being both part of the dominant culture and a marginalized subgroup at the same time.

The concerns that circulate around critical pedagogy when working with white students are related to situations in which a class is led by a white instructor, a generally privileged position. Ricky Lee Allen and César Augusto Rossatto are quite pointed in their concerns about working with white teachers and white teacher-education students. They wonder whether critical pedagogy can be used when the oppressor is the center of the classroom and members of the dominant culture see any questioning of their privileged position as an attack, responding with resistance and at times, hostility (163–65). They raise serious concerns about how critical pedagogy may need an oppressor to operate, and those students who are not marginalized or oppressed must, by default, fall into the oppressor category (165–68). Additionally, students who are not aligned with power have to declare themselves disempowered, marginal, and oppressed, which is perhaps equally alienating to some. Freire's initial construct leaves no room for any person who is a member of the dominant culture, a person with privilege, who is able to shift from that understanding of the world into a position that allows them not only to recognize their privileged status but to act as agents in concert with students who have not had the benefits of privilege.

Additionally, Allen and Rossatto point out situations where powerless students align themselves with the dominant culture to such a degree that "oppressed students might not even believe they are oppressed" (168). Allen and Rossatto's comments bring to mind my own rural students who choose not to engage in the classroom around issues of identity and power. In what ways might I have isolated them, placing them in a tight spot where they have to identify as the marginalized, even to a small degree, when they do not see themselves in this way? Instead, they may be choosing to silence themselves to avoid the conflict, to avoid revealing themselves in this precarious position—or they may not recognize their own expertise in an area that is regarded by the dominant culture as something unimportant.

Allen and Rossatto point out that the driving force behind critical pedagogy, to provide classroom experiences that call into

question the power and privilege of the oppressors, may "seem unsuited for privileged geographical and cultural contexts" (170). However, their solutions for this concern do not match the needs of my students. They address situations in which the teacher is white and the students are people of color (174), yet in my classroom nearly all the participants are white. Marginalization is not marked by color, so the power dynamic is, at times, quite difficult to "see," allowing students to ignore or negate the existence of a power hierarchy, at least in the short term of a class discussion. Allen and Rossatto recognize and problematize the difficulties of directing critical pedagogy when the teacher represents a member of the privileged oppressor class with authority over students who are visually and culturally othered. This is not quite the situation on my rural campus, where nearly all professors—93 percent—are white, with a nearly 50-50 split between the genders, and a student body that is 70 percent white. Those students who self-identify in our registration information as Latinx make up 12 percent of the student body ("Faculty and Staff Data"; "Student Demographics").

According to Freire's binary, everyone is a member of either the oppressor or the oppressed group. My community college classroom has a more complicated dynamic. Speaking in agreement with Freire, Allen and Rossatto suggest that there are no "degrees" of oppression, and, given the fluidity of the classroom situation for me, there must be another way to consider the position of these students in the academic world of the community college, a position that occupies multiple locations or degrees of power simultaneously. For example, a white, male student who is living on a farm, who must drive more than ten miles to the college to attend classes and who does not have high-speed internet at home, may also use the campus connections and local high-speed Wi-Fi connections in town or at the homes of friends to participate in multiplayer online games. He may also be related to the largest landowner in the county, a position of significant power in the local community. To ascribe the position of either oppressor or oppressed to this student is to nullify a portion of the student's experiences and identity. In a class discussion, this student needs to draw on multiple positions simultaneously in order to enrich the conversation. Creating activities that allow for students to

inhabit multiple locations along a continuum of power and identity is necessary.

Another concern for me is that Allen and Rossatto's solution to a power differential between the white instructor and marginalized students is not well articulated. They rely on repeating Freire's idea of radical love so that oppressor students are "treated as capable of becoming more fully human once released from their investment in the oppressor status" by helping them learn "to not dehumanize themselves and others . . . . And it requires letting them know that if they make a mistake they will still be loved" (178). There are no specifics, and there is problematic language with the embedded statement that white students will make "mistakes," yet these mistakes are not clearly defined or identified. Allen and Rossatto's work illuminates a concern but does not help to alleviate the problem they identify, which to summarize is that instructors who occupy a position of power and cultural dominance may not best serve students who are othered without repeating and replicating the very hegemony they are trying to work against. To minimize an othered student may be an embedded pattern that needs to be addressed, though Allen and Rossatto do not provide clear guidance on just how a disruption of this power dynamic might be accomplished.

Trainor's work, as mentioned earlier, suggests that it is possible to provide a third position for these students. They may legitimately occupy both the oppressed and the oppressor's positions. In the way that students from multiple language communities will code switch, my rural, white students may be daily shifting between these two positions, depending on the needs of the moment. When they are in the feed store, they connect with the marginalized rural, but when they are in the academic world, they connect with the dominant culture. While switching to meet the needs of each audience and identity may be a useful skill, I want these students to enact their knowledge of both these locations, or at least begin to bring those aspects of their lives they consider outside of academic interests, into the classroom. My task, then, in building a critical rural pedagogy, is to find ways to bring the multiple hegemonic positions students occupy into conversation with one another in the classroom. A critical

rural pedagogy needs to help all students orient themselves within the broader systems and structures in which they live. A critical rural pedagogy should further help them to see avenues for action and give them opportunities to become aware of and responsible for their own forms of discrimination. A critical rural pedagogy should work with students' already established connections to positions that are both high and low in the power hierarchy. A richer contextualization of their own situations, more complicated than a simple binary, can be explored initially through working with the texts in my American literature classes.

Karen Kopelson's work with student resistance in composition classes suggests students who align themselves with the dominant culture may best be approached with a "performance" pedagogy that casts an image of neutrality, not to sidestep the important work of critical pedagogy, but because a direct assault on the concepts that students use to identify themselves and their place in a larger society may not be effective (118). Kopelson has taken bell hooks's concerns and attempted to devise a way for "oppressor" students to operate within critical pedagogy. For example, students would be encouraged to consider what is and is not oppressive. Students might be asked how to respond and to look outward at an issue/situation to examine multiple formulations of power and its consequences and the various reactions to power.

