

Towards Using Critical Rural Pedagogy with Rural Community College Students in
Undergraduate American Literature Classes

Sharon J. Mitchler

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Reading Committee:

Candice Rai, Chair

Robert Abrams

Eva Cherniavsky

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Sharon J. Mitchler

University of Washington

Abstract

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Sharon J. Mitchler

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Candice Rai
English Department

This dissertation 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 perspective of 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.

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Figure 1. Centralia College, central campus, 23 October 2014.

Introduction

This project first developed as a direct result of my experiences and interactions with students in my American literature classes at Centralia College, a rural community college in Washington State. Located halfway between the large urban centers of Seattle, WA, and

Portland, OR, Centralia is in the middle of a vast rural, often heavily forested, landscape. The photo above was taken on central campus in the afternoon, when most of the 2,000 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 8:00am and 12:00pm, and then again after 5:00pm until about 9:00pm, when the night classes run. There are also numerous students taking classes through online and hybrid modalities who access the campus resources, faculty, and staff through the internet. The campus is very small, occupying three blocks by two blocks. 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 to “provide to our greater community an ever-increasing number of educated people having the knowledge and skills to become lifelong learners and productive and responsible citizens, more capable of realizing their highest human potential” (“Mission”), most of the faculty members at Centralia College teach in several related disciplines, although they each have 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 who I initially defined as “rural” were nearly invisible in class discussions. I expected their rural backgrounds would 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 who’s family had significant land holding and was already “known” for ties to agriculture, would proclaim this information, but only in private writing to me. Generally, they were hesitant to show their expertise on rural perspectives. 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 all rural students are exclusively agriculturally based, with the student serving as a representative of a relatively homogenous culture. My definition was dead 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 as a person who had direct experience with farming or ranching, only when they saw and heard me refer to my experiences growing up in a rural Iowa first. It was almost a secret, which they would only share with another “rural-identified” person who was hiding out in the academic world. It was as if this aspect of their identity/experience needed to be minimized. They did not want their rural backgrounds to make their classmates think less of them or to think that they 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 academic classroom. I was blinded by my own stereotyped definition of rural students so much that I assumed rural students would be more likely to share on a rural campus, not less. I assumed 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 did they 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 project. My dissertation makes a case for theorizing rural literacy and how 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 rarifying what it means to identify as rural.

My project is one attempt to address this disconnect between my expectations, some of my student's decision 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. All my students are rural. For the purpose of this dissertation, students who are attending a rural community college are rural. They may have life experiences that reflect farming, 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. They 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 clarify 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 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 critical pedagogy, I was not as successful as I hoped in providing an American literature classroom space that encouraged and supported rural students in developing their analysis 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.

Introduction to the Project

There are several prominent concerns that I address in this dissertation. First, I needed to find a way to conceptualize a pedagogy that students could use to bring their life experiences and expertise to the study of language. Secondly, although I was using critical pedagogy in my classes, it was not operating as successfully as I 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 resolve and clarify my own misconceptions and perceptions as I approached defining rural students. Finally, it is important to me that this work is 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. Due to 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 is 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* (2008), and Bruce McComisky and Cynthia Ryan's edited collection, *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices* (2003) are three recent texts that 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 scholars have 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.

My dissertation 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, like a case study, in my dissertation 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 dissertation 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 also 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 to empower students to both participate more fully and to take a great degree of ownership and connection to their studies. For me, empowering students means helping them see themselves as legitimate participants in academic conversations. Empowered students understand that their experiences have value and that their contributions enhance the discussions and activities. They recognize that they “belong” in higher education and engage. 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 critique 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) that argues individuals writing about the rural have built a version of the rural that suits their own needs and biases, and their edited collection *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy* (2012) offers perspectives on literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy in rural communities. My dissertation 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 students' written rhetorical skills, I assert that when grappling with these 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 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 build moral character. I examined how these cultural narratives 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 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, Hogg and Schell *Rural* 1). My project 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 connected to the work of previous scholars, as well as 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 vs. 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 built a pedagogy that makes use of students' awareness, critique, and strategic deployment of these topoi. These include: Henry Nash Smith, who maps 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 through 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 dissertation, I explore how students from rural spaces can 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.

My study 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.

Core Research Questions

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 control, focus, or define experiences. Part of the aim of my proposed critical rural pedagogy asks 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 expand their critical discussions to also ask students to pointedly locate themselves, their experiences and their surroundings within the rhetorical structures and topoi that they are reading that pertain to the rural. When instructors do not have first-hand 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 dissertation 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 might I develop a critical pedagogy, using composition theories of language, power and place that help to build on and enhance students' rhetorical skills to deploy in the interrogation and intervention of these texts by students in a rural classroom setting and empower these students to use their expertise in rural life as a critical focus when examining texts? 3- How might a current theoretical structure based in topoi of lack, lag and rosy past be deployed in literature complicate the ways students define rural peoples and places, and their relationships to other American citizens?

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 literacy 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, and theories that use students' locally lived experiences as the basis for building knowledge and skills may inform work with rural students at the college level. 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 students in the world of higher education. According to the 2005 Two-Year College English Association Facts and Data Report, partially funded by a 2004 CCCC's Research Initiative grant, in the 2000-1 academic year, "52% of all two-year college students are first generation college goers" and in the 1999-2000 academic year, "89% of all two-year college students are defined as...nontraditional, compared with 58% of public four-year students" (Two-Year College 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 as a public, rural serving, medium institution for federal Stafford loans. According to the most recent 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 the citizen so 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. (Centralia College 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 Paulo Freire in critical pedagogy precisely because he calls for the empowerment of those 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 and voicelessness. I had hoped by using critical pedagogy my students would learn to speak back to power. Also, from

Freire, I hoped to reinforce the idea that students are a focus of their own learning – because this allows students to overcome their culturally constructed ideas that negate their rural experiences in the academy. However, I discovered that my use of critical pedagogy was flawed.

But why critical pedagogy? As Joe L. Kincheloe explains in his 2008 introduction to critical pedagogy, “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 fact that:

critical pedagogy is...grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality, concerned 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, concerned with the margins of society, the experiences of and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation, attuned to the importance of complexity – understands complexity theory – in constructing a rigorous and transformative education. (10)

Kincheloe points out working through texts using multiple or changing lenses is important because “Idiosyncratic 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 are both marginalized and in positions of

power, as I discuss more deeply in Chapter 2, and 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

While I interrogate the concepts of the “rural” and “rural literacy” in much greater detail in Chapter 2, below 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” reveal more than a standard for mutually understood label used in conversation. The concerns that underlie this project 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, languages, and experiences in the rural space currently. 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 challenge, these struggles.

However, despite Comer’s call, the reality of defining the rural is that there are multiple definitions, often 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 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” (United States). 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 that number rural. The U.S. government calls the rural a place without enough people to warrant its own definition. 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” (United States). 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; “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” (United States). Again, the Census Bureau defines urban and then rural so whatever is not urban is rural by default. 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” (United States). The name suggests a hierarchical structure with 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 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 United States Department of Agriculture [USDA] picks up terminology that foregrounds what is missing in rural areas, using a sliding scale that designates 0-3 metro, 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” (United States). Strikingly, within their definition, the USDA references 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 that 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 each other 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 circumstances of 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 definition, I widened my own definition of rural students. For this dissertation, 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 wide ages, 14 or 15 up through mid-60's, come from multiple ethnic groups, speak English often, but just as often have a home language or two that is not English, are from a range of economic classes, social identities, abled-ness, 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 and the business community after completing associate degrees.

On Rural Literacy

There is tremendous contention around the term rural literacy, and my dissertation clarifies the existence of that gap in current knowledge and practice. The use of the term “rural literacy” is important in this dissertation 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, each of the scholars I consulted rooted their definitions from disparate perspectives, leading to a multitude of literacies that are 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 this term, as it is currently being used. To paraphrase just a few of these scholars, rural literacy has been defined as “literate skills needed to live in rural areas by Brandt (qtd in Donehower, Hogg and Schell *Reclaiming* xiii); as a way to “read” rural spaces and peoples (Edmondson 63-66); or as missing memorization skills in elementary school children (Petrosky 65); or an expertise in using resources available to rural peoples (Hautecoeur 9-19); and finally, as the ways women in Appalachia maintain their nonacademic dialect when writing in academic situations (Sohn 5).

I did not discover a consensus in content, structure, purpose, or object for the term “rural literacy.” However, it is clear 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 the urban creator’s 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 utilize 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 for me to both empower students and engage them in classroom interactions, in this dissertation I have theorized a variation of critical pedagogy that is more likely to engage rural students. I have called this 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 teaching strategies. The discussion of pedagogy that specifically targets rural students also tends to homogenize students into a single cultural or ethnic group, which 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, Hass and 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 (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 “cosmopolites [...] a class of transient exotics” (Zencey16), who are not in a position to understand the value of connection to a specific place because they themselves have moved away from their place of origin. In short, my project 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.

Towards a Critical Rural Pedagogy

Given a definition of the rural as constituted of diverse people, practices, cultures, and

geographies, this dissertation offers a conception 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, but situated vocabulary and language patterns, which 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. Paulo Freire’s thoughts on the teacher-student relationship, along with his criticisms of education as a bank, rather than a transformative experience (72), provides 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.

A composition theorist who provides deeper insights on the distinctions between academic language and the language practices students bring with them is David Bartholomae, who laid important groundwork when he pointed out the difficulties students face in learning academic discourse when entering higher education. 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. So, in a critical rural pedagogy, I create curricular ways to include students’ rural experiences, make links between their experience and the representations of the rural in literature, and develop 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 vs. 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, with a powerful reaction to their situation in college classrooms. My project 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 maintain 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 references.

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 as marginalized and Othered. The persist and dominant representations of the rural, which foreground what is missing, what is lagging behind, or a connection 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 the texts. I develop these ideas more fully throughout the dissertation, but a short example follows. 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.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I address 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 an important goal 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 representational rural patterns 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 for, but are also ideally suited topoi, structuring the tensions that exist around rural representations in texts and the structure to help students argue back, or complicate these representations.

In Chapter 2, I explore how rural literacies currently in the culture are, or more frequently, are not utilized in current pedagogy used with rural students. I also examine rural pedagogy, also a contended term, and how it has been used by teachers, policy makers, 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, current pedagogy makes scant use of students' literacies, neither 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, which I will discuss more fully in Chapter 2, include: a critical rural pedagogy needs to encourage and support students when they use their previous rural language experiences; help students develop tactics and skills to reveal the biases that limit representations of the rural; and recognize 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 I have 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 three American literature authors, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost and Flannery O’Conner, 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 that are to be kept as idealized locations. I chose these three 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 that 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. Finally, in Chapter 4, I conclude with lessons that I have learned from this project and make suggestions about the next steps that I and others can take in further developing critical rural pedagogy.

In sum, this dissertation 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 perspective of 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 1.0: Dominant Rural Representations Possible use as Topoi

As described in my introduction, I explore the rural representations in American literature texts and how these representations, created by authors for their own purposes, serve to distance rural students from connecting with the academic world. I believe these representations, when viewed through the lens of critical pedagogy, and more specifically, 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 that 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.

1.1 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 2,000 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, to question the imagery of the poem, both in purpose and 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 freshmen and sophomores, 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 15 or 16 year olds, have come to the college after completing their homeschooling programs.

My oldest students are typically in their late 50s, 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 Hispanic 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 were not at the top of their list of priorities. As college freshman 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 over simplifications, 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, in order 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 from the ways the poem depicts the rural and their experienced 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 three and four of Emerson’s poem, “The heifer that lows in the upland farm, / Far-heard, lows not thine ear to charm” (qtd in McMichael and Leonard 581) would provide material that students could relate to and that could open a critical conversation. Persons who have worked with cows would see 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 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 a possible parallel with students’ lives is not constituted as a negative, in a Freshman level 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’ lived experiences of rural places and the constructed rural world they encountered in the poem provides a starting structure for a critical examination of the entire poem, including the historical context in which 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, connections to dominant movements in poetic theory and cultural attitudes are all available for further exploration once students grasp the fact that all 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 my students from the local area would notice that Emerson's representation did not match their lived 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 non-response initially, but became more concerned when this same pattern 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 qtd in McMichael and Leonard). 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 discuss when we parsed the description of the Van Tassel farm in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," an impossibly productive and valuable homestead. My attempts to draw them into 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 by providing students with a way to push back against dominant representations through the use techniques developed out of critical pedagogy, students would be able to empower themselves and see their place in the academic world. My intentions may have been well placed, but clearly my execution and understanding 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, 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 context 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 its [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" (Kincheloe, *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 in rural experiences, issues and perspectives, 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 dissertation and 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 the 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 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 Batholomae's work on the need for students entering the university system to learn to use unfamiliar discourses that did not correspond to their previous language use, both in their homes and K-12 academic experiences. He points out "the student

needs to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do” in multiple academic genres and discourses (Bartholomae 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 between 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 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 of texts that have rural imagery in a college classroom.

1.1.1 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 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 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 who I would classify as having “rural” experience would hide that background. I had considered students who have lived in rural areas, or 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 be currently living in a rural setting, but they have grown up with a different set of expectations for family, for their connection to community, and 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 burst of time, for example, a class period. However, I came to realize additionally, 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 with 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 dissertation that my own understanding of rural student 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. For the purpose of this dissertation, 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 often occupy multiple positions of power, often at the same time. Many 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. They are also different from students at suburban and urban college campuses because they can call on their perspective as a person who is in the rural when confronting the representations of the rural they encounter. Their daily interactions in a rural space give them a chance to use an awareness of perception heightened by their everyday lives.

Each student has 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, WA. The high school serves 950 students in grades nine through twelve (“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 twelve (“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 Associates of Arts degree with an intent to transfer on to a university after two years. She lived with her parent 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 for going to school. Raising rabbits was a passion her, and she had advanced from simply raising rabbits to judging rabbits at the local and state fair levels. She travelled across the state extensively and developed a large network within the bunny world. She also had travelled 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 similar 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 also complicated and multi-layered.