As I envision it, a critical rural pedagogy then would engage students in the complex thicket of ideas with no clear paths or stark rights and wrongs. Critical rural pedagogy might ask students to unpack, understand, orient, act, and be responsive and responsible for their actions and orientations in the broadest context possible. Traditional critical pedagogy is clearly not the perfected solution to facilitating student growth in areas that are subsumed within the dominant culture's use of education to replicate a current structure at the cost of admittance to power by marginalized students and groups. Because Kopelson's work focuses on minority or marginalized professors and dominantly oppressor students, it does not mirror the situation at my community college, where most of the students are white, and the most frequent markers of marginalization are gender, age, or

class. However, she opens a possible set of techniques, a way to create student discussion and outcomes that allow for multiple reactions to the text and their interpretations of that text as it plays out in the world.

The question of student response to critical pedagogy is also tackled by Alexander Reid, and there is some question about whether student resistance to critical pedagogy should be cast as a problem or as an appropriate response to challenges of student identity. Reid proposes that professors consider their own reactions to student resistance (par. 4). Instead of legitimizing an instructor's response based in a perceived lack of some ability, insight, or level of maturity on the part of students, Reid explores the possibility that the power hierarchy of the classroom itself coerces professors to minimize their students' resistance to critical pedagogy (paras 4, 6, and 7). Students should react negatively to a dominating power, in this case the instructor, who attempts to force them into a particular political point of view or a worldview that privileges those who are marginalized. Regardless of the motivation for this move, Reid suggests, when students strongly resist, instructors should see that resistance as a cue, a marker of their own hegemonic control of the classroom. I agree with the concerns he brings to light. Critical pedagogy, as a way to empower those without power, would seem to be incompatible with making students agree with a particular vision of the world in order to please the instructor or to submit to the power structure created by an instructor with a particular agenda. Reid's concerns in this area clearly identify a significant point of friction within critical pedagogy. However, they also suggest that a variation in critical pedagogy that places students in a role of some power may break through their resistance to participating fully and validate their contributions of (in my case, rural) knowledge to classroom discussions.

Clearly, although there are important ideas relating to rural students and their sense of place within the world of higher education as well as how the hegemony of the urban or suburban as the "normal" or more familiar lens might marginalize or minimize rural students who are in community colleges, at this time these concerns have had only limited discussion in academic conversations. I believe other scholars have outlined the concerns,

which I will discuss more fully in Chapter 2, both in terms of hegemony and the creation of a rural identity. For now, suffice it to say, the terms *rural literacy* and *rural pedagogy* are contested both in their definitions and in their uses, which reflects the difficulties in attempting to build on the work of earlier scholars to create a critical rural pedagogy. However, what I next wish to explore more fully is how specific representations of the rural, as rhetorical commonplaces or topoi, that circulate within literature and in public discourse have been internalized by students (and their professors) and how such topoi might be used strategically in what I am calling a critical rural pedagogy in order to examine, challenge, resist, and intervene within these representations.

The Topoi: Commonplace Representations of the Rural in Dominant Culture

The approach I take begins with already established formulations of the rural that circulate in the social imagination and are replicated in American literary texts and in the ancillary materials that precede these texts in American literature anthologies. The imagery of the rural in the literature we study in class may be a part of what silences students from rural backgrounds who do not wish to be associated with marginalized groups, e.g., country people, or representations that diminish the value of their lives since they are not part of the urban or suburban worlds. I envision using the imagery and characterizations of the rural as lever points against which to compare rural students' experiences, to build patterns of argument that can break down these ideas more critically. In their idealized form, these representations are commonplaces—concepts, symbols, or key words connected to the ideals of a "rural" world—and recognizing them as such can serve as a way into analyzing and dissecting them, which will give rural students more agency than they currently experience in my classroom.

I hope to repurpose those dominant representations as a basis for resistance, a strategy I first saw enacted in critical pedagogy. As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein explain in *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, "public

orators from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Renaissance studied rhetorical *topoi* or 'commonplaces,' model passages and formulas that represented the different strategies available to public speakers" (xxii). As Aristotle originally articulated, a topos is "a mental 'place' where an argument can be found, or topoi may be the argument itself" (44–45). Another way to think about topoi is that they are based in "common warrants, often unstated premises that seek to connect with an audience's hierarchy of values, and several studies have evidenced their power as inventional tools for students" (Wilder and Wolfe 174). Topoi are these commonly held beliefs and understandings that provide a starting point for more complicated analysis. A culturally constructed set of ideas about what the rural is, what it represents, and what the value of "rural" is in the larger context of the nation might serve as an "in." This is a way to challenge the "idea of the rural" in order to reveal the more complicated reality of the rural that my students have lived and understand. Because my students have experiences that help them recognize the distinctions between these culturally constructed representations and the reality of life in rural locations, a class with rural students can use their collective knowledge to push back against these commonplaces, using, for example, the idea that the rural is merely a rustic, backwater location as a point of contrast with the rural that students know directly through their experiences.

I understand that the repeated images and assumptions that circulate in literature, public discourse, and popular sentiment on the rural are topoi, and I aim to help students both recognize and mobilize these topoi in complicated and multilayered ways. I have chosen this term specifically to describe the moves I want to make with students because it encapsulates the shifting nature of the discovery of critical argument as well as the structures that can be used to facilitate student exploration of these issues to a greater depth. As stated by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, topoi have been deployed as "both the stuff of which arguments are made and the form of those arguments" (152). Although there are multiple ways topoi function, I will be focused most closely on Candice Rai's more specific explanation, in which topoi are also "the reified tools, material conditions and mechanisms (objects, things, spaces, genres, bodily habits, and

other materialities) that constrain, enact, generate, circulate, and mobilize salient rhetorical structures" (36–37). Topoi are not merely stock discursive structures to be used. They rise out of specific conditions, contain contradictory worldviews and beliefs, and provide spaces for interaction with contentious ideas that are alive at this moment in the culture or in this case a specific subculture.

Similarly, Ralph Cintron conceptualizes "topoi (commonplaces) as storehouses of social energy. . . . topoi organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions in the lifeworld" (101). I agree with his assertion that topoi "constitute the body politic in a visible and highly public sort of way" (101). The representations of the rural my students have internalized are already part of a widely understood cultural conversation and, regardless of students' specific individual backgrounds, attention to topoi provides not only the means by which to deconstruct the power structures, political agendas, and cultural impulses embedded in them, but also the means to speak back, to create rhetorical responses that have salience and power. Additionally, by identifying these representations as topoi, rural students are provided with a way to bring their personal knowledge into the academic world in ways that are in line with academic expectations and concurrently demonstrate the importance of multiple perspectives being voiced in the university. Also, recognizing representations of the rural as topoi may allow the discovery of ideas that rural students need to be able to develop for themselves in order to occupy multiple hegemonic locations between the dominant culture and the marginalized rural. I will discuss more fully how and why topoi will be enacted as part of a critical rural pedagogy in Chapter 2.

In order to use representations of the rural as topoi to be interrogated with rural students in my classes, it is important to clearly determine the prevalence of these particular images of and attitudes toward the rural. Because repeated rural representations function as topoi, ideas that have deep resonance with the larger culture and are reflected in the written works students and scholars encounter, they can be used in my classroom as structures for conversation, activities, analysis, and tools of invention that help generate content for writing. Topoi can provide a way for my rural students, who will recognize that these topoi do not encompass

the totality of their experiences in a rural environment, to question the purposes of rural representations in texts for the author, for the reader, and for other groups who may have either political or cultural reasons for promoting specific views of the rural in literature. As Rai, Cintron, and Crowley and Hawhee point out, topoi are the content of representations of the rural that students may articulate and examine, as well as the tools that help them to question, to push back, and to mobilize as they explore texts in American literature. Furthermore, if constructed images of the rural and its people are culturally dominant, and if rural students can be made aware of them, they might use them to push back critically against the texts.

Students who have not had agricultural experiences must not be isolated or minimized by a pedagogy that focuses too exclusively on a homogenous vision of the rural. Because my students have usually come from a variety of backgrounds, including not just rural but suburban and urban locations, this is especially important. Culturally dominant representations of the rural must operate as warrants, as common assumptions, so that students who do not have direct experiences in the rural are still familiar with the topoi and able to engage and interrogate them, and for the purposes of this book, keying in on three repeated, general, and common constructions of the rural may help students learn to recognize the overgeneralization and political hierarchy that is imposed by these representations of the rural.

The work of Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell on rural literacies within composition studies, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter 2, might be used strategically in a classroom that aims to use the experiences of rural students to engage in critical analysis of texts in my American literature courses. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell have explored the prevalence of language and attitudes in dominant culture that marginalize rural places and people. In *Rural Literacies* (2007), they call for a closer examination of the traditional misrepresentation of rural places as locations for only "lack, lag, and a rosy past" (1). These misrepresentations assert that the rural is missing important economic or cultural attributes, is slow to follow the improvements of urbanized neighbors, or

is the site of sweet memories of a fictional farm life where daily tasks are easy, simple, and character building. According to Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, these misrepresentations may be found individually, in a pair, or all three together in the same work. I would assert that these three representations are shifting. For example, representation of the rural as a location for a "rosy past" will be explored, enacted, articulated, and privileged or not differently within multiple texts. It is not enough for students to point to an example of rosy past. Instead, by using rosy past as a topos, the multilayered use of this term, the variation in its expression, and the full range of possible cultural meanings that are associated with it should be included in a critical rural pedagogy.

Next, I look at how these concepts play out when framed as topoi, or rhetorical commonplaces, keywords and ideological formations that circulate in the discourse of the classroom, in literature, in social spaces, and in the everyday lives of my students. Through the tracing and strategic use of these topoi, students may begin to understand how the images and representations in a work of literature do not reflect an absolute reality but instead create merely one author's vision of rural places, a vision that reflects ideological dispositions that may or may not have clear connections with rural life. As topoi, these three representations of rural places provide a jumping-off point for students as they interrogate the extent to which rural spaces are or are not places that lack cultural and economic resources available in urban spaces, as places that are or are not behind in their cultural and economic development, or as places that represent an idealized, and perhaps fictionalized, past for urbanites (Donehower et al., *Rural Literacies* 1). Because topoi are dynamic and capacious, they serve well to capture the shifting nature of rural representations. Because there are myriad, contested ways that lack, lag, or rosy past are enacted in these rural representations, students will need to delve repeatedly into how the representation of the rural is altered and how it evolves from one text to another. I can use these topoi as a framework for a critical rural pedagogy that calls all students to examine how representations of the rural may be revealed, obscured, altered, and created.

Lack, Lag, and Rosy Past: Connections with the Field

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's identification of "lack, lag, and rosy past" is strongly connected to the work of previous scholars who focus on the rural. These three general representations also appear with regularity in popular literature, memoirs, and even United States government publications. These common representations are repeatedly used to further their own agendas by those who do not live and work in rural areas. Urban dwellers may scapegoat or oversimplify the rural to create an illusion of the superiority of cities, politicians may use a rural-versus-urban dichotomy to influence policy development, and those who have left a rural environment for an urban one may want to depict their choice as liberation from a diminished location and lifestyle.