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 classes' deconstruction 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 "interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and marginalization" (Kincheloe, *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 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 lived 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 their work ties marginalization to geographic locations in ways that might also be extended to theories about rural students, but interestingly, these theorists tend to also 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 recent examples

include Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005), David Fleming's *City of Rhetoric* (2008), and Bruce McComisky 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 an oppositional location, and Fleming calls to 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 sphere: *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" (Fleming 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 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 minimal 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 that 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 all solely marginalized. As I have previously pointed out, they often occupy multiple positions of power and marginalization at the same time. My project addresses the need to better serve rural students, with a special focus on rural students in freshman and sophomore level American literature courses.

There are additional concerns when applying critical pedagogy to rural community college students. Critical pedagogy developed from Paul Freire's desire to empower Brazil's oppressed peasant students more than 40 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 diverse students populations. First amongst the difficulties is the fact that my rural community college students identify with the dominant culture, those Freire labels the oppressors. Most of my 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 relevancy 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 but stands a foundational touchstone.

Critical pedagogy does not always empower all students. bell hooks has repeatedly and frequently stated that “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 last 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. And, for my project, the situation becomes even muddier because my rural students occupy 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.

hook’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 into racialized conversation that marks them out as the oppressor. She notes that “characterizations [by professors of white students] contribute to static, stereotypic 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; white students in a “multicultural critical pedagogy” become essentialized and politicized in ways that are destructive to the goals of critical pedagogy, and secondly, 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 Cesar Augusto Rossato 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 (163-165). They raise serious concerns about how critical

pedagogy may need an oppressor to operate, and that students who are not marginalized or oppressed must, by default, fall into the oppressor category (165-168). Additionally, students who are not aligned with power have to declare themselves disempowered, marginal, and oppressed, which is perhaps equally alienating to some. Friere'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 to not only recognize their privileged status, but to act as agents in concert with students who have not had the benefits of privilege.

Additionally, Allen and Rosatto point out situations where the powerless student aligns him or herself with the dominant culture to such a degree that "oppressed student might not even believe they are oppressed" (168). Allen and Rosatto'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 manner? 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 that is 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, Allen and Rossatto's 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 the situation on my rural campus, where nearly all professors are white, with a nearly 50/50 split between the genders, and the student body is overwhelmingly white.

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 not “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 multi-player 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 either the position of oppressor or oppressed to this student is to nullify a portion of the students’ lived 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 "not to 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 imbedded 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 attained.

Trainor's work, as mentioned earlier, suggests that is it possible to provide a third position for these students. They may legitimately occupy both the oppressed and the oppressor's position. 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 to have these students blend 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 each

other in the classroom. A critical rural pedagogy needs to help all students orient themselves within the broader systems and structure. 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 on 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 side step 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 hook'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 outwards 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, be responsive and responsible for their actions and orientations in the broadest context possible. Traditional critical pedagogy, then, 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 strongest markers of marginalization are based in 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 professors consider their own reactions to student resistance (para 4). Instead of legitimizing an instructor's response based in a perceived lack of some ability, insight or level of maturity by students, Reid explores that 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 students into a particular political point of view, or worldview that privileges those who are marginalized. Regardless of the motivation for this move, Reid suggests that when students resist strongly, 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, it also suggests 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 rural knowledge to

classroom discussions.

Clearly, 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 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.

1.2 The Topoi: Commonplace Representations of the Rural in Dominant Culture

The approach I will take in this project is to begin with already established formulations of what the rural is that circulate in the social imagination and what the rural represents that are replicated in American literary texts and in the ancillary materials that precede these texts in American literature anthologies. The imagery of the rural that exists 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 with rural students' experiences, to build patterns of argument that can break down these ideas more critically. These representations are commonplaces, both concepts, symbols, or keywords connected to the ideals of a "rural" world, and these representations can serve as formulas for analyzing and dissecting these images, which will give rural students more agency than they currently experience in my classroom.

I hope to repurpose those dominant representations as basis for resistance, a strategy I first saw enacted in critical pedagogy. As Graff and 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, *topoi* are "a mental 'place' where an argument can be found, or *topoi* may be the argument itself" (Aristotle 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 understood 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," a perspective to challenge on its face in order to reveal the more complicated reality of the rural that my students have lived and understand. Because my students have life 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 the point of contrast with the rural that students know directly through their experiences.

I understand 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 Crowley and 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 of the term in her forthcoming book, in which *topoi* are also “the reified tools, materials conditions and mechanisms (objects, things, spaces, genres, bodily habits, and other materialities) that constrain, enact, generate, circulate, and mobilize salient rhetorical structures.” *Topoi* are not merely stock discursive structures to be used. They rise out of specific conditions, contain contradictory worldviews and beliefs, and provide a space for interaction with contentious ideas that are alive at this moment in the culture, or in this case, a specific sub-culture.

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,

topoi provide not only the means by which to deconstruct the power structures, political agendas, and cultural impulses that are embedded in them, but also the means to speak back, to create rhetorical responses that have salience and power. Additionally, by harnessing 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, enacting 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 enacted with rural students in my classes, it is important to clearly determine the prevalence of these particular images and attitudes on 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 lived experiences in a rural environment, to question the purpose of rural representations in texts for the author, for the reader of the document, and for other groups who may have either political or cultural reasons for promoting specific views of the rural in literature. As Rai, Cintron, 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 again, 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, to include 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 dissertation, keying in on three repeated, general, and common constructions of the rural may help students learn to recognize the over-generalization and political hierarchy that is imposed by these representations of the rural.

The work of Donehower, Hogg and Schell on rural literacies within composition studies, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter Two, might be used strategically in a classroom that aims to use the lived 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” (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 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 expression, and the full range of possible cultural meanings that are associated with this topos should be included in a critical rural pedagogy.

In this dissertation, I look at how these concepts play out when framed as topos, 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 topos, 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 that reflect ideological dispositions, which may or may not have clear connections with rural life. As topos, 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 behind in their cultural and economic development, or as places that represent an idealized, and perhaps fictionalized past for urbanites (Donehower, Hogg and Schell, *Rural* 1). Because topos 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 believe my project can use these topos 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.

1.3 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 by those who do not live and work in rural areas 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 vs. 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, lack 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: Matthieson, Brickhouse, Bredahl, Smith, and Marx. I will follow that with the work of urban and social planners with designs on the rural, Popper and Popper. Next, scholars who explore Geographic theory and writing, Bruchner and Hsuan Hsu, Turner, Abrams, Pratt, and Batteau are glossed. Lag, 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 several Kellogg reports for Congress. Finally, I will include a scan of literature/memoir/popular texts by Frazier, Berry, Davidson, NPR, and Pollan. It is not my intention to use these specific texts in the classroom as part of this dissertation, but I will be looking closely at the ways the representations of lack, lag and rosy past, and how rural spaces are controlled in text by outsiders occurs repeatedly, across genres in order to validate using 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 that is 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 each other 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. Having these students in a classroom should enable all students to 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 images in scholarly texts, political documents, and popular fiction. The repeated use of these images, 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, which I will focus on for the remainder of this project.

1.3.1 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 present of rural topoi. It is important for this project that I demonstrate a repeated and common use of lack, lag, and rosy past as they occur at time 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 the works of 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 Anna Brickhouse pushes back against the general creation of a dominant white male canon in her text, *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, to include: us (Anglo-Saxon) vs. them (native, Spanish, not with northern Europe (4), and the national identity- literature of the U.S. (9) when held against colonialism, slavery and indigenous “removals.” She does not, however, include a rural / urban binary or distinction amongst her critical turns, which suggests that not only is the rural of minimal importance, but it is not part of the development of the nineteenth-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 1800’s.

A. Carl Bredahl, Jr. 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 Easterner’s and Westerner’s 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 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, to not challenge, to not question, and to stay safe in an environment that may be hostile to their success if they privilege the rural or non-urban 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 her 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 the nineteenth-century American Society - a collective representation, a poetic idea (that Tocqueville noted in the early 1830's) that defined the promise of American life....the 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 the 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 is constructed in direct response to the industrialization of urban areas lays the theoretical groundwork on which Donehower, Hogg, and Schell later point out rural places become locations for only “lack, lag and a rosy past” (*Rural* 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 references both Thomas Jefferson’s conception of the yeoman farmer and St. John Crevecoeur’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 reference 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 “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 often have 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 enact 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 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 sparsely settled” (491-2). 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 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, altering rural locations in text to meet particular needs is not disputed by literary theorists. My work using topoi to reveal motives and power structures within texts with students when they analyze 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 Bruckner and Hsuan 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... democratic individualism had been continually forged" (14). The editors 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 concurs with the supposition that physical locations are malleable when re-created by authors and artists in his recent book *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (2004). 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 historic period, "what emerges is a drift in concrete material possibility through ongoing mutation in the socio-cultural mechanisms where by 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 the works of Abrams, Bruckner 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 writer's 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 critical pedagogy for use

with rural students when they are confronting images created in their American literature textbook.

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 200 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 multi-state 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 creation of 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 the rural. When the rural is overgeneralized into one or more of three general topoi, there are the 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 later in my dissertation 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 to me because, in this dissertation, I will explore how students from rural spaces can 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 non-rural creator of rural representations, while concurrently these same students are cast among the oppressed, in Freire’s binary. The assumption that the urban is normal at the same time creates a tool through which rural students can work. Perhaps, taking a cue from critical pedagogy, there is a way to create assignments and opportunities for students to re-write 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 counter narratives.

Talking back is a pathway to creating more nuanced responses to texts in American literature. By talking back students control 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 into their critical reactions and responses to texts that are held in esteem due to their appearance 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 situation. 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 non-productive and empty, students might begin to push back by identifying what is in the rural landscape, 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 each other. 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 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 texts works that capture the colonizing gaze of the authors when describing the rural.

1.3.2 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 space, including farmland, ranchland, and public grazing tracts are defined and organized by governmental and quasi-governmental agencies. The National Park Service, the Farm Bureau, the Department of Agriculture, and even the U.S. 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, 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 regulations, 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 U.S. 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," 16 of whom were Democratic House members and Senators and 10 who were Republican House members and Senators (2). The second report,

“Perceptions of Rural America” (December 2002) was developed from “242 in-depth interview of rural, urban and suburban Americans in several regions of the country” (1). The aim of both of these reports was to build a body of data to discover “perceptions of rural America” by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Congressional Perspectives 2).

The perspectives identified in the report of the legislators 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 Unites States in solutions to these problems because the rural economy needs to improve, when compared with the urban and suburban economy, and rural areas have fewer representatives in Congress, equating to 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 senators and congressmen/women 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. 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. (“Perceptions” 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 the use of these images in the texts they read in their American literature.

1.3.3 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 recent books that treat non-urban spaces with Pratt's colonizing eye. 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, which 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 Frazier's 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 non-industrial areas. However, after closer examination it is clear he lays out theoretical groundwork that reinforces the construction of rural places that are lacking. Berry also uses a falsely constructed narrative. When he waxes poetic about the binary of woods or cultivated, domesticated fields, he omits previous inhabitants in order to perpetuate a pristine, untouched metaphor. 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 how 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 a 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 in to 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 and this project because Davidson depicts my rural students' experiences as outside the normal, invisible in the happening of the world where power and decision making exist. 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 with 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 D.C., pulled out a rosy past reference to make his point. He explained, "...the 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 with "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” (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 Southeastern 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 “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 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, 85 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 non-rural 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.

1.4 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, was 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. 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 students 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 for my project. 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 the 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, memoir 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.

Chapter 2.0 Toward Pedagogy that Utilizes Rural Literacies in the College Classroom

In this chapter I explore how to build a critical rural pedagogy that enables rural students to draw on their experiences and expertise as rural students, specifically in my community college, and to engage American literature texts, but with broader relevance. Ideally, this critical rural pedagogy will enable students to engage in the texts and bring their voices to the critiques as they develop and create richer, more complicated discussions of language and its use in these texts. It is my hope to show these students that they have an important contribution to make as participants in higher education. I also expect that a critical rural pedagogy would be useful to instructors and professors who are working with students in other rural community colleges. I am concerned that rural students are reluctant to use their rural expertise in my American literature survey course, and in the world of higher education in general. Along with rural students' reticence to engage their expertise, I am concerned that most students over-simplify rural peoples and places, and their relationships to other American citizens, and this leads to a flattening of their critical work in the American literature classroom. American literature texts that foreground rural people and places would seem a logical location for inserting means and structures to change this pattern.

As mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, I tentatively define rural literacies as specific knowledge built from living in rural spaces, to include written skills, social understanding, and knowledge of places, which are central to living successfully in a rural environment. This is a problematic definition because it is built on a fluid understanding of what rural spaces are, but it will serve as a starting point. As discussed in Chapter 1, the rural is not consistently defined in public discourse; it is sometimes delimited by geography, or by population, or by the ways that it

is “not” urban. Additionally, the students who inhabit the rural space in my community college are not a homogenous set, but reflect a range in ages, socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences. For my students, rural literacies, and the extent to which their experiences are foregrounded or buried in academic classrooms is important because I want to leverage their rural literacies to help connect them to the classroom, and to their place in the larger world of higher education. In this chapter, I want to explore how rural literacies can be used strategically to enrich the teaching of American literature texts, especially when the term rural literacy is already highly contested. Rural students’ literacy practices needs to be part of a thoughtful construction of classroom activities and tasks. A critical rural pedagogy should include a set of classroom practices or guidelines that provide ways for students to enact their understandings of the rural world when they are examining texts. In my class, American literature, I need to not only be aware of rural literacy, but call on students to use those practices. Later, I provide a brief overview of rural pedagogies in order to reveal the problems I hope to ameliorate for students in my American literature courses and other such classes taught in rural settings. Finally, I lay out the theoretical groundwork for a critical rural pedagogy that: 1) aims to accept and problematize students’ use of language around their rural experiences; 2) gives students an opportunity to develop tactics and skills for critical work that builds on their rural knowledge; and 3) contextualizes rural students as both within the dominant culture and marginalized. I plan to develop a critical pedagogy to deploy in the interrogation of texts by students in a rural classroom setting and empower these students to use their rural expertise as a critical focus when examining texts.