What follows is a brief review of literary, popular, and government texts that replicate the ideas and imagery of "lack, lag, and rosy past." In order to illustrate the pervasive nature of these three representations of the rural, it is important to demonstrate that representations appear nearly ubiquitously in multiple genres in order to be sure that I can construct a form of critical pedagogy that will work with and against these representations later in Chapter 2. I will include the following texts to explore the scholarly conversation about the rural as it appears in American literature: F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Anna Brickhouse's *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*, A. Carl Bredahl's *New Ground*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, and Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*. I will follow that with the work of urban and social planners with designs on the rural, Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper. Next, scholars who explore geographic theory and writing, Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, Robert E. Abrams, Mary Louise Pratt, and Allen Batteau are glossed. Lack, lag, or rosy past also appear in federal government documents, genres which often catalogue, characterize, and control rural land and peoples to an astounding degree, and in several Kellogg Foundation reports for Congress. Finally, I will include a scan of literature/

memoir/popular texts by Ian Frazier, Wendell Berry, Osha Gray Davidson, NPR contributors Peggy Lowe and Ted Robbins, and Michael Pollan. It is not my intention to use these specific texts as classroom examples as part of this book. Rather, I will be looking closely at the ways the representations of lack, lag, and rosy past, and the ways rural spaces are controlled in texts by outsiders, occur repeatedly, across genres. The frequency of this repetition validates recognizing and critiquing "lack, lag, and rosy past" as pervasive topoi in our culture. The constant drumbeat of these images helps to illustrate my confidence in using them with my rural students, who will also recognize these representations when encountered in American literature texts and supplementary materials.

All my students should also be familiar with these constructions of the rural, and if lack, lag, and rosy past are truly in the dominant culture, these students will also learn to recognize the gap between the constructed world of a text and the actual world being described. Because my students have experiences with rural living, with small-town culture, or with more frequent interactions with rural life realities, they should recognize how these two different worlds are in accord with one another at times and how they are more complicated in their distinctions across contexts when they engage in exploring the topoi of lack, lag, and rosy past. When these experiences are shared in the classroom, all students have access to information and points of view that help them to discern the layers of meaning and purpose in their American literature texts. These skills are important for the empowerment of all students. While limitations of time and space preclude me from analyzing all possible texts, I have attempted to use a variety of texts to illustrate the frequency and often uncritical use of these topoi in scholarly texts, popular fiction, and political documents. The repeated use of lack, lag, and rosy past in all their variations suggests that they are firmly embedded in dominant American culture. And if they are firmly embedded, they can be used as topoi for critical interrogation of texts with students.

Scholarly Context for the Rural in American Literature

Images of the rural in American literary works have been at times a focus of scholarly attention and at other times granted only a minimal discussion, but the question of how, why, and for whom rural spaces appear in American literature has a long history. I will attempt to highlight several examples of scholars of American literature who theorize and problematize the way the American rural appears, or not, and how it is constructed through literature within the conversation, realizing that a full discussion is beyond the scope of my project. I do so in order to trace the academic conversation on when, how, and why images of the rural are created and manipulated in literature, and to clarify the repeated use of lack, lag, and rosy past as topoi that can be used in classroom settings to complicate students' understandings of texts in general, and of texts that include references and images of a marginalized rural, specifically. So my aim is not to be comprehensive but representative in the presentation of rural topoi. It is important that I demonstrate a repeated and common use of lack, lag, and rosy past as they occur at times separately, at times together. I will begin with discussions of American literature since the class that is the impetus for this project and that will be the point of intervention is a general American literature survey.

F. O. Matthiessen, in his introduction to *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), asserts that Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville both reflect and create a particular type of democracy in their texts (xv). Interestingly, Matthiessen is uncritical in his glancing descriptions of the rural and his assertion that between 1850 and 1865 "the farmer rather than the businessman was still the average American" (ix). This, he suggests, helps to support the major writers of the day in their use of natural imagery, which he often conflates with rural imagery without distinction. Matthiessen's terminology is still in use today, and Brickhouse pushes back against the general creation of a dominant white male canon in *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (2004). Expanding the boundaries of Matthiessen's conception of American literature,

she argues that "the very conception of the American Renaissance, tied as it has always been to a cultural moment of intense national self-consciousness, is inherently dependent upon and sustained not only by nationalist discourses but by the underlying transnational desires and anxieties that such discourses seek to mask" (33). Brickhouse foregrounds important binaries, including us (Anglo-Saxon) versus them (native, Spanish, not from northern Europe) (4), and the national identity-literature of the United States when held against "colonialism, slavery, and indigenous 'removals'" (9). She does not, however, include a rural-urban binary or distinction among her critical turns, which suggests that not only is the rural of minimal importance, but it is not part of the development of the nineteen-century public world she is describing. The rural does not seem to matter, despite the significant number of people who were living in rural areas of the United States all through the 1800s.

A. Carl Bredahl also asserts that the construction of the American literary canon, a highly problematic term and concept, privileges the Eastern, but he adds, more specifically, the urban. In *New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon* (1989), he notes a distinction between the way Easterners and Westerners understand landscape and the stories placed in those landscapes. He writes, "Not surprisingly, traditional students, trained to distrust surface, frequently regard western writing as naïve. But . . . distant from eastern structures and challenged by the big sky, the westerner finds himself accepting the landscape and indeed embracing it for physical and spiritual sustenance" (30). Rural spaces and small towns, with an abundance of sky and landscape, are not central to the canon, according to Bredahl, not because they do not have value, but because those in positions of power have minimized their value for the sake of placing the complexities of urban life above all other contexts. Bredahl's work describes how the canon diminishes inclusion of western/rural locations in "American" literature. My experiences with students suggest that they understand this hegemonic structure and have internalized it to the point that they may not value their experiences and knowledge because they perceive them to be not as academically fit or rigorous. In the words of Bredahl, their lives and knowledge are "naïve" in the context of an American literature survey course. And there

is danger in challenging "America's perception of itself" (32), as Bredahl points out. When confronted with a powerful set of urban images, which are given greater worth both in American literary texts and in the dominant culture, it seems that rural students in my classes may choose to disappear, not to challenge, not to question, and to stay safe in an environment that may be hostile to their success if they privilege the rural or nonurban in their literary analysis and critiques. As illustrated in the opening vignette, they elect to remain silent and choose not to bring their expert knowledge of rural life and spaces into discussions of American literature. The danger of not being recognized as a valued member of the academic community, let alone a person with opinions that are valuable in classroom discussions, is avoided if a student simply does not bring their knowledge out in the open.