Vignette: The Silenced Student

In the fall of 2010, I was invited to present at the Washington Community College

Humanities Association. This annual conference had been a part of my professional development for over a decade, and I felt familiar with the faculty who generally attended, usually 80 -100 two-year college professors from multiple disciplines in the humanities. In the past, my presentations typically focused on sharing best practices, collaborating with other faculty outside my discipline, and sharing conversations around our subjects, students, and pedagogy. So, I decided this conference would be an appropriate venue to test out concepts that undergird this dissertation. Specifically, I wanted to discuss the unquestioned “normativity” of urban / suburban representations that then puts the rural into the “abnormal” category, creating a perception for students from rural backgrounds of being outsiders in the academy. I also wanted to share Donehower, Hogg and Schells’ summary of the three major conceptions of the rural, as places of lack, lag, or a land of the rosy past. I expected that this group, with its critical stance and knowledge of both community college classrooms and community college students, might make me aware of strengths and flaws as I developed my theoretical approaches to engaging rural students in American literature survey courses.

This audience should have been especially attuned to students similar to those at Centralia College. I wanted to determine whether my initial concerns about how rural students might silence themselves due to the dominant culture’s marginalization were on track. I hoped that feedback from colleagues would help me create a more nuanced understanding of my concerns about how to draw more complex and complicated analysis of texts with my rural students. Other community college instructors seemed the most useful audience to help me begin developing a critical rural pedagogy that would operate more effectively with students who don’t see themselves as marginalized, but, I was more and more convinced, acted as people with less power and status in the academic world due to their geographically and culturally influenced

experiences. Specifically, I hoped a more targeted pedagogy that foregrounds rural students' concerns might help me intervene to alter a perceived knowledge/power imbalance and encourage students to bring their rural experiences into classroom discussion and textual analysis in myriad ways that they find valuable and meaningful.

My presentation, entitled "Lost in the Fields: Representations of the Rural in American Literature" was well attended, with fifteen community college faculty members in the room. Additionally, I was pleased to discover that because the conference started on Friday and was held on the campus of Cascadia Community College, ten undergrad students were also present. I believe they were enticed into attending with extra credit and a writing assignment by at least one of the Cascadia English faculty. My presentation began with the assertion that students who come to higher education from small towns and rural areas recognize established binaries. By the time I arrived at the third binary, urban and suburban = well educated (accompanied with photos of a university, students in a large library, graduation) rural = not well educated (one room school house, Montezuma Iowa Future Farmers of America students in an antiquated gym with blue corduroy jackets on), I had noted one student seemed to be paying particular attention. The student leaned forward in the desk, nodding his head in agreement at particular moments.

Later, he turned to look at each person talking during the question and answer period after the main presentation. The student also wore a plaid shirt, identical to those for sale at Tractor Supply and a pair of Carhartt boots. I presumed that this student came from a rural, and, perhaps, actively agricultural, background. As the presentation wound down, one of the faculty members from Cascadia asked whether I had heard from rural students in response to my assertions, and if so, what had they thought, and then the Cascadia professor turned directly to this student and asked the student, "what do rural students think?" To my horror and surprise, I

witnessed exactly the Othering and marginalization of a rural student about which I had been theorizing. The student's physical reaction was striking. The student quickly leaned back in the chair, pulled in arms and legs close to the body, and looked down, then at other students, and finally up at me. The student did not look back at the professor who had posed the question. The student was silent. Calling attention and labeling this student as rural had been enough to cause the student to retreat.

This student's body language was identical to the response I had witnessed repeatedly when students from a visible minority group on campus had been asked to speak for an entire group in the past. An uncomfortable, yet familiar moment was playing out yet again during my presentation. I was reminded, for example, that despite my past efforts at classroom management on my own small campus, I have witnessed a single Muslim student asked to speak for all Muslims, a student of color asked to speak for all students of color, a younger student asked to speak for all young students, an older adult student asked to speak for all adult students, and a veteran asked to speak for all veterans. In the past though, these requests had come from other students, not a teaching colleague who I assumed would be more sensitive to the consequences of asking any one person to represent a large group, especially a marginalized group. Before, I had been in my own classroom, with some degree of influence for next steps and classroom culture, but now, during the presentation, a professor, an authority figure, had clearly perceived of the student as a representative of a foreign, exotic outsider group. And, more surprisingly, the other faculty members in the presentation audience turned to look at the student as if he had been invisible to them until the person asking the question had "outed" the rural student.

It appeared that my theorized concerns about rural students choosing to silence

themselves were being blatantly enacted right in front of me as I witnessed this student positioned to represent a marginalized group, rural students. Despite rural students' desire to attach themselves to the dominant culture, clearly, this student responded as a person without power, exactly the opposite of what I hope for my students. It is my desire to provide opportunities in the classroom that will help students recognize their importance in the academic world, and that their life experiences as rural students are valid and important in discussions of American literature (but I want to do so in a manner that avoids the discomfort and alienation that the student described above experienced at my talk). I emerged from the conference with a renewed sense that I was on the right track in wanting to develop a more effective version of critical pedagogy, a version that takes into account the complicated hierarchy rural students do not willingly recognize but are subjected to, to empower my rural students in the classroom and perhaps to help build their confidence as people with important ideas to share in the academy. It appeared that students with rural life experiences have been overlooked. In the most extreme examples, rural students may have learned to become invisible in a college classroom.

2.1 Defining Rural Literacy

In their second book, *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy Rhetoric and Pedagogy* (2012), Donehower, Hogg and Schell defer to Deborah Brandt when she explains, "rural literacies are the particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas" (qtd in xiii). This definition only goes so far in clarifying the term. It is circular in its logic because it requires a clear understanding of the rural, which is also a highly contentious term. If we cannot agree on what constitutes the "rural," then how can we pinpoint the literate

skills required to “sustain life”? Because the rural is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic, variable, and contested reality, comprised of multiple, agonistic literacy practices, I begin our conversation with what I mean by the term “rural literacies.” While I have much more to say throughout this section, suffice it to say here that I include three components to rural literacies: 1) special knowledge of a geographic location; 2) learning to use reading and writing to establish a voice in a rural community; and 3) the ideals for reading and writing that are imposed on rural peoples by urban outsiders. I came to this brief definition through an examination of the current uses of the term rural literacy, which follows.

In order to develop a critical rural pedagogy, I begin by offering a brief overview of some ways that rural literacy has been defined. Rural literacy is important to my thinking of a critical rural pedagogy because defining and limiting the term “rural literacy” will help me to focus on the abilities and skills that students from rural backgrounds bring with them to the college classroom. Definitions like that offered by Brandt are not sufficient because they lack the connection between the rural and the rest of the world. Rural literacies are not lesser than general literacies. I prefer to structure rural literacy as additional knowledge and myriad skills that rural students bring with them to their academic careers. In terms of developing a critical rural pedagogy, only after I have distilled a clearer understanding of what literacy students bring with them can I then move toward attempting to develop a pedagogy that brings these students’ specific knowledge and experiences to the foreground in a college class where they need to operate across the multiple perspectives of rural literacy. There is not a single rural literacy. Instead, rural literacies cross boundaries and constantly shift, depending on geographic location, and necessity of context.

Even a small overview of the ways scholars attempt to define rural literacy reveals the

fault lines around this problematic term, so I will discuss five key and contested conceptions of rural literacy. In summary, the first sees rural literacy as a limited, specific set academic, basic skills, learned by rote in elementary schools; the second posits rural literacy as the ability to “read” a rural space, not just in written text, but through visual clues that have meaning for people living in the rural space; the third, as a practice of a way of life, a deep knowledge of a specific location and the community that develops are a result of that shared knowledge; the fourth ties rural literacy to academic and economic reading and writing tasks that can be accomplished after learning from an educational entity, like a school or rural college; finally, the last argues against a general definition of rural literacy, claiming in direct opposition to the other definitions of rural literacy, there are multiple rural literacies, and each is determined by the individual tasks that use reading/writing that are valued and regularly engaged in by a rural subgroup, for example the Amish. As I read the work of these scholars, I found my own thinking on the subject paralleled much of these scholars’ work, except for the first example, which reduces literacy to basic skills and rote memorization. Even in my overview, it is clear that there is not an absolute consensus for the content, structure, purpose or object of the term “rural literacy.”

That said, let me briefly distill the core threads in my own definition of rural literacy. First, rural literacy, writ large, is a special knowledge of a particular geographical location and how to successfully operate linguistically in that space; second, rural literacy is learning to use reading and writing to establish oneself as a voice in a rural community and against rural discourses that circulate inside that community; and, third, rural literacy is a set of ideals for reading and writing that has been imposed on the rural community by urban outsiders in order to control the rural for the urban’s purposes. Rural literacy can be defined or identified in multiple tasks, skills and points of view, and is continuously changing to meet the needs and lived

situations of rural peoples in various locations. But now let's look at others' conceptions more closely.

The first approach to rural literacy, and one that runs counter to my developing definition of rural literacy, appears in an early study that defines rural literacy as K-12 teachers' in class methodology. In this sense, rural literacy is understood narrowly as basic skills in reading and writing that are taught in schools settings, using primarily rote memorization. In the late 1980's, Anthony Petrosky studied literacy practices in rural Mississippi Delta public schools, and his observations suggest that students' uniform responses based on rote memorization (65) formed the basis of a basic skills curriculum in literacy. Mississippi Delta students were perceived to be lacking in the most elemental of literacy skills, so the teachers used pedagogy "grounded in rote learning, as opposed, say, to notions of learning as generative" (65). Rural literacy, as reported by Petrosky, involves top down educational policies and reforms intended to be implemented in the public school system, and through that gateway, filtered out into the larger community. These policies are couched in the language of reform.

Rural literacies, in this case, are a prescribed set of tasks, skills, or specific pieces of information that rural public schools students are lacking, identified by state level curriculum developed outside the local community. Rural literacy, as defined with this deficiency model, lists skills, abilities and knowledge students do not have and then fills the vacuum of what is missing. This form of rural literacy does not build toward any sort of critical pedagogy. In fact, it is in direct opposition to the ideas of empowering marginalized students. Instead, it is a method of control by a bureaucratic system that allows only for the most minimal system of tracking, with progress a measurement of a student's ability to memorize prescribed ideas and skills. This form of rural literacy does not provide insights that can inform the critical rural pedagogy I hope

to develop. Instead, it reinforces the constructed representation of rural children as lacking in something that must be provided by outsiders, and it suggests that rural children are not necessarily capable of higher order critical work, as it is explicitly excluded from the school curriculum.

Petrosky's study identifies the students in the two schools he studied as majority African American. The intersection of race and educational history in Mississippi are undercurrents of his work, as he identifies percentages of students of color and education levels of the larger community in racial terms. However, his results include a caution against curricular ordering of basic skills with writing first and then more advanced skills later. He also warns against attempts to generalize his findings beyond the classrooms he has studied. He calls for careful examination of mandates from beyond the classroom and district because they removed teachers from the development of policy and programs (71). Throughout his assertions, Petrosky's study conflates literacy with curriculum and pedagogy. Additionally, while his work is valuable, his definition of rural literacy does not match that of the other four scholars I include in this discussion: Edmondson, Hautecoeur, Sohn, and Fishman. It is also of limited use for my project, other than as a reminder that rural literacy has been used as a limiting construct, intended to "fix" broken students. My students, certainly, are familiar with this attitude in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation and standardized tests.

The second approach to defining rural literacy is presented by Jacqueline Edmondson, an academic working in a rural Minnesota town, which she names Prairie Town, who distinguishes "traditional rural literacies" (66) from other literacies by noting they are a complicated set of required structures used to interpret and access the people, organizations, and landforms of rural spaces. I agree with her insight that life in a rural place has its own complications that are not

obvious to the casual observer. Just as with other cultural constructions people use to navigate lives intertwined with others, rural literacies include information and skills beyond traditional definitions of general literacy. She defines rural literacy as a way for rural people to respond to “agrarian republicanism, socialism, and early American capitalism” by “reading farm and land” (51), “reading community” (53), and “reading school” (59). She also suggests that rural literacy serves to change the urban centered conversation about the rural because rural people control the conversation. She suggests that rural people redefine how they are perceived by others when they act by “reading the ‘rural problem’” and renaming it “the country life movement” (63). Despite her claim of agency, I have to question her conclusion here. She suggests that rural literacy includes controlling the imagery and representations used by non-rural people, but she does not adequately support her assertion. The language of a “rural problem” is still endemic in the larger culture, despite efforts by rural people to control that language. Instead, this highlights the marginalized position of rural people. They are not in a position of power; they cannot guide the conversation about themselves beyond their own communities.

For Edmondson, rural literacy focuses on an object, system or idea that is to be understood, which is opposition to Petrosky’s discrete writing / reading skills based definition. She uses the term “reading” to describe a variety of structures, including both written and oral forms, through which people living in rural areas develop their understanding of their experiences in a specific geographic location. A familiarity with peoples’ past in specific geographic locations underlies her definition of rural literacy. This connection to place is central and all the specific ways she identifies to “read” the situations and needs of people in this location becomes the basis for literacy. Using Edmondson’s lens, rural literacy then is malleable, varying from location to location. There may be general similarities in rural literacy that focus on

agriculture, or cultural contexts and structures, but the specific skills and knowledge to interpret important information from written documents, oral traditions and visual cues in the landscape will be different in each rural location.

Rural literacy, as Edmondson defines it, would also change over time as the needs of people and changes to the land and its uses adjust with and against relationships with entities and agencies in the larger world. I appreciate the flexibility of Edmondson's conception. As she has outlined them, literacy skills are situational, embedded in the culture, specifics, geographies, and ways of knowing and doing that are specific to various places and times. She also suggests that rural literacies are often tied to a specific location so that any person who wishes to use this knowledge is also limited in some applications of these literacies. Her ideas crystalize in some small way rural students' need to master the ability to work in multiple contexts at the same time, shifting their language use as they move between locations and situations. This flexibility and connection to appropriate audience has been well documented in other students who navigate through multiple worlds concurrently, for example, when people code switch.

Students ability to alter their language is also made visible in Juan Guerra's work with disenfranchised students who need to make use of *modalities of memory* to "negotiate the challenges they face in Life in the Neither/Nor" (2). Although my students operate across multiple, often concurrent positions of power, I agree with Guerra that there are ways my student may work across the third space, literacy shifts students make across spaces, both physical and cultural (4). Another scholar who is working to clarify the shifts individuals made when working across linguistics spaces, Suresh Canagarajah uses the term translingual to capture a similar move students make when operating in multiple language spaces. Canaragajah uses the term to describe the "ability to merge different language resources in situated interactions for new

meaning construction” (1-2). More complicated than code switching, Canaragajah is suggesting that when interacting with texts across locations, the students’ actions are “hybridizing and emergent, facilitating creative tensions between languages” (2) and calls explicitly for making a classroom “a safe house” for “developing relevant strategies and dispositions for translingual literacies in the contact zones outside the classroom” (9).

Edmonds, Guerra, and Canaragajah all present clarifying descriptions of language use that I have noticed in my classroom and community. As I have observed rural students making these linguistic and cultural moves in multiple locations, for example the same student will draw from different vocabulary and language patterns in my classroom, at the county fair, and in their house of worship, I generally agree with Edmondson’s conception of situational literacy skills and I am encouraged by Guerra and Canagarjah’s recent scholarship that also calls for classroom practices to support students as they work across literacy locations. I can develop class activities that allow students to explore the ways they maneuver through variations of rural literacies, and then, how this might or might not play out in the American literature they are studying.

The third conception of rural literacy focuses on it as a practice of a way of life, a deep knowledge of a specific location and the community that develops are a result of that shared knowledge. For example, Jean-Paul Hautecoeur defines and identifies rural literacies in a way that accounts for the expertise and resources present for people living in rural contexts. He focuses on the cultural basis for rural literacy. He opens with an idea from Jean Bruno, who has written about the decline of agriculture in Canada for the Canadian Agriculture Federation, which Hautecoeur describes as a “positive view”:

...the rural space as a particular use of space and social life...More than a distinct bio-physical environment, the contemporary rurality presents three specific

attributes. First, a human, ecological, cultural and historical patrimony of high value, which is also a certain way of life. Second, an intimate knowledge of the land, the territory, which creates an identity. Lastly, a strong community spirit or solidarity which builds a society of mutual knowledge. (18-19)

Hautecoeur notes three overlapping sources for rural literacies: land, community, and patrimony, and he argues that each must be central to defining rural literacies. Interestingly, in defining rural literacy, he parallels the three rural topoi (lack, lag and rosy past) that I discussed in Chapter 1, which was surprising since he suggests that his conception of rural literacy reflects a positive, or value to overall literacy that is added to the skill sets of rural people.

From this perspective, Hautecoeur builds an “action research perspective,” which highlights local people’s responses to “questions of shortfall, development, cultural change, preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage, . . . and illiteracy [;] specialized terms of individuals’ linguistic competence or school performance results [and] plans to resist the destructing of their community” (9). He does not recognize the negative references to lack, lag and the rosy past in his own work. I believe this is another example of how these representations have become so deeply imbedded in the more general culture that they go unquestioned and repeated, even by Hautecoeur. He does point out a difficulty, however, when he argues current rural literacy practices are a source not only of tension, but also of domination and control of rural peoples by urban outsiders.

I agree with his hegemonic concerns here, and he has clearly identified the power imbalance created by those outside of the rural who use and control the rural for reasons that do not include the needs of people in rural places. Hautecoeur provides a turn that is useful in developing a critical rural pedagogy that accounts for context and specific actions for students to

use when working against these stereotypes. Hautecoeur advocates developing rural literacy practices at the local level, by those who need and use them, which then separates those practices from the systems of measurement placed on them by outside agents. Following his lead, I hope to find ways for my rural students to use their local knowledge of agricultural practices, specific locations, and social interactions as points of comparison against which literary pieces may be examined. For Hautecoeur, rural literacy is the battleground for controlling definitions and terms of rural literacy, as well as how these ideas may be deployed.

Hautecoeur provides me with a framework to more deeply examine the dominance of outside forces on rural people's representations in texts. The power differential he describes fits the framework of critical pedagogy, at least roughly, because it situates the urban/suburban author and publisher in the power position, with rural peoples clearly marginalized, subjugated by the language used to describe and control them. Hautecoeur's structure encourages me to provide activities and discussion spaces in the classroom that may draw rural students into a clearer understanding of their less powerful position in this structure. However, as I discussed earlier, rural students occupy more than one position in the power structure. Hautecoeur's conception does not include the possibility that rural students may not be marginalized in all ways. Despite my deep concern about his limited perspective, his work does suggest an opening for more critical examination of the literature, with the students' rural literacy providing the expertise for a more complicated deconstruction of the literature. I can ask students to orient themselves within the constructions and discourses on the rural, allowing them to better understand how language represents and creates realities, and to what end for themselves, their families, and others. I am also further convinced of the malleable and contested space within the term rural literacy. While I am often in agreement with Edmondson and Hautecoeur, and their

conceptions have areas of overlap, they are not identical.

The fourth conception of rural literacy defines the term through academic and economic reading and writing tasks that can be accomplished after students have attended a rural college. Katherine Sohn, in her influential text, *Whistlin' and Crown' Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices since College* (2006) states the context for rural literacy includes primarily actions that are explicitly enacted through reading and writing in college. In her book, she follows female students through their college experiences and beyond. Academic reading and writing are by default the context of rural literacy for these Appalachian women. Sohn's second chapter "reveals how the women moved from silence to voice to identity by maintaining their dialect throughout college and beyond, by discovering the power of expressivist writing and completing their degrees to enhance their identity as strong women of Appalachia, by gaining economic and social power, and by remaining in their communities" (5). Her conception directly opposes that of Petrosky in that his rural literacy required abandoning rural speech patterns for more "correct" patterns of Standard English language use. Sohn disagrees. For her students, maintaining their Appalachian speech patterns in written work is necessary for building a literate identity that is both strong and tied to their geographic location. For Sohn, literacy is closely tied to academic tasks and economic advancement through a college degree, but also in empowerment, defined as women developing and then using their voices in their current communities. Asserting one's identity comes from using reading and writing to explore, develop and reinforce that identity.

Rural literacy, as defined by Sohn, is then the act of reading and writing and the asserting of personhood through these tasks. Literacy is explicitly intended to help people find and express themselves. Literacy is a tool through which individuals, who happen to be in Appalachia, enlarge their sense of self and empower their own actions. Her conception of literacy has direct

implications for my possible classroom work. For her, it is the act of reading and writing in the classroom, while maintaining respect for students' linguistic patterns that reflect their identities and nurtures the use of voice, the empowerment of students from Appalachia, and at least conceptually, should also serve my rural students in Centralia. However, there is a hitch. I am directed to teach and evaluate student writing against Standard English practices. While I might encourage students to use non-standard dialects when working in informal responses, when participating in class discussion, and when developing drafts of longer works, formal essays are to be evaluated against a student's ability to operate in Standard English. As noted previously, rural students are already proficient at code switching for a community and an academic audience. I have not resolved this tension, but it is important to acknowledge that when students switch from their local dialect to Standard English, this is another moment in which to examine the ways that language choice and use alters the reality of what is developed in text.

While noble, Sohn's definition again, does not exactly match Brandt's definition, Edmondson's ways to read rural communities, Hautecoeur's tension between practice and outsiders or Petrosky's elevation of rote memorization for mastering basic reading and writing skills to fill in missing abilities. However, Sohn does further illustrate the multi-layered uses of the term literacy, let alone rural literacy. Context, how rural literacy is situated in everyday life matters, as it does for Brandt, Edmonson, Hautecoeur, and increasingly, for me.

The fifth conception of rural literacy is Andrea Fishman's ethnographic study of Amish reading and writing patterns, *Amish Literacy: What and How it Means* (1988) she states that rural literacy is determined by the individual reading/writing tasks that are valued and used regularly by this rural sub-group. She asserts that a general statement of rural literacy is inadequate. She asserts there is no one "monolithic condition or decontextualized set of discrete skills [are]

transferrable across all contexts” for a singular rural literacy (133), which is in concert with Edmondson, Brandt and Hautecoeur. She argues for a definition of literacy that is not universal, not static. Amish literacy, a subset of rural literacy, fits the needs and cultural requirements of the Amish; “they are sufficiently observant and aware to discern and adopt those practices that will best serve their own way of life” (133). Her work suggest that it is important for me to determine what rural western Washington literacy might be, or more importantly, the exploration of a specific form of rural literacy that operates in and around Centralia should be explored by my students. Fishman identifies six types of reading which “count”: 1) “the ability to discriminate among print materials; to find the desired portion” of a text; 2) “following written directions”; 3) “the ability to recall”; 4) memorization; 5) “the ability to synthesize what is read in a single text into what is already known or to synthesize information across texts in an organized whole”; and 6) “to empathize with characters in a text” (134-7).

As for writing, Fisher “found...the abilities to copy, to encode, to list, to follow format and to choose content” (137) central in importance in Amish literacy. In addition to her analysis and identification of specific literacy skills and abilities prized by the Amish, Fisher adamantly argues against the back-to-basics moment, which focuses on rote memorization of isolated facts, stating that “just as the back-to-basics zealots might be wise to stop and define basics and decide which basics should be returned to by whom, so the literacy evangelists might be wise to stop crusading for reading and writing long enough to decide what those words mean to the people they consider the unconverted” (141). Fishman’s theorizing of Amish literacy is different from the other conception in that she subdivides rural literacy into multiple rural literacies, using the Amish as a primary example. This is certainly useful for me and my students as an example of working against cultural representations of a simplified, uncomplicated rural. She is advocating

for multiple rural literacies, based on the existence of multiple groups within the rural environment. Hautecoeur would concur, as he also advocates for a definition of rural literacy that is tied to specific locations.

Even with this brief overview, it is clear that there is not an absolute consensus for the content, structure, purpose or object of the term “rural literacy.” As a result, as I stated earlier, my own definition of rural literacy includes three points, which I repeat here. First, rural literacy, writ large, is a special knowledge of a particular geographical location and how to successfully operate linguistically in that space; second, rural literacy is learning to use reading and writing to establish oneself as a voice in a rural community and against rural discourses that circulate inside that community; and, third, rural literacy is a set of ideals for reading and writing that has been imposed on the rural community by urban outsiders in order to control the rural for the urban’s purposes. Rural literacy can be defined or identified in multiple tasks, skills and points of view, and is continuously changing to meet the needs and lived situations of rural peoples in various locations.

This definition may serve as the basis for resistance, and for a critical rural pedagogy that will allow students to enact a richer response to texts. The literacy practices students bring with them to my rural community college should be part of a thoughtful construction of classroom activities and tasks. As I pointed out at the start of this chapter, a critical rural pedagogy, a set of classroom practices the guidelines that provide ways for students to enact their understandings of the rural world when they are examining texts, and specifically in my class, American literature, needs to not only be aware of rural literacy, but call on students to use those practices. In the remainder of this project I will explore these threads and determine how to utilize them in order to empower rural students in college American literature classes. Ultimately, I hope to engage

these students in critical conversations that have meaning for them, and to help them recognize the importance of their presence in and contribution to the college environment.

2.2 Toward a Pedagogy that Utilizes Rural Literacies

2.2.1 Problems and Inconsistencies with Current Rural Pedagogies

Given the range of antagonistic/competing definitions of rural literacy, it is not surprising that there is also no consensus on what a rural pedagogy might be, nor did I discover any clear guidance in developing a pedagogy for rural students enrolled in a survey-level American literature course at a small community college. Just as rural literacy does not have universally consistent purchase in the field, neither does rural pedagogy. In some ways, the term is even more problematic than rural literacy. My review of rural pedagogies reveals that there are variable and contested ways of conceiving the aims and practices of rural pedagogy. The core tensions represented by these approaches tend to either over simplify the rural, homogenize the rural, or merely provide a means for the author to posture, generally around the political perspectives that underlie pedagogy. There is also a tension between developing idiosyncratic curriculums based on very local knowledges and top down set curriculums rooted in broader national learning outcomes. On the one hand, while having a set curriculum stabilizes what a rural pedagogy might look like, the tendency to homogenize the rural tends to flatten out the ability of such pedagogy to respond to students' lived experiences. On the other hand, pedagogies that are wholly situational risk diffusing the model of rural pedagogy so much that it ceases to recognizably exist.

Just as with the concept of rural literacy, I advocate a “rural pedagogy” that draws on situational, geographically bounded, place specific sets of reading and writing skills. I argue that rural pedagogy needs to provide a means for incorporating the specific location in which students are working by using a variation of critical pedagogy that attempts to work with the need for students to identify with the dominant culture while occupying a position of marginalization, which they may not be willing to recognize. My project attempts to clarify the wide-ranging uses of the term rural pedagogy. And, specifically, this project will define rural pedagogy in terms of a critical project that aims to empower rural students who take my American literature survey courses through the use of a critical rural pedagogy. Ideally, these ideas should be useful for other instructors who are also working in similarly rural community colleges. By the end of this chapter, I will develop a set of guiding principles that are at the heart of a critical rural pedagogy that could be used not only in my classes, but also in other rural community colleges. It is important for me to identify how and when power influences curricular choices, as well as what the content and consequences of controlling terms is for people in rural contexts. For this reason, facilitating students’ experiences so that they take a closer look at the use of language to control and define rural people and places is one of my goals. Ideally, students can then learn to deploy techniques, such as the topoi of lack, lag or rosy past, strategically for their own purposes through a critical rural pedagogy.

An overview of the term rural pedagogy reveals at least two strands. The first is that pedagogical discussions around the rural focus almost exclusively on students in the kindergarten through twelfth grades. Despite the focus on younger students, I hoped to find pedagogical techniques, strategies, or theories that use students’ lived experiences as the basis for building knowledge and skills that could transfer into or inform working with students at the college level.

Then students may be better prepared for using their expertise as a basis for critical interrogation of representations of the rural they will encounter in higher education. As this next section will illustrate, unfortunately these resources are of limited value in developing a pedagogy that is explicitly critical in its stance.