Other scholars have given rural representations a more dominant place in their theorizing. Henry Nash Smith traces shifts in imagery surrounding "domesticated" rural spaces in *Virgin Land* (1957), developing the idea that

> the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society—a collective representation, a poetic idea (as Tocqueville noted in the early 1830's) that defined the promise of American life. . . . [T]he garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow. (138)

Smith made areas outside of urban spaces a metaphorical conception rather than a realistic vision, which enabled a fictional image to develop, an "agricultural paradise in the West, embodying group memories of an earlier, a simpler, and, it was believed, a happier state of society" (139). While Smith's idealized frontier farmer parallels the idea of a rosy past exemplified in the rural, and his title certainly mirrors the lack of interaction with the natural world in rural spaces, he does not focus on the concept of a culturally or economically lagging location, illustrating that these rural representations may appear individually as well as in pairs or all together. Certainly, the overt construction of this imagery, and the degree to which Smith is responding directly

to the industrialization of urban areas, lays the theoretical groundwork on which Donehower, Hogg, and Schell later point out how rural places become locations for only "lack, lag, and a rosy past" (*Rural Literacies* 1). Smith points to the importance of the rosy past in the initial development of an American character and then its continued dominance into the modern age. He refers both to Thomas Jefferson's conception of the yeoman farmer and to J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, two texts that stand as antecedents to Nash's continued development of the theoretical framework (142).

Leo Marx's work, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), opens with, "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination" (3). I will withhold commentary on his use of the term "native" to refer to dominant white culture but will instead note that Marx foregrounds what it means to be an American as reflected in the landscape people inhabit, and how these developing representations may be altered when pastoral locations experience urbanizing technologies. He makes powerful use of the historical extensions of train lines and engines as objects that appear in important American literary works. Marx traces the use of pastoral imagery in literature back to the European Romantics and then even further to the Roman poet Virgil. However, he also makes unquestioned statements, such as that "the soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness" (6).

For Marx, the rural is a domesticated space to be leveraged against the industrialization of the United States. He leans toward an idealized version of spaces outside of cities that are most useful as points of contrast rather than as sites with their own complicated history and use. My rural students who have often been awake since well before dawn to care for livestock and who know the constant stress of a never-ending list of daily and seasonally repeated chores that must be completed in order to keep a farmstead in profitable status would certainly disagree with Marx's nostalgic characterization of the rural. My purpose then should be to encourage students to analyze these differences

between the rural as portrayed and the rural as they have lived it, including individual variations of their unique experiences in the rural, a subject that I will explore more deeply in Chapter 2 and then express in practical terms in Chapter 3.

Stepping even more overtly toward controlling the rural with text, social planners with designs on the rural Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper wrote an especially influential 1999 article, "The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method," that illustrates how urban peoples' vision serves the urban rather than rural inhabitants. Their stated aim is to "craft regional metaphors. . . . [that] can help the public to understand and expand regional choices. As a metaphor for the United States' Great Plains, the Buffalo Commons stand for a large-scale, long-term ecological-economic restoration project" (491). They describe the Great Plains as "America's steppes—wind-swept, nearly treeless, and largely semiarid. Their expanse is mostly rural and sparsely settled" (491–92). For the Poppers, population density endows value, a value judgment that gives greater power to the urban. Their proposed "public policy for the Plains would eventually have to respond . . . by creating a huge reserve, the Buffalo Commons" (493). In summary, since the Great Plains cannot sustain large populations over long periods of time, ownership should be taken by the federal government (493). The government would then use these lands as a reserve for buffalo, also known as bison, an endangered species. For the Poppers, spaces outside of cities are empty spaces, lacking in sustainable value.

Shifting to literary scholars who focus more specifically on the intersection of geography and written works, that rural locations are altered in text to meet particular needs is not disputed by literary theorists. My work with students using topoi to reveal motives and power structures within texts is grounded in the work of these theorists. Geographical space is pliable in the writer's skilled hands, molded into the form and representations of specific ideas, according to Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu, editors of *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production 1500–1900* (2007). In their introduction, they foreground the writer's ability to "transform the literary stage from the homogeneous space of an expansive democratic empire to a multitude of qualitatively different spaces that varied

significantly from prominent discourses in the history of human consciousness and emotions" (13). They highlight, specifically, Frederick Jackson Turner's use of the frontier as a place in which "America's sense of national identity . . .[and] democratic individualism had been continually forged" (14). Brückner and Hsu agree that the understanding of space is controlled by the imagery that is developed for an audience. In their study of maps and railroad company advertising, they demonstrate repeatedly how space may be homogenized or divided into distinct images based on the needs of the authors of those maps and texts.

Robert E. Abrams, in *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (2004), concurs with the supposition that physical locations are malleable when re-created by authors and artists. He points out that in capturing images, in this case in paintings by Thomas Cole as well as images developed by American writers from the same historical period, "what emerges is a drift in concrete material possibility through ongoing mutation in the socio-cultural mechanisms whereby it is measured and endowed with value, semioticized into symbol and sign, mapped, categorized, and formulated to the eye" (127). Again, the constructed understanding of a space is made plain in this work as in that of Brückner and Hsu. The representations of space that appear in text are not a singular truth of a place that is faithfully recorded without the author's perspective and the cultural influences that play out in writers' lives. Instead, geographical spaces in texts are built, they have a purpose that is not isolated from the time and purposes of the authors, and they reflect but one way to take a reader to a place and time. Representations of the rural that appear in the American literature survey course are subject to the same influences. Because my students have personal experiences that may help them to recognize the differences between what they know about the rural and how the rural is depicted, there is an opportunity for critical analysis. It is my hope to use this theoretical underpinning to develop both a critical stance and a critical pedagogy for use with rural students when they are confronting images created in their American literature textbooks.

One especially powerful example of the deliberate manipulation of representations of the rural to create a particular response is

found in Allen Batteau's *The Invention of Appalachia* (1990). Batteau's first sentence states, "Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination" (1). He then spends the following two hundred pages providing specific examples of how people outside of Appalachia ranging from Thomas Jefferson and Crèvecoeur to filmmakers, musicians, novelists, and television producers have invented a particular version of life in this multistate area in order to achieve their own purposes. The rural parts of Appalachia are used for political gain, urban solidarity, and consolidation of power by those who wish to control the area. The invention of a people who lag behind in education and culture, who lack the modern conveniences, and who represent a version of a storied past that has gone awry because it could not adjust to the present, modern world, according to Batteau, has been developed to serve those who wish to use the rural for their own purposes. The creators of Appalachia construct a rural space that needs to be "filled" with superior urban economic wisdom and culture.