The second strand is the fragmented use and understanding of the term rural pedagogy. I have classified the examples I will share as “inconsistent rural pedagogies.” The commonality in these pedagogies is that they exist solely because of the rural place where students are being taught. They seem almost “accidental” pedagogies, something developed on the fly because of pressures from state boards of education and the need to control curriculum, or because of threats to consolidate small school districts. Pedagogical discussions are then further split into isolated conversations about the content of curriculum or classroom practices. As an overview, these pedagogies call for using rural K-12 schools: 1) to fulfill a personal agenda for a utopian sense of community; 2) to create a local food and resources movement; 3) to promote an “American rural way of life” (Haas and Nachtigal vi); 4) to expand curriculum to include local geography and history; and finally, 5) to advocate for small schools with individualized attention, perhaps even “model classrooms which use instructional management” systems (Gjelton “Elk” 218).

I will provide an overview of the conversations to demonstrate the general tone and to identify small moments that have helped me recognize the need to create a critical rural pedagogy that allows and encourages students to bring the range of their experiences into the academic space. Student should then be given classroom experiences that help them to develop tactics and skills for exploring what these experiences mean in relation to the context of content materials, in this case, representations of the rural and the constructed worlds they are reading about in American literature. This critical rural pedagogy should address questions of power and

hierarchy that are embedded in American literature and serve as a starting point for students to further discuss and dissect the ramifications of these constructed representations. The classroom will then serve as a location for helping students develop their ability to speak back, to respond to the ways these constructions of power and representation influence their lives, and how they might respond. At the same time, a critical rural pedagogy is still required to account for students' abilities in regard to state standards and national benchmarks.

2.2.2 Inconsistent and K-12 Dominance of Rural Pedagogy

Paul Thoebald, in his text *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride and the Renewal of Community* (1997) provides an example of the dominance of K-12 pedagogy. His book is less about curriculum and more about using rural schools, specifically kindergarten through twelfth grade public schools, to advance his personal vision of community. He generalizes all rural spaces into one homogenous context and makes a strategic choice to use small town and rural schools as a first step to remaking America according to his "educational agenda" (120). He asserts his agenda "has the best chance of catching on in rural America, where size is still manageable and where lingering vestiges of a sense of community yet remain" (120). This last statement especially suggests he sees the rural through a sense of the rosy past. Rural schools are not necessarily smaller than their urban counterparts, thanks to the move to consolidate small districts, which has been in play since at least the early 1980s. There is also an uncomfortable sense that urban spaces have lost all community, which I would also dispute, or that rural classrooms somehow are more communal, which is also not always the case.

He states the curriculum in rural schools must be based in the local geography and issues.

This would allow rural educators to become the agents of change who would use their classrooms and their work “as a moral endeavor to rebuild community,” by which he means creating an anti-big business, anti-commodities driven society (122). He calls his curriculum a “revitalization project” (124) that rebuilds community (122). His biased vision of rural communities as places that are broken or damaged in important ways is clear. I would dispute this understanding of the rural, instead noting that Theobald’s work places him squarely in the cultural understanding of the rural as a place of lack and lag because they have lost a fictional version of community that Theobald espouses. Another problem is that he chooses rural pedagogy because he asserts the size of the communities are manageable (120), an overgeneralization with which I strongly disagree. Given the complicated nature of defining a rural community, as discussed in the introduction to this project, his glib statement demonstrates his minimization of rural communities. He also equates a smaller number of people, again, a generalized statement, with an easier task for managers of schools who want to manipulate the learning environment.

Clearly, his focus is on the local school’s classrooms, though his discussion suggests a lack of practical knowledge in rural schools. He does not address consolidation issues that move secondary classrooms a great distance from a student’s home, and he repeatedly assumes that the old system of desks in rows and teachers talking while students take notes is still the norm (140). Even in 1997 when his book was published, rural teachers were utilizing more varied pedagogies than Theobald asserts. Anecdotally, my own experiences as a high school English teacher in Iowa in the 1980’s demonstrates entire rural districts with professional development that encouraged and required student-centered pedagogy, e.g.: writing in multiple genres, student developed projects, speeches, songs, use of popular culture images to make connections, student

led discussion, and nearly ubiquitous group work. Desks rarely stayed in rows.

Theobald's examples of an elementary teacher and a secondary teacher in rural schools, illustrate his assertion that "explorations of subject matter" are "a matter of inquiry. Answers should not be provided by the teacher or the textbook. Rather they should be deliberated on and thereby constructed by the students" (139-40). While he seems to be advocating for pedagogy that might be critical, he does not say so explicitly. Because he calls for using the rural public school, a move that is clearly that of a dominating power over the less important or powerful rural educators and community, I have great concerns about whether a critical pedagogy is within his conceptualization. He is not advocating for a student led curriculum so much as he seems to be advocating for a curriculum that encourages student involvement only to the extent that those students arrive at the vision of community that rejects big-business models that Theobald desires.

The implications of Theobald's ideas for rural pedagogy become even more distant from the experiences of rural student and teachers when he extends his ideas into the preparation of teachers for rural schools. Theobald posits that new teachers in K-12 will best develop their vision of rural pedagogy when they attend rural universities. However, he is vague about what constitutes a rural university. Is it a state university located at a distance from urban centers – for example a land grant university such as Washington State University or Iowa State University? Is a rural university an institution that serves only or dominantly rural students? My concerns that Theobald is using rural pedagogy as a means for controlling a version of the rural that is not connected to the reality of rural life is only increased when he provides an example of an elementary teacher to solidify his perspective:

because he attended a rural university where professors were serious about

preparing teachers for rural schools, he has latched onto and become committed to certain principles. The first is that he believes knowledge is socially constructed and that his instructional practices, therefore, must include socializing his students into the habit of courteous conversation and deliberation. He will not function as the provider of answers; he will, rather, facilitate the sound construction of answers by his students. (141)

Theobald continues to describe this new teacher more in terms of a noble calling (141) than reinforcing marketplace or economic needs of the urban. It was unclear to me whether Theobald did not see or chose to ignore this concern. Instead, Theobald asserts the new young male teacher will “do what he can to help his students visualize and then attend to the needs of the community of which they are a part. The students’ place on earth, in fact, will be central to all of his curricular and instructional efforts” (141). In the era of No Child Left Behind legislation, this is not easily possible, and even in the late 1990’s, for a first year teacher to create a curriculum completely separate from state level standards would have been a herculean task. Simply attending a rural university would not prepare a new teacher to work through the political concerns that underlie the curricular discussions at the district, school or classroom level.

Theobald assumes that the professors at a rural university have a greater understanding of teaching in rural schools than professors in teacher education programs in general, which seems unlikely, especially in light of Eric Zencey’s work (1996) that points out a cultural disconnect between instructors who have limited experiences in rural places and their rural students. He writes one of the few essays located in higher education, and contrasts students who have a sense of place with “rootless professors” (Zencey 16), pointing out that although most students attend university in their home states, their professors are often “cosmopoles [...] a class of transient

exotics” (16). He further criticizes unrooted instructors who tend to mistake “disconnected from locale” for “educated” (16) and do not place value in “connectedness to place” (17), thereby diminishing the value of their students’ prior knowledge. If Zencey’s analysis is correct, the professors at a rural university, however it may be defined, do not have a specialized knowledge of the rural classrooms in which they are preparing students to teach after completing the teacher education program. In fact, these professors may be unprepared to conceptualize students’ knowledge and experiences, or the locations where their students will be teaching. Theobald’s assertion that education students who attend rural universities are better prepared for the needs of students in a rural elementary classroom does not stand if Zencey is correct.

The concerns voiced by Zencey have been echoed by Valerie Mulholland in her 2012 article, “For All Students in this Place” published in *Reclaiming the Rural* (190-206). She does not identify the professorate who develop teacher education programs as especially capable of working with marginalized students because current teacher education programs work from a position of embedded white privilege. Instead, she advocates for a change in pre-service teacher training to include “several years of systematic reflexive practice” so that young, mostly white, and mostly privileged teachers recognize their white privilege against the educational work of continued colonization of First Peoples in Canada. This is a direct response to Donehower, Hogg and Schell’s identification of lack, lag and rosy past (190). Mulholland recognizes her own faulty lens when working with pre-service teachers. She states, “What I failed to realize when I began this process [teaching pre-service teachers] was that until I incorporated antiracist theory and practices, my classes would be susceptible to a romantic view of the past that reified entrenched white-settler identities” (196).

As a professor in a teacher education program, she did not have a special sensitivity to

one subgroup in her rural school. She came to an understanding of her white privilege only after years working in the classroom and training others to teach in K-12. White privilege and concerns about minority groups are difficult enough to negotiate when the culture at least speaks nominally about a gap or difference. Because rural students as a group are not discussed as an outsider group, realizing culturally influenced bias is equally, if not more difficult for professors. Theobald's assertion that professors in a rural university would have special understandings of rural students is weakened by both Mulholland and Zencey's work, which is based in more academically sound theories and support. Mulholland has struck an important idea for my dissertation. When working with rural students, who may be marginalized in some ways but may or may not be aware they occupy a less powerful position, there is also a need for "systematic reflexive practice," to use her terms, for students.

As I noted in the opening of this section, an investigation of pedagogy reveals educators' inconsistent approaches to working with rural students. Most of the discussion is dominated by work with K-12 schools. But moving on, there is a greater fracturing of the conversation along approaches to pedagogy in terms of curriculum. Clearly, there is not a point of connection, let alone consensus, for all the repeated uses of the term rural pedagogy.

2.2.2.1 Curriculum

Another way rural pedagogy is defined is by curricular content. It is important to note that the term pedagogy is often used interchangeably with curriculum, which I find particularly problematic. Pedagogy is the classroom practices and constructions for helping students to learn, to interact with new materials, ideas, and improve specific skills. Curriculum is not the same. Instead, curriculum is the content of a course or discipline. Conflating these two terms creates

confusion. Not surprisingly, exactly what students from rural places should learn is heavily contested and political matter. Next, I will explore in more detail other examples of pedagogies that call for using rural schools 1) to create a local food and resources movement; 2) to promote an “American rural way of life” (Haas and Nachtigal vi); and 3) to expand curriculum to include local geography and history. As I detail below, what I have found is that rural students tend to be exposed to inconsistent curricular content, some of which attempts to foreground the rural experience, and from this I taken away a realizations that curricular control is often a locus for control of how the rural is envisioned and operates. This insight is central to my rural pedagogy because I hope to develop a critical rural pedagogy that questions where and how representations and control of the rural are visible in language. A pedagogy that has empowerment of students as one of its goals has some overlap with, but is not equivalent with the rural pedagogies that are discussed below.

The first answer to “what is rural curriculum?” is presented by David W. Orr, a professor of environmental studies. He states that there will come a point at which the migration to urban and suburban spaces will be replaced with a move back to rural areas (227-8). He coins a new term when he states, “re-ruralization, in contrast, will require a curriculum that honors tradition, locality, rootedness, ecological competence, and the attributes that hold people and land together in harmony” (231). Orr advocates for this change from the only curriculum currently in use, the “urban curriculum” that educates students to be “urban with urban appetites, skills, minds, dependencies and expectations” (228). Although he is not clear just what these appetites, etc. might be, his overall point reinforces my concerns that rural students have been required to follow a curriculum developed by an outside group, generally a state level education department that must also now consider the national common core. Certainly, a critical pedagogy would

seem to be useful in helping students push back against this dominating force.

Orr then goes on to call for more agriculturally-based education embedded in the liberal arts across the curricula. His list of what rural students need to know how to do includes: grow enough food on local farms and in gardens to feed the population, generate energy from renewable sources, substitute local goods for imports, keep investment capital in the community and grow that capital, purify “without chemicals, eliminate toxic wastes and restore degraded environments,” raise children who will work hard and, finally, be good citizen/neighbors (228). Orr’s call is familiar incarnation of a desire to change the content of curriculum in rural schools that is repeated by numerous others. Agricultural knowledge figures dominantly in the “new” curriculum, and each proponent adds her own interests to the mix, for example: environmental concerns, religious doctrine, or economic independence. There is a concerning repeat of Theobald’s impulse to control the curriculum again here, however. The environmental and sustainability threads in Orr’s curriculum may or may not develop out of a critical pedagogy, let alone one that attempts to empower rural students. Orr is attempting to control the outcomes of the curriculum for his own purposes, rather than the organically derived curricular outcomes that students from rural areas might develop. There is an impulse in Orr’s writing to create a small, subsistence form of farming, more akin to the ideals of the rosy past than the current economic needs of rural agriculture.

Despite Orr and other’s call, there has not been a corresponding response to remake the overall curriculum in rural schools. There is a program in rural high schools for students to improve their skills and knowledge of local agriculture, Future Farmers of America, known more often by its initials FFA. But there has not been a corresponding program in public schools for younger children. Additionally, the current limitations created by the federal mandates of “No

Child Left Behind” (NCLB) work against agriculturally based curriculum, focusing instead on concepts and means of measuring progress that are embedded in an urban or suburban experience. Recently, the rise of the Common Core State Standards, which are national in their stance, and therefore not connected to local and regional literacies, adds to the pressure on rural schools to conform, reducing the likelihood that Orr’s vision can be enacted on a large scale.

A second approach to rural pedagogy that promotes an “American rural ways of life” as curriculum is also foregrounded in Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal’s brief collection of essays on “good literature on rural lifeways, environments, and purposes of education” (vi). Haas and Nachtigal reinforce the idea that there is an “American rural way of life” (vi) that gives priority to “deeper bonds with family, friends, and the world around them” (vi) rather than material gain. Unfortunately, their statement reveals a tendency to project a rosy past on the rural, rather than a clear-eyed understanding of rural places and people. There is also clear statement that the rural environment is lacking, hence the need to use public schools in the service of “protecting self-determination” (vi). Schools then are necessary for “equipping rural students and the adults who surround them with tools to create a different, better future” (vi). My concern here is that Haas and Nachtigal do not recognize value in the rural as it exists. Instead, in a move that is reminiscent of Pratt’s colonizing gaze, they minimize what exists in order to build a new version of the rural that matches their ideals. They place themselves above the students and communities they purport to improve in an obvious power hierarchy. Additionally, they again focus exclusively on K-12 students, and there is little in their overall approach that is helpful for me when working with undergraduates.