Clearly, the academic conversation around the rural as it appears in scholarly works suggests that there is ample evidence for a pattern of representations that diminish the importance and relevance of the rural, at times creating a rosy version of it. When the rural is overgeneralized into one or more of the three general topoi identified by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, there are patterns for students to discover and opportunities to create situations for rural community college students to use their perspectives to contest the accuracy of these representations.

A diminished value of the rural becomes a greater concern when considered in light of Mary Louis Pratt's conception of the "contact zone . . . that is, social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (7). The unequal power structure is fully apparent, with the rural subjected to the colonizing gaze of the urban. Pratt's terms may also be useful to investigate how students who have lived in these rural contact zones may engage in "autoethnographic expression" to "talk back" to the dominating powers outside of their communities (9). Talking back is critically important because it is a mechanism for students from rural spaces to use

their expertise with the rural to develop their own critical thinking skills, as well as add to the richness of ideas present in their college classrooms. In my exploration of possible pedagogies, Pratt's work suggests that providing avenues for students to represent themselves back to the colonizer, in this case the urban normative assumption, helps to explain why rural students try to ally themselves with Freire's oppressors, in this case the nonrural creator of rural representations, while concurrently these same students are cast among the oppressed in Freire's binary. Calling out the assumption that the urban is normal at the same time creates a tool through which rural students can work. Taking a cue from critical pedagogy, there is a way to create assignments and opportunities for students to rewrite the texts with their own knowledge, using the urban language of lack, lag, and rosy past as a foil against which to work or to develop counternarratives.

Talking back is a pathway to creating more nuanced responses to texts in American literature. By talking back, students resist the colonizing gaze of authors who have a particular economic, political, or cultural agenda when writing about the rural. Tactically, using Pratt's theories as a guide, there are specific tasks that can be built on talking back that give students a foothold in their critical reactions and responses even to texts that are held in esteem because they appear in a college classroom or in an assigned anthology. In Chapter 2, I will explore pedagogy that tackles concerns for rural students and how I can build on it for my students' specific situations. For example, when the Poppers' colonizing gaze ascribes lack to the entire open plains, the West and the Middle West, students can work directly against that representation. Since the Poppers define the rural as nonproductive and empty, students might begin to push back by identifying what is in the rural landscape and how it is divided and used according for specific economic and cultural purposes by multiple groups of people who inhabit the geographic space. They can explore the people that the Poppers have marginalized to the point of extinction, and their interactions with the land and with one another. Such an activity may even include direct contact with the Poppers in the form of a report, a letter, or a response that refutes the assumptions in their original article. As stated

before, although critical pedagogy engages marginalized students in their need to become empowered and respond to texts in their own voices, it does not match my classroom needs completely. Because rural students in my classes may not identify themselves as marginalized, I need to develop a possible set of pedagogical moves that combine the ideas of Donehower, Hogg, and Schell with those of Pratt and critical pedagogy.

How a space is contextualized and discussed can have a powerful impact on the way those from outside a space respond. This idea has been deeply demonstrated by multiple scholarly works, but with respect to the ways that rural and small-town locations have been defined and represented in writing, there is a nearly endless supply of examples that one can draw on in order to support my assertion that the themes of lack, lag, and rosy past are common and, therefore, familiar to all students, not just rural students. However, I would like to point out just a few of the other genres of texts that capture the colonizing gaze of the authors when describing the rural.

United States Government Constructs the Rural in Government Materials

Commonly, people with an urban orientation are unaware of the powerful control exerted by governmental agencies on rural spaces, peoples, and activities. Rural spaces, including farmland, ranchland, and public grazing tracts are defined and organized by governmental and quasigovernmental agencies. The National Park Service, the Farm Bureau, the Department of Agriculture, and even the US Census, to name but a few of these organizations, not only determine what can be called rural but what activities may occur in those locations: when and which crops are planted, who may have access to various types of rural spaces, what property must be held in land banks, and how products of the rural environment may be planned, created, marketed, and at times, destroyed. In short, the government has a profound influence on daily life in the rural. This is clearly visible for people living and working in rural spaces. But this is not apparent to those outside of the rural.

I will share two documents that illustrate how policymakers and regulators, and those who elect them, reflect the ideas of lack, lag, or rosy past. The strength of these beliefs, attitudes, or impressions of the rural are then enacted in the laws and bureaucratic texts that govern rural spaces. Not only rural students but suburban and urban students should be aware of how these representations become "real" in government actions carried out by their fellow citizens.

Two reports compiled by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, written in 2002 for the US Congress, attempt to document perceptions of the rural. The first report, *Perceptions of Rural America: Congressional Perspectives*, made public in May 2002, was a "bi-partisan survey [that] included 26 members of Congress," sixteen of whom were Democratic house members and senators and ten of whom were Republican house members and senators (2). The second report, *Perceptions of Rural America* (December 2002) was developed from "242 in-depth interviews of rural, urban, and suburban Americans in several regions of the country" (1).

The perspectives identified in the report on the legislators' views use the term "lack" repeatedly; rural America is described have having a "lack of economic diversity . . . lack of infrastructure . . . lack of access to the Internet and inadequate transportation" (2). The area falls behind the rest of the United States in solutions to these problems because the rural economy needs to improve, when compared with the urban and suburban economy, and rural areas may have fewer representatives in Congress, potentially meaning less power and influence in governmental policy development, especially in terms of the Farm Bill (2). Interestingly, the legislators see rural communities "as an incubator of American values, such as self-reliance, stewardship of the land and faith, [and] it represents an important source of American tradition" (2), paralleling the idealization of the rural described by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell as the rosy past. Again, the Kellogg report does not record the reality of these terms but instead reveals and reinforces dominant perceptions in the minds of elected national government representatives, and since members of Congress are writing policy, proposing legislation, and establishing funding,

their perceptions percolate strongly throughout federal programs, which rural students often know in detail. Those who have power "see" with Pratt's colonizers' gaze.