Haas and Nachtigal disavow the use of a national curriculum, and instead advocate for a curriculum that focuses on local geographic spaces. Through in-depth study of the local, students

engage in a “careful study of one’s own habitat reveals truth about the entire planet” (2). This curriculum should then be combined with entrepreneurial education in concert with “state and local development agencies, extension agents, and community colleges” (16). Students would be engaged in a pedagogy that overtly draws on the idea that they will stay in their rural communities and not be required to leave the area for an education or to find fulfilling and economically feasible work.

As I envision the practical use of Hass and Nachtigal’s call, for example, such a curriculum might focus on locally relevant sources of revenue: forestry practices in the Pacific Northwest, or in the Midwest agricultural practices that deviate from monoculture so that risk is mitigated by multiple crops. Despite Hass and Nachtigal’s naiveté, I believe it should be possible to enhance pedagogical approaches to American literature in the college classroom by tapping into this call for local, place-based practical knowledge. Rural students’ practical knowledge and skills can then serve as a jumping off point for richer interpretations of text and discussions with classmates, as well as application of critical reading and writing skills to their own lives. The context in which this use of local knowledge is called into the classroom would need careful development, however. In order not to replicate these author’s misguided attempt to control what the rural should be, it would be important to adhere to the major tenants of critical pedagogy, that of empowering students and the instructor’s role as facilitator, rather than classroom leader.

As envisioned by Haas and Nachtigal, this pedagogy also works counter to the current school reform movement, considering the constraints of NCLB that seeks to measure all students against a statewide or nationwide set of outcomes. Additionally, these NCLB outcomes are to be measured with nationally parallel assessment tools. Rural students, who have just come through the K-12 system, may be especially sensitive to the tensions that arise between Hass and

Natchigal's proposed curriculum and their own recent experiences. I may be able to leverage their understanding of NCLB national standards, like the Common Core, against their knowledge of the rural with critical pedagogy in the classroom. I still have concern about how to use critical pedagogy with students who may not consider themselves to be marginalized and align with the urban/suburban culture in a number of ways.

The work of Orr, Haas and Natchigal reflects differences in ideas for rural pedagogy and content that at times overlaps, but each reflect a desire to use the rural K-12 school for some purpose that is likely to be more important to the authors than to the rural communities where these schools are located. There is a third way rural curriculum has been approached that more closely matches the will of and concerns of rural students, but which has not proven highly successful over time or replicable, due to its reliance on local, situated knowledge and practices.

Using the local geography and history as the center for curriculum was documented when Thomas Gjelten explored an expansion of the curriculum in Gary, Texas that started in the early 1970s. Gjelten focused on the development of a *Foxfire* styled project, a publication conceived by high school teacher Lincoln King initially, but then developed, written, and distributed by students at the small rural school; the town's population was approximately 200 when *Loblolly* began (227). Though the project was initially part of a 10th grade geography class (230-232) it later became a journalism elective, which did not count toward graduation (233, 239).

Gjelten's article is a nuts and bolts examination of how this radical content and structure came to exist and gain status in the school, as well as in the larger community. The content is student generated and based in local geography, resources, history and community. This would seem to answer a need for a rural curriculum, but *Loblolly* never served as anything more than an add on. Gjelten reveals tensions between the academic curriculum, based in tradition and state

examinations, and elective courses that are seen as important, but not important enough to be included in graduation requirements. Despite the high status ascribed to the magazine, currently, *Loblolly* is no longer being published. A last book of collected articles was published in 2005. Because the students' production of *Loblolly* did not mesh smoothly with state standards, it was doomed to be marginalized curricula, an interesting irony, and it only existed until the force of will of the teacher/advisor and students ran out. In this situation, rural pedagogy is equivalent to additional curriculum that exists more by the force of individual participants than by inclusion in the high school's overarching curricular goals.

Ultimately, my search for rural pedagogies has revealed few models from which I can draw to develop a more robust, critical pedagogy for use with my community college students. My search did reveal the complications that undergird teaching rural students, including control by outside of district agencies, the lack of discussion about rural students in higher education classes, and the economic pressures that determine the existence of small, rural schools. It is also clear that there is not a shared use or definition for rural pedagogy. The term is contested, taken over by pressures beyond what I would typically define as pedagogical, which I define as the work of teaching, the instructional methods employed in educating students. What little I found did not connect with critical pedagogy. As articulated in the introduction, critical pedagogy is important to me because rural students are often marginalized and subjected to cultural assumptions of the rural as a place and people of lack, lag or a rosy past. In order to help students see themselves as legitimate members of the higher education community, to develop their skills in critical inquiry, to facilitate their use of critical thought to empower themselves, I need to be mindful of the needs of these students, but go back to the roots of critical pedagogy in order to devise a critical rural pedagogy.

2.3 Requirements of Critical Rural Pedagogy for Rural Representation in Freshman/Sophomore Level College American Literature Courses

2.3.1 Key Characteristics of Good Rural Pedagogy

The fragmented nature of approaches to K-12 pedagogy for rural students does not provide adequate guidance for instructors when attempting to create a useful theoretical framework, let alone a useful pedagogical structure to use in a higher education class that includes student with rural backgrounds. I now offer a conversation on a possible pedagogy for students who have rural backgrounds in my community college, specifically, and in similar settings in higher education, more broadly. As I stated in the introduction, my project makes a case for theorizing rural literacy and developing critical pedagogy approaches for students who attend rural community colleges. As I outlined in Chapter One, my own students have varied backgrounds, experiences and socio-economic statuses. And now I will pick up these concerns, along with the importance of a critical pedagogy. What follows are my conceptions of and commitments to critical pedagogy. As stated in the introduction, critical pedagogy “works to help teacher educators and teachers reconstruct their work so it facilitates the empowerment of all students” (Kincheloe *Knowledge* 9). For me, empowerment in this context means rural students recognize the value of their contributions to class discussions and their academic work; that they believe they are not only welcome to share their ideas, but that their ideas need to be part of the conversations; and, lastly, that their rural knowledge can be useful not just for their own understanding of texts, but to add to the diversity of contexts and lenses through which a

text can, and should, be examined.

The students in my classes have a variety of lived experiences, both in and out of the academic world, and are often disempowered by their social status, economic status, geographic location, age, cultural heritage, or by a number of other factors that have, at least in the eyes of some, relegated them to attending a community college in a poor, rural county of Washington state. Because I am working in a rural environment, it is also important to enact a critical rural pedagogy that 1) hones in to explore and use the language they bring from their rural lives into the classroom; 2) provides space for students to develop tactics and skills they can bring to bear when revealing biases that limit the rural or when speaking back against an author's representation of rural peoples and places; and 3) addresses students' positioning in multiple places concurrently in the power hierarchy, neither solely allied with the oppressor or the oppressed.

2.3.1.1 Use of Students' Language

In developing and theorizing critical rural pedagogy, I put forth the following key characteristics. First, a critical pedagogy would stress both the acceptance and problematizing of students' use of language based in rural experience. Rural students bring particular 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. Paulo Freire's thoughts on the teacher-student relationship, along with his criticisms of education as a bank, rather than a transformative experience (72) are helpful when approaching this gap. Creating classroom interaction 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.

A move that counters a traditional construction of power and knowledge as top down would create space for students to engage the texts using the language they already know, and allow them to apply their critiques and considerations to the texts without the overwhelming hand of authority from the professor with a “right” answer. This does not mean that any old thought a student expresses is perfection in its initial voicing, but it does mean that students have the power to voice their thoughts and then refine those thoughts and responses with continued discussion and exploration. As I picture an American literature class engaged in rural critical pedagogy, those students who have direct experience with the rural would hold a place of “expert” in aspects of a text’s discussion that call for a critique of rural imagery, character development and geography. Students’ rural status and knowledge then becomes a significant asset in the richness of class discussions of texts with rural representations and peoples.

The difficulty may be in not placing rural students with this knowledge in a position where they are asked to speak as a representative for all rural peoples, as happened in the vignette I shared earlier in this chapter. Instead, the opportunity to share this information has to be built over time. Trust and multiple chances for students to lead the direction of class discussion, to provide their expertise repeatedly in the classroom setting, has to occur in order for students to understand that their perspectives are important. Just as with critical pedagogy as a larger structure, critical rural pedagogy is not just a one shot deal, a moment that only occurs when the text mentions a specifically rural location or person. Instead, it is a constant perspective, an openness, and an encouragement undergirding the entire class structure. When this is also a part of the classroom experience, students with rural expertise may share what they

know first in pairs or in smaller groups where they are not on the spot before the entire class. Later, when trust is established, and all students' individual contributions have been recognized and encouraged, students may choose to speak before the entire class, but always as one additional perspective, not necessarily as the representative of a larger group. The construction of activities and discussions that provides a space for students to share what they know is also crucial for critical rural pedagogy to be successful.

David Bartholomae provides helpful insights on the difficulties of speaking and sharing in the academic world by providing for understanding the difficulties students face when entering higher education. The problem of "power and finesse," according to Bartholomae, lies in students' awareness of audience (595). Students from rural locations may lack awareness not only of the university setting, but also of the assumptions about rural and urban, which are carried in the university environment. A highly urbanized space is constantly assumed to be "normal" on college campuses, making the rural students' background, by comparison, abnormal. Just as Bartholomae posits that prior texts are not able to help new writers (596), prior rural experiences may not inform the rural student in this new environment. Certainly, the use of Standard English in their previous academic lives is consistent, but there are aspects of their rural language that do not seem to be welcome in an urban space. The new urban, academic language does not include Carhartts, cattle squeezes, or distance as a factor in getting to stores, schools, and friends. So, in a critical rural pedagogy, I would seek curricular ways to include students' rural experiences, make links between their experience and the representations of the rural in literature, and develop critical thinking skills as they push within and against rural topoi as they encounter them in literature and their everyday life. I believe this would require instances of direct intervention early in the class to highlight the value of the variety of experiences students

bring to the classroom. Later, it would become the instructor's job to facilitate the translation of language and themes from the lived rural into the academic language considered acceptable in university level work. I will provide more specific examples of these pedagogical moves in Chapter Three.

2.3.1.2 Opportunities to Develop Tactics and Skills

In a critical rural pedagogy, as I conceive it, giving students opportunities to develop tactics for building writing skills and critical thinking would be necessary. Activities, classroom discussion, written assignments, projects, and creative output would require instructors to design assignments that “provide the opportunity for engagement and growth” (Tinberg and Nadeau 116). Michel de Certeau's construction of strategies vs. tactics proves informative, illustrating possibilities for rural students to operate against the strategies of the larger educational structure or against economic systems based in a national view (34-39), where “strategies” are official rules and practices of government and cultural institutions (thus, are transparent, unchanging, rigid), “tactics” are kairotic, situational, fly by the seat of your pants responses that may allow marginalized rural students to respond powerfully to their situation in college classrooms.

Ideally, my project should explore how and when rural students might use their prior knowledge to push back against simplistic understanding of the complicated, messy and at times error filled representations that appear in specific works of American literature. For example, as I mentioned briefly in Chapter One, rural students did not bring their expertise into classroom discuss when we parsed the description of the Van Tassel farm in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” an impossibly productive and valuable homestead. The farm's amazing productivity, achieved with seemingly little effort on the part of the Van Tassel family, along with the often

pristine, clean environment that is presented in the tale have much more to do with increasing the eligibility and desirability of the young Katrina Van Tassel than with the reality of a working farm. When Washington Irving's representation of a family farm is presented as accurate, rural students are in a unique position to complicate that interpretation of the text. Since rural students have not elected to share their expertise previously in my classroom, I hope to change that by providing tactics for intervening in that conversation that allows them to enter the critical discussion despite their at times perceived position of less power in the culture, and the I hope to give them ways to "push off" from their first conversations into more complicated, complete, or rich discussions of the text as a whole, along with all their classmates, not just those who may have experiences in rural communities. Using de Certeau's construction of strategy and tactics, I can construct contexts, activities and responses that may facilitate the full participation of rural students in the analysis of these American literature texts, and hopefully, provide a way for rural students to see their own experiences and intellectual gifts as both welcome and vital to success in the academic world.

2.3.1.3 Contextualize Rural Students' Concurrent Positions of Power and Marginalization

And a critical pedagogy needs to contextualize students in their multiple positions, at times aligned with dominant culture and power, and at other times, or perhaps concurrently, marginalized and Othered. However, as pointed out in Chapter One, rural students may not see themselves as outsiders, people whose lives are not automatically considered part of the dominant culture, despite the persist and dominant representations of the rural that foreground what is missing, what is lagging behind, or a connection with a fictionalized, mythic past that are

forced upon rural students by government agencies, urban curriculum developers and others, as demonstrated in Chapter One. A critical rural pedagogy must take this paradox into account. I first looked at works by theorists and classroom practitioners who work with marginalized students in attempt find guidance for how to construct classroom experiences that could navigate this difficult space.

The feminist pedagogical movement has significant insight into working with marginalized topics and peoples, especially when there are issues of power hierarchies and enshrined cultural attitudes. Melanie Kay/Kantrowitz writes specifically about “teaching across difference” (281). She speaks directly to practices that allow students to “look for pockets of resistance, to understand how resistance is strengthened or undermined” (283). Her use of multiple lenses in the classroom to destabilize dominate theories, cultural constructs and individual biases provides a model for an access point through which rural students may find an opportunity to voice more problematized interpretations of representations of the rural in texts and in their written analysis of such texts. Kaye/Kantrowitz opens her classes with overt conversations about hierarchy and power, as demonstrated in activities that require students to make the hierarchies of subgroups within the culture visible (285-286). This direct confrontation and isolation of the shadowy world of power that underlies the structure of American literature texts provides an entry point into the larger discussion later in the class. However, my concern with her approach is that my students may see themselves as connected to the “oppressor” group and resist the concerns of power and control because it may be considered an attack. While I find her direct approach appealing, I think that a more subtle approach, something that provides ways for students to discover for themselves the concerns of power that emerge from the literature, may be more effective. It may also take more time to build a sequence of activities serve as small

steps, allowing for tangents that are inevitable, but also fruitful because students should be driving toward discussions that have resonance for them. The representations of the rural are present in the literature, so students will most likely discover them, but tactics to arrive at this discovery may include patience on my part and recognition that this is not a straight line of reasoning. Instead, students will need to work through their revelations concerning the texts at their own pace, in their own way, if they are truly to be empowered.