Government research also suggests similar perceptions from American citizens outside of Congress. The second report reveals similar perceptions by a sample of Americans and then contrasts these perceptions with collected data. In summation, the report states:

> This means that perceptions of rural America are centered on a series of dichotomies—rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is friendly but intolerant of outsiders and difference; and rural life is richer in community life, but epitomized by individuals struggling independently to make ends meet. (1)

The fact that these perceptions are not accurate when compared with the data gathered about rural America is highlighted in the report.

The misperceptions identified in these reports are also reflected in rural students' awareness of a disconnect between what rural life "really" is and how it is perceived by others. Recently, during the "passing" time between classes, a heated discussion began when a student who raises and shows hogs, and is an active member of the Future Farmers of America, began to verbalize his excitement about going to a national FFA conference. He was especially excited that he was going to be with people who would understand his farm circumstances immediately. As he began to complain about urbanites' misconceptions about farm life, several other students chimed in. They spoke together with great vigor for the remaining five minutes before class started. However, when I attempted to transition their discussion into a relevant topic during official class time, they were universally resistant. This class moment reinforces my belief that students from rural backgrounds already recognize and could use these dominant images of the lack, lag, and rosy past paradigm as jumping-off points, topoi to push back against, to isolate elements of, or to interrogate in the texts they read in their American literature.

Cultural Context, Popular Fiction, and Popular Texts

Finally, I trace Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's three representations, lack, lag, and rosy past, as topoi that appear in popular texts and public discourse. There are certainly numerous books that treat nonurban spaces with Pratt's colonizing eye. For example, Ian Frazier's *Great Plains* (1989) is a travelogue. The memoir traces the author's travels from the urban Eastern United States out into the West, a place that he first needs to define, to identify boundaries for, and then replicate for the readers of his book, complete with fascinating and little-known details. Frazier repeatedly identifies what is lacking in the landscape:

> I didn't pass a single place that looked as if it was in any way expecting me: no landscaped residential communities, no specialty sporting-goods stores, no gourmet delis offering many kinds of imported beers. Just grain silos, and flat, brown fields with one cow on them, and wheat fields, and telephone poles, and towns with four or six buildings and a "No U-Turn" sign at each end. (10)

Frazier's intended audience is primarily Eastern urbanites who can travel to this foreign space through his book. The book is littered with travelogue details, somewhat humorous adventures, and the author's wry voice, at once both enchanted with this landscape and distinctly separate from it. He was a traveler to an exotic place, whose representation he controls and reproduces in his memoir.

When my students read portions of Frazier's memoir, they seem to universally align themselves with Frazier, despite the fact that some of them are closer in their experiences to the people who inhabit his landscape. Conversation does not go willingly into a space where Frazier's depictions are questioned, despite my attempt to pull students in that direction. Clearly, my previous strategies have not been adequate to the task. Students comment on the funny characters, choosing not to share their familiarity with rural people or unable to separate themselves from the dominant culture's clearly preferred position.

Initially, I expected to find less marginalizing in the works of Wendell Berry, a well-known conservation advocate who encourages living in rural spaces in his texts. In his collection, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (2002), Berry locates "Agrarianism" within the conservation movement, both connecting with rural agricultural practices and arguing against diminishing the experience of life in rural or nonindustrial areas. However, after closer examination it is clear he lays out theoretical groundwork that reinforces the construction of rural places as lacking. Berry also uses a falsely constructed narrative. When he waxes poetic about the binary of woods and cultivated, domesticated fields, he omits previous inhabitants in order to perpetuate a metaphor of a pristine, untouched land. He chides the urban visitor to rural spaces who leaves beer cans and killed animals behind for being "the true American pioneer, perfectly at rest in his assumption that he is the first and the last whose inheritance and fate this place will ever be" (22). He refers to the way white settlers "undertook the privilege of the virgin abundance of this land. . . . And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest—the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways—and re-enter the woods" (26–27). Berry wants to create a vision of geographic space on which particular work reinforces hegemony, a power structure that simply does not reflect the reality that the land was occupied prior to white settlers. He reinforces the binary of domesticated space or empty woodlands, which forms the heart of his Agrarian construct. The world he builds fits his purposes, so it must erase Native Americans, women, and people of color who may have inhabited or currently inhabit the landscape.

The marginalization of the rural is familiar enough in the dominant culture that Osha Gray Davidson, author of *Broken Heartland* (1990), used the imagery as a certainty he could work against. He wrote:

> To most Americans, rural communities are just dim blurs alongside the gleaming superhighway that carries us into what we tell ourselves is an ever-brighter future. If we notice those blurs at all, it is usually to laugh at their quaintness, perhaps

> warmly à la writer and humorist Garrison Keillor, or to shake our heads at the backwardness of our unfortunate rural cousins. Few, however, slow down enough to allow the blurs to differentiate themselves into real people, in real communities, with real problems to be solved or ignored. Time has not forgotten Keillor's Lake Wobegon; we have. (Davidson 71)

Davidson's rural spaces are so missing, so lacking, that they are quite literally unseen. They are just hazy spots that flash by when one drives down a highway. This concerns me in this book because Davidson depicts my rural students' experiences as outside the normal, invisible in the happening of the world where power and decision-making take place. This seems a powerful message to my students to stay quiet because they are not important, not even worth noticing. And my observations up to this point suggest my students have learned this lesson all too well.

And to add another example of how lack, lag, and rosy past have become uncritically embedded in recent popular cultural representations of the rural, National Public Radio ran two stories on January 23, 2013, that focused on rural topics. The first was an exposé demonstrating tomato growers' challenges from Mexican tomato growers dumping their product on the American market at below-market prices. Gary Hufbauer, a senior fellow with the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, DC, pulled out a "rosy past" reference to make his point. He explained, "[T]he mental image of the little house on the prairie has most of us captivated in Florida" and he finishes the comparison between Florida's agribusiness industry by saying that "the little house on the prairie is a tomato grower, a sugar grower, or an orange grower—a small part of the economy, but a big part of the popular imagination" (qtd. in Robbins). Agribusiness is in no way similar to the small homesteaders depicted in the *Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, but the image works to Hufbauer's advantage and is readily accepted by the NPR audience. The second NPR piece reported on a dairy farmer cooperative in the Southeast United States that had actually become a milk monopoly, to the financial detriment of cooperative members. A lawsuit was filed, and in describing the details, NPR reporter Peggy Lowe wrote that "the deal makes

the milk industry icon Elsie the Cow look instead like Gordon Gekko." The urban-rural binary is clearly in play, and Lowe's comparison relies on an audience familiar with the mythologized vision of farming in order to complete her image.

In Michael Pollan's 2006 bestseller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Pollan attempts to follow food from the point of origin to the grocery store or restaurant. Interestingly, the general public's misunderstanding of farming is so profound that Pollan has to spend the first four chapters of his book, eighty-five pages, explaining the physical and economic realities of current farming practices. He relied on the expected representations of lack, lag, and rosy past, and then used them as pivot points to show the difference between the imagined farm and the actual farm. For example, after noting that each Iowa farmer supports 129 Americans, Pollan continues, "it can no longer support the four who live on it: The Naylor farm survives by the grace of Peggy Naylor's paycheck (she works for a social services agency in Jefferson) and an annual subsidy payment from Washington D.C." (34). It was as if Pollan had revealed a hidden world, completely unknown to nonrural people but vital to their very survival. The separation of urban and rural, to the detriment of the rural, is the structure against which students will need to learn to navigate if they are to shift their position from the margins to full participants in the public sphere, and for this project, in the academic classroom.

Next Steps

The purpose of this chapter has been to move from an initial question—"Why didn't my rural students want to share their expert knowledge in a college-level American literature survey course?"—to a possible answer and course of action for developing a critical rural pedagogy. From composition studies and literary theorists, I began with knowledge of critical pedagogy and how representations in texts reflect power structures. I discovered that traditional notions of critical pedagogy, though a useful starting place, were not sufficient when working with rural community college students. The basic structure of oppressor and oppressed,

as defined by Freire, does not operate cleanly when the students who are marginalized, or oppressed, see themselves as members of the dominant culture, and therefore, not marginalized. At the same time, there are students of color and other marginalized groups in rural community colleges, and their struggle to minimize their rural connection because it is of lower status is complicated by their multiple layers of oppression, as defined by Freire. Further, my classroom presents a highly diverse situation, where individual students have differing amounts of wealth, resources, experiences beyond the community, and degree of connection to the rural community in which my campus is situated. This information provided me with a need to look more closely at how a critical rural pedagogy might be constructed, which will be discussed in Chapter 2. But let it suffice here to say that my conception of a critical rural pedagogy must take into account the multiple positions of power student occupy simultaneously, as well as the rich variation in students who are included in my definition of "rural students."

I also explored how the work of Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, who identified repeated uses of rural representation that foregrounded this geographic location and the people who inhabit it as lacking, lagging behind, or representatives of a rosy past, might be useful in this endeavor. In order to use these representations in the classroom, I needed to be sure they were repeated with their cultural and political implications with enough frequency that students can identify, recognize, and speak back against them. However, in order for a rural critical pedagogy to be useful at my community college, which has students from multiple locations and backgrounds, it needs to include techniques and topics that will benefit all students. With this in mind, I also included an examination of written texts from multiple genres to see if lack, lag, or rosy past representations appear consistently, frequently, and across time. Since these three representations do rise to that level, I can use them as topoi, through which all students can talk back critically against texts in American literature. Students with rural experiences can serve as experts, guides for the class, enriching inquiry into the construction and implications of representations of the rural when they appear in texts their American literature survey class covers. The power

of the repeated, culturally dominant imagery negates the direct experiences of the people who live in rural spaces, explaining in part why my rural students silence themselves rather than identifying themselves as rural or experts in rural issues. Lack, lag, and rosy past have traction in historical and contemporary literature and public discourse. They are used uncritically and problematically in scholarly works, in government documents, and in multiple works of literature, memoirs, and popular texts.

In the next chapter, I will explore how others have approached these concerns. First, I will need to identify rural literacies and the extent to which they are defined and given room in the academic world to determine how they are foregrounded or buried in classrooms where rural students are present. Second, I will explore rural pedagogies, looking for use of those literary practices in academic settings as a way to foreground the development of specific pedagogies for my American literature survey courses.

Sharon Mitchler argues for a reconfiguration of critical pedagogy to empower and engage American literature students at rural community colleges. She constructs an intersectional pedagogy that draws on feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and conceptualizations of rural places and builds on the work of various other scholars. This approach addresses the multiple positions of power and marginalization rural students occupy, often concurrently. Critical rural pedagogy actively seeks to engage rural students to bring their lived experiences to college, and not only to individual classrooms, but to other forms of higher education, as community college students transfer on to university settings. The book includes activities and examples to model classroom practice.

Drawing on her experiences in her American literature survey course at Centralia College, a small, rural, community college, Mitchler:

- Offers an insightful and effective response to lack of engagement and empowerment of rural students in the English classroom.
- Outlines a variation of critical pedagogy that explicitly addresses the multiple, concurrent positions of power and marginalization that rural students may occupy.
- Empowers instructors to enact scaffolding that empowers rural students to enter conversations about classroom texts in ways that connect to rural life.
- Provides sample activities and written assignments that model critical rural pedagogy in the American literature classroom.

Sharon Mitchler is a professor of English and humanities at Centralia College. Mitchler teaches a range of undergraduate courses in composition, literature, humanities, ethics, and film. Her current research focuses on critical rural pedagogy and teaching for transfer. Mitchler's scholarship has been published in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and *Composition Studies*. She is a former national chair of the Two-Year College English Association.

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