My concerns were directly addressed by Valerie Mulholland, who documents her experience working with pre-service teachers in her article “For All Students in this Place.” She provides a powerfully transparent record of her struggles in working with native and non-native issues of privilege, which I hoped to borrow to help illustrate the marginalization of rural students. Mulholland focuses on antiracist pedagogy, but captures intentionality with a step-by-step system that offers a possible model. She combines a self-study activity, using student created literacy biographies, with more direct instruction in “shared history and... post-colonial history” (197-99). This combination has created a space for explorations of privilege, and the resulting consequences for those with and without privilege. A parallel series of assignments / conversations would be relatively easy to develop, using student created literacy biographies as a contextualizing conversation around privilege in general, with follow up activities to make explicit connections between the privilege students already identified in their autobiographies and the texts read in American literature.

I can also build upon Charlotte Hogg’s chapter from *Rural Literacies*, “Beyond Agrarianism: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Place,” which activates Freire’s theories and Grunewald’s drive toward a “critical pedagogy of place... [focused on] decolonization and reinhabitation” (Donehower, Hogg and Schell 129-30). Although Hogg’s critique of current

agrarian ideas that can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson, with its imbedded sexism, problematizes her initial work to create a rural pedagogy, the use of “specific social and economic contexts” she advocates can still be useful (128). Classroom discussions of literary works can include what she calls “the history of a rural area” (129). This history extends more than unilaterally through the narratives of people in a particular location. This history includes each particular area’s economic and social connections with other geographical and political spaces. Connecting rural representations and peoples who appear in literary works with the more complicated world in which those texts were created and operated creates the scaffolding needed for richer conversations of texts.

While I will explore curricular possibilities further in the next chapter, for now, let me say that instructors can develop activities and assignments that ask students to explore more deeply the histories of locations that appear in American literature. The students could be asked to create a finished version to present to the class in a number of modalities. Such an assignment could be expressed as a formal academic “researched” paper, as a multi-modal visual presentation or in another medium, such as song lyrics or poetry. The students’ work then becomes the basis for comparison with the text, providing for a structure with which to critique. An advantage to this assignment is that students can find and trace the distinctions between the representation of the rural in the literature and the historical information that they have uncovered for themselves. Rather than a perceived attack on the dominant culture, if constructed carefully enough by the instructor, this activity has the advantage of using student gathered information. That act both empowers the students by valuing their work and at the same time provides a way to see the power differentials and unpack the purposes authors may have had for creating particular representations of the rural.

In sum, let me distill the above into principles for a critical rural pedagogy as pedagogy that:

- Explores and uses the language students bring from their rural lives into the classroom
- Provides space for students to develop tactics and skills they can bring to bear when revealing biases that limit the rural
- Addresses students' positioning across multiple places of power and marginalization with inquiry directed to understanding how this may be leveraged or may work against them in specific situations
- Accounts for top down state standards, national benchmarks, and a general sense of "college readiness," but also adapts and situates pedagogical strategies, methods, and content to the students and their contexts
- Provides experiences that help students find their voices and become more empowered in the academic setting
- Recognizes students will need to work through their own revelations concerning the texts in their own way, if they are truly to be empowered

From here, I move into a more pragmatic look at a community college classroom that embodies the above guiding principles for a rural critical pedagogy. Using a course from my campus, a freshman-level one quarter survey of American literature, I present a series of activities and assignments that draw on the principles for critical rural pedagogy that I have developed. It is my hope that this practical exemplification will serve as a starting point for not only my own use of critical rural pedagogy in American literature, but also as a starting point for colleagues in similarly rural community colleges.

Chapter 3.0 American Literature Anthologies and Critical Rural Pedagogical Activities

In Chapter 3, I offer curricular activities and assignments that embody/exemplify critical rural pedagogy. Although these activities have been created for use in my American literature survey course at my rural community college, they also serve as a model for teachers and scholars interested in adopting a critical approach that empowers rural students. I begin by identifying and critiquing commonplace representations of the rural embedded within introductory and ancillary materials, such as the brief author and literary introductions, in popular American literature anthologies in order to explore how these representations work to shape students' encounter with the "rural" in standard college literature readers. I, then, discuss curricular ideas that help students recognize and critically engage with, and speak back to these rural representations through the topoi of lack, lag, or rosy past through in class activities. That conversation is followed with curricular scaffolding that includes activities, assignments, discussions, and paper prompts. These assignments encourage students to critically consider the works being studied and draw on the positive, empowering experiences of rural students. Rather than attempting to provide assignments for all possible American literature texts, I will focus on responding to works by Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost and Flannery O'Connor, given their frequent inclusion in survey courses.

Topoi, such as lack, lag and rosy past, offer persuasive places from which students can discover how the language around these concepts shape, focus or define experiences, perceptions, and everyday practices. These representations are not the only way to present the rural, but they are constructed perceptions that cannot capture the dynamic realities of rural places, experiences, and people. Because commonplace conceptions of the rural necessarily

minimize or marginalize rural people and places, rural topoi present students in rural settings with the opportunity to grapple with their complicated relationship with a dominant culture that has, to some degree, marginalized them. As part of a critical rural pedagogy, students in rural places read within and against these topoi and are well positioned to do so in complicated ways. Part of the aim of my proposed critical rural pedagogy asks students to understand the historical genealogies/sources/legacies of these core topoi, and how the topoi appear in literature. In the American literature survey courses that I will discuss here, my hope was to expand students' critical discussions in a way that helped them pointedly locate themselves, their experiences, and their surroundings within the rhetorical structures that they were reading and experiencing in everyday life. Rural students, like all students, bring with them an expertise that can problematize class discussions and activities. When classmates, and, at times, instructors, do not have first-hand 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 critical rural pedagogy.

Thus far, I have established the concept of the rural as contentious, that rural students may not see themselves as fully integrated into an academic environment, and that to help ameliorate this situation I propose a critical rural pedagogy that aims to: 1) explore and use the language rural students bring from their rural lives into the classroom; 2) provide space for students to develop tactics and skills they can bring to bear when revealing biases that limit the rural or when speaking back against an author's representation of rural peoples and places; 3) address rural students' understandings of hegemony in relation to the dominant culture, bringing to light the complicated positions they may occupy as both part of a dominant culture and members of a marginalized group; and 4) provide experiences that help students express

themselves in written forms and become more empowered in the academic setting and beyond. The purpose of this chapter is to bring these threads together in ways that are specifically useful in my American literature classroom at my small, rural community college in southwestern Washington. It is my hope that my project may be useful to others who are working in similar situations, and perhaps these pedagogical moves may open up discussion and further work. I'll explore that possibility more concretely in Chapter 4.

There are multiple reasons I am focused on American literature survey courses as a location for critical rural pedagogy. I was initially drawn to these courses because there are so many representations of the rural in American literature; however, as I mentioned in the Chapter 1 vignette, it became clear that the discussions of these texts in my classes has been especially flat, homogenized to generalized interpretations and thinking by most students. There is an opportunity here to both help students better achieve the critical outcomes of the course and find a way to more fully engage rural students. I also chose the American literature survey course because students have commented in their beginning of course surveys that they chose my class because they felt that they wouldn't need to work hard because they had already read American literature in high school. This confluence of a chance to improve students' experiences in my courses, along with my desire to develop a more appropriate pedagogy to address the silencing / minimizing of rural students made this course a logical place to focus. At Centralia College, American literature is taught as a one-quarter survey, and is offered, at most, twice a year. Literature courses at Centralia are capped at 36 students, and there are generally 30-36 students enrolled in American literature each time the course is offered. The course textbook is an anthology of American literature, typically Pearson's *Concise Anthology of American Literature*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, or the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*.

3.1 Deploying Lack, Lag and Rosy Past as Topoi in a Rural Critical Pedagogy and the Bias of Anthologies

Vignette: The Giant Book

On the first day of my American literature class, I typically pull out the assigned anthology so my students can see the edition and cover of the book. It is not uncommon for me to hear an overwhelming vocal response. “Really, Mrs. M? Are you seriously expecting us to bring this giant book to class every day?” is a typical comment, usually accompanied with the requisite eye rolling, shoulder drooping, and open mouth gasps. These books are paperback, but they are not light and fluffy. They often have over a thousand pages on rice paper thin sheets. They could be used as adequate door stops against hurricane force winds. They cover works by American authors from before there was a United States right up to the present time, and often, there is an attempt at breadth of the subject. A few students will have brought the text with them on the first day, but often they number less than half the class. Financial aid won’t pay for books until a student has attended a first class. Other students have been stunned by the cost of the book, and they are waiting to see if they have to actually use the book in class, or whether they may be able to share with another person. Once the text is explored in the first class period, I make it a point to use the book every single day. My students have a keen sense that if they have slapped down their hard earned money, we darn well better use the book.

Given the obvious difficulties in using a giant behemoth of a textbook, why would I assign it? Aren’t there other, shorter texts, more limited in scope, or more focused on a theme, perhaps, that could help students reach their course outcomes and objectives? Certainly, it would

be reasonable to make that choice, but there are a number of restraints for instructors who teach Centralia College's American literature survey course (and, no doubt, at similar community college institutions), and this, in turn, serves to limit the textbooks that are most often assigned. Because the course needs to cover such a wide range of time, genres, authors and topics, the large anthologies end up being more useful for the entire class, and less expensive than assigning 10-15 individual texts. And there are multiple pressures that require freshman-level American literature courses to serve as wide-ranging surveys.

To begin with, the course needs to be "transferrable" to a variety of other institutions of higher education in the state of Washington. When developing course outlines, individual instructors are required to check to be sure the course will be accepted when students transfer to the University of Washington, Washington State University, Western Washington University, Central Washington University and Eastern Washington University. A second tier of colleges, which are not considered central by the State Board for Technical and Community Colleges, must also be consulted because students regularly transfer from Centralia College to The Evergreen State College, St. Martin's University, Pacific Lutheran University and a host of other small, private colleges in the state. Often, if the University of Washington will accept a course for transfer, the other schools will follow their lead; however, this is not always the case. So, as much as possible, the content of the course must satisfy the wishes of each of these institutions. The result is that the course outline is fairly general, and some would say traditional, survey of 19th and 20th century American literature. To meet such a wide audience's needs, the anthologies are a useful and cost effective, especially if using an older edition.

The need for the Centralia College American literature course to meet outside constraints is extended to the other community college's in Washington because of common course

numbering, enforced by the State Board for Technical and Community Colleges, and legally required by the Washington State Legislature since summer 2008 (“Common”). While the content is not checked against the title officially, deans in the CCs monitor these courses as they are developed and the curriculum review committees on each local campus would not allow a course that has content dramatically mismatched with the title of the course. The course outlines are created on each campus, but there is no general consensus, other than course title, between community college campuses. The transfer institutions either accept or do not accept the transfer credits for courses, and so again, there is a tendency to go with the most traditional version of any course so that it will be acceptable to the greatest number of transfer colleges. The texts presented in an anthology have been accepted by the profession at large, so these anthologies become a common choice for freshman level American literature surveys. Among other things, this means that critical pedagogies must be formulated (in my institution and other similar community college contexts) within these curricular constraints and preoccupations with course transfer.

Matching a general title to content may not seem overly limiting, but all courses at the community college level must pass an internal review by curriculum committees made up of stakeholders from across the campus that decide whether courses that are offered fit well with the budget and scheduling needs of the rest of the college. That also means that despite an initial review by peers in a department, the ultimate “okay” for the course comes from a committee made up of people who are not content area specialists. The collegiality and professionalism of these committees, while often of the highest level, depends heavily on the administrator in charge to set limits for questions concerning course outlines and the tone of these conversations. When confronted with a hostile committee, course outlines may migrate to the “safest” version

of a course, which means the most traditional since other faculty are remembering courses they took as undergraduates five to forty years before. American literature is, unfortunately, a course that other faculty members believe themselves to be somewhat knowledgeable about, providing for more meddling in course content than in, say, a statistics course or a nursing course.

On my campus, there is one remaining area of constraint. Because we are a relatively small campus, with only 2,580 full-time students (1,000 of whom are enrolled in college transfer courses and programs), there are limited offerings for American literature (“About Centralia”). We do not have the student population to support multiple forms or sub varieties of literature. There is only one American literature course, one Non-western World literature course, one Women’s literature course, and one British literature course offered at the freshman/sophomore level. These courses are surveys precisely so that the few students who will be majoring in literary studies at their transfer institutions have a wide enough background to facilitate some general understanding of the overall patterns of literature before they move on to upper division courses. For all students transferring on after completing their Associate in Arts degree, survey literature courses fulfill part of their general requirements.

So, given all of this, the large anthology, for good or ill, is the best tool for meeting the needs of the course outline and the financial constraints for students. While these texts serve these purposes well, there is a curricular concern. Typically students use the book as their only real reference. While this is not what I would encourage if these students were English majors, they are not. I will often bring in additional materials to the classroom, but the time constraints of the large survey course and students’ often limited interest in the content generally make adding reading assignments outside of the textbook a less successful approach. The students have limited financial resources and time. As is typical for community college students, they are they

are often working at least part time, and may be caring for family members or siblings. While the ideal would be to include multiple and frequent additional materials, it is important to make the best use of the materials that are immediately available, in this case, the major textbook for the class. The ancillary materials in the anthologies include a preface, introductions to sections of the book, introductions to specific authors, and occasional web resources or end of section questions. While I can encourage and support students who read the ancillary materials, Bartholomae's comments are an important reminder of the impact of reading only one perspective on any work of literature. Once students begin to write about that text; "The act of writing, here, has a personal cognitive history... that is made possible by prior texts," and reading research, Bartholomae continues, makes "it possible to say that these prior texts, or a reader's experience with these prior texts, have bearing on how the text is read" (596). So if students have read the ancillary materials prior to reading / discussion / class activities / writing activities, then what appears in these ancillary materials and introductions form part of the students' reactions. If students have had limited exposure to these types of texts or have only seen one example, from an anthology, for example, their thinking about these texts will be shaped by the language they have seen used and are attempting to replicate to some degree in their own responses to the literary works.

Because these ancillary materials will be the place where students look first for information on the assigned works in my American literature survey course, this section of my project is devoted to a brief, closer examination of the ancillary materials in three major American literature anthologies, which I might use in this freshman-level survey course. The three dominant topoi of lack, lack and rosy past (Donehower, Hogg and Schell *Rural* 1) appear in the editor's written texts that frame and contextualize these anthologies. Because the three topoi

appear often in the ancillary materials, they serve as a readily available frame that can be used in critical rural pedagogies designed to help students critically read, engage, and challenge thin or simplistic rural representations. Rather than simply accepting the information and contexts for the literary texts as presented in the ancillary materials, students should be able to talk back, contest and question these presentations of text, and I will provide several activities that assist students to recognize and push back against these representations of the rural. Because it would be time prohibitive to create activities to accompany each text, I have included one activity for each of the three major anthologies.

3.1.1 Analyzing Ancillary Materials in Anthologies

I have chosen to examine the ancillary materials found in American literature anthologies, focusing on American literature texts that have met two criteria. First, they must be works that can be taught according to the Centralia College American literature course outline, and second, works that focus on characters, imagery, narrative, or settings that highlight rural areas or small towns because my rural students have the lived experiences that allow them to recognize when the texts' representations of the rural do and do not match their knowledge of rural peoples and places. Three works that meet these criteria are authored by: Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost, and Flannery O'Connor. I will also briefly address the degree to which similar constructions of the rural are dominant in the ancillary materials for the three chosen authors/works across three commonly used text books on my campus, the *Pearson Concise Anthology of American Literature* (2006), the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2008), and the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (2009).

When presenting these authors' works, the three anthologies follow similar, though not identical patterns. All three include excerpts from Thoreau's *Walden*: "II: Where I lived and What I lived for," "XVII Spring," and "XVIII Conclusion." Each anthology includes 14-16 individual poems by Robert Frost. Poems that appear in all three are: "Mending Wall," "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Design." Each of the anthologies included only one O'Connor short story. Two included "Good Country People" while the Heath anthology included "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

It is important to remember who uses the ancillary materials that accompany these author's works and how that might alter the students' understandings. Students are expected to reference these sections to add context and depth to their understanding of these texts.

Realistically, in a freshman or sophomore level American literature course the majority of students are not literature majors. Those with a declared major or a special interest in the subject will read these materials, but the rest of the class may not. A few students will read the ancillary materials and not the assigned text. Although editors of these texts hope students will read these materials, there also is a second audience. Instructors, teaching assistants and professors will also reference these materials.

This larger audience is visible in the editor's inclusion of a timeline referencing what has come before and what will come later, specific literary techniques or stylistic contributions to be found in the selected texts by each author, and the additional references often provided. Few general studies students care that there are other, more specific books to read about each author and his or her works. However, for the new teaching assistant, who is using an anthology for the first time, the adjunct instructor who was just handed the anthology and course outline days before the start of the course (not unusual in community colleges), or the professor who is

teaching outside the narrow band of his or her expertise, these introductory and ancillary materials are a god-send. Ancillary materials are read carefully, notes are taken, and at times, they drive pedagogy.

The genre of anthology ancillary materials has some specific features and limitations. The introductory materials must serve multiple audiences. The instructor approaches the textbook as one who “knows” and just needs a brief refresher or as a person who clearly knows much more than can be written into the introduction and may be critical of this information as a reader. The editor also needs to please colleagues in the field. What will other professors think of the approach used in the ancillary materials? Does it play to a particular strand of thinking in the field – political, newest theories, student centered, critical in its stance to a particular subfield of study? Meanwhile, for the publisher, introductions must be an item that “sells” the book. Introductions need to take up a minimal number of pages, due to publishing costs, yet need to be the item that, in part, draws instructors’ attention. Ancillary materials need to help with sales, yet not make the total cost of the textbook too expensive. This is a tricky line to walk, and necessitates a generalization of concepts and often a macro-view of materials. Finally, ancillary materials need to be clearly organized to help students interpret the text that follows and to place the work within a particular time frame, social context, and theoretical framework.

As a result, the ancillary materials follow a prescribed pattern that has been created by the editor, which is replicated throughout the anthology. The editor builds the illusion of a single text, rather than a collection of random texts bound together. For the editor, the question becomes how much parallel structure is enough. Whatever the choices, the remaining piece should match the pattern, limiting the editor’s options in the ancillary materials. The ancillary materials need to be written at a freshman college reading level, with enough of an interesting

construction to hold students' attention. These students may not know much about the texts or the authors, so the information must be clear and relatively comprehensive. It helps if it can peak interest, telling enough to make a student curious enough to do more reading on his or her own. References to others works is a standard inclusion, but copious in-text citations or footnotes make the introductory texts much less readable, so editors most often provide a brief list of reference materials at the end of the introduction.

In terms of representations of the rural, literature anthologies also reflect the general cultural use of lack, lag and rosy past when introducing texts in their ancillary materials. Although I could do a full analysis of the anthologies to support this assertion, given the focus of this dissertation on pedagogy, it is more useful here to provide a typical example and then to focus on how to use them in the context of a critical rural pedagogy approach. In *The Concise Anthology of American Literature*, the introductory section "The Age of Romanticism" (McMichael and Leonard 399-403), frames the rural as a place without cultural value on its own merits. Instead, the intro materials suggest that increasingly urban authors were necessary to bring the rural out of its low, culturally unimportant, or lacking, position. As the editors explain, "American character types speaking local dialects appeared in poetry and fiction with increasing frequency. Literature began to celebrate American farmers, the poor, the unlettered, children, and noble savages (red and white) untainted by society" (403). It is interesting to note how the farmer has become an outsider, marginalized with the rest of the categories in this list. The rural person is not part of the mainstream although most people still lived in rural environments until 1910, according to the U.S Census, well after the Age of Romanticism is considered over by academics. In 1910, 54.4% of the population was classified as living in rural environments, and by 1920 that number had dropped to 48.8% ("Population"). By comparison, in 1860, 80.2% were

classified as rural, while in 1990, the percentage of the U.S. population classified as rural had dropped to 24.8% (“Population”). The editor seems to be reflecting an impression dominant in the modern world, namely that rural spaces are inhabited by people who were left behind, who are not up-to-date, or who are on the edges of society, rather than examining these ideas through the historical context of a predominantly rural population.

The concepts of lack, lag and rosy past create a bias that will not help instructors who are not familiar with the rural, especially if they are “transient exotic” professors, as already referenced in Chapter 2 (Zencey 16), who are not from rural settings and, therefore, less attentive to this minimization of the rural. In fact, the ancillary materials potentially reinforce the marginalization of rural students’ experiences in the world of higher education. Because ancillary materials are a shortened written form, varying from a short paragraph to a page or two, it is not surprising that the language reveals an embedded bias that depicts the rural simplistically and that draws on commonplace representations of the rural. This constructed representation is reinforced, and students are expected to accept these ideas, lack, lag and rosy past, as true. Kenneth Burke’s terministic screen is helpful for understanding that these materials are written by people who are not attuned to the complexities of rural life, and therefore they rely on the more simplistic bias of the larger culture, which prioritizes the urban. The term “rural” directs the attention of these writers to the culturally dominant definition, for as Burke states “...any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (45). Although the understanding of rural expressed in the ancillary materials is not false, it reflects only one understanding of the reality of the rural, or as Burke describes, the same object may be observed through a different “color filter, with corresponding differences in the nature of the

event as perceived, recorded, and interpreted” (46).

Examples of this limited representation of the rural are abundant in each of the anthologies’ ancillary materials for Thoreau, Frost and O’Connor. Rural students more complicated understanding of who lives in rural spaces, how people interact with others in rural areas, and what occurs in those spaces does not appear in American literature texts that foreground rural locations and peoples. My greatest concern is the likelihood that rural students will “read” themselves as outside of the academic landscape. They will not see themselves in these works. Additionally, because they are freshman and sophomores (who may be aged from sixteen to sixty), they may or may not have the experience or confidence in academic setting to contest these depictions or see the classroom as an opportunity for making productive connections between course content and their everyday lives.

In order to complicate the anthologies limited depictions of the rural in the context of a critical rural pedagogy, I offer in this chapter classroom activities, writing assignments, and interactive experiences with the authors’ works that move beyond the ancillary materials, while taking advantage of the topoi of lack, lag and rosy past, culturally resonant ideas that students can contest. They can explore how these terms are controlled, deployed and perhaps resisted, how they appear in texts, and how their use by authors reflect deliberate minimizing strategies or culturally embedded attitudes. The speed and breadth of content coverage in a survey course are important when considering how students will be asked to work. Generally, individual texts are read by students before the one class in which the work is discussed. Then, students move on to the next text, read before the next class session, which will also be accorded one in class session before moving on. This is a breakneck pace. Every class session and assignment needs to make the best possible use of time and energy. Despite the fact that there are multiple ways to

approach each work, and because so many students are not English majors, interactive class activities become especially important. With that in mind, the following activities and assignments serve as examples for what may be achieved within the confines of time and student expertise in the subject area. My goal is to provide a sampling of what is possible and how an American literature survey course might make use of critical rural pedagogy. Through the next two sections, I will provide examples for taking advantage of a critical reading of the anthology ancillary materials, and then I will share activities for use with the literary texts for the remainder of the chapter.

3.1.2 Opening Activities to Prepare for Critical Rural Pedagogy

The opening day of class presents an interesting opportunity, not only to set the tone for the work to come, but to engage students in challenging assumptions they may have about the range of experiences their classmates bring to future discussions and analysis of American literature. It is important when teaching with a critical rural pedagogy that students see their rural experiences in the classroom as central. Each student's experiences are to be valued, included and encouraged when supporting, contesting, or speaking back to the representations of the rural later in the class. In order to set this tone, I use the "The Who Has" game, to reveal the variety of student experiences and expertise without placing any one student in a position of being the sole representative of a particular group, or making shy students uncomfortable. Even at this early point, the idea of rural students as a static or homogenous group can begin to be chipped away. At the start of the activity, each student gets a pile of paper. I often use 3x5 cards, cut in half. As each question is asked, those students who have the experiences repeat or describe the

experiences on a slip of paper.

I also participate in this activity so that I can model an initial response, and so that my experiences will also be added to the general class knowledge. For example, I begin with “Who has traveled outside the United States?” and model a possible answer, emphasizing that students may add details if they wish. Once all the questions have been asked and answered, I collect the slips and as a group we see what experiences we will be able to draw from in our class.

Additionally, this activity makes visible those areas that student may or may not want to highlight while providing support for all experiences and their value as perspectives that will help make discussion of the texts more complicated and interesting. This opening activity also works well because it does not diminish the experiences of individual students. Instead, the importance of each person’s contributions to class becomes the baseline from which class discussion will operate. A variety of questions might include “Who has _____”:

- Traveled outside the U.S.
- Lived on a farm
- Taken a subway
- Worked full time
- Attended a small high school
- Attended a large high school
- Attended private school
- Lived in a ranch style house
- Eaten food you have grown / raised
- Children
- Been the primary person responsible for siblings
- Spoken more than one language
- Figured out how to get around with a city bus or rail schedule
- Traveled on a train
- Ridden a horse
- Owned or cared for livestock
- Owned a car
- Shared ownership of a car
- Worked for family, without pay

This in-class activity activates the guidelines for rural critical pedagogy, creating a space in which rural vocabulary and experiences are valued equally within the classroom setting, making evident the previously unseen details of their classmates' experiences, creating a more complicated understanding of the academic setting, and developing a context for the position of rural students in the dominant societal representations. When the complexity and variety of experiences is made visible, students have concrete evidence that the rural, as a place that is lacking, is lagging behind, and/or is a reflection of a rosy past, can be directly called into question. The next step is to ask students to create a definition of a rural person, based on the information their classmates have provided in this activity. I often ask students to work in small groups so that at the end of the activity there are multiple definitions, but the total number is limited so that we can share them as a class.

As with most pedagogical moves, this one activity does not completely develop all aspects of the guidelines for critical rural pedagogy. Also, this activity is not intended to serve as a separate or finalizing conversation. Instead, the "Who Has...." game is one small part of a longer-term series of intellectual opportunities for students to enrich their sense of the world and places within it. Additionally, this activity is one of numerous chances for students to practice making direct comparisons between what is represented about the rural and their own experiences. We can begin to develop intellectual structures that will help them to express and explore these complications. For example, just a few of these structures might include short definition, comparison and contrast charts that then lead to prose expressions of those same ideas, adding details to a statement, and citing from another text to support a statement. With this opening activity, students can begin to orient their own ideas and experiences of the rural within

the ideas that circulate in the dominant culture. This activity also opens a space for recognizing that individuals may occupy multiple positions of power, as depicted in their rural definitions and highlighted through instructor led discussion. Critical pedagogy encourages students to call into question the hegemonic structures in place around them over time, and the guidelines I have proposed for rural critical pedagogy do the same, with an enhanced focus on a particular subset of experiences pertaining to the rural, without minimizing other experiences students bring to the classroom setting.

3.1.3 Activities to Problematize Anthology Introductions to Thoreau, Frost, and O'Connor

I also include more specific activities that encourage students to speak back, to question, to complicate the information they are given in the introductions. Because, as noted earlier, these ancillary materials might be the only context students have for each American literature text the class covers, critical rural pedagogy can be useful in helping students see those texts as only one, limited way to envision the rural. I have included one example of a classroom activity to accompany an introduction from each of the most common anthologies: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. - W.W. Norton & Company, (2008); *Concise Anthology of American Literature* – Pearson (2006); and *Heath Anthology of American Literature: Volumes A-E*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning (2009).

The Norton Anthology of American Literature, published by W.W. Norton & Company, (2008), and edited by Nina Baym has a five page introduction to the works of Henry David Thoreau. Because the text is particularly dense, it is helpful to isolate a specific section of the introduction for closer examination by students. One in-class exercise gives students tools for

exploring the information and language used by the introduction’s author. I have pulled one small section of the introduction, which students often read too quickly, or not at all. The language is inserted in the chart below, which is then distributed to students in class. Ideally, students would work through this activity in groups of two or three so that a variety of responses can be gleaned and so that all students participate. The principles of critical rural pedagogy that are enacted in this activity includes situating the strategies to the students and their context, helping students express their ideas, and exploring the language students bring with them from their rural lives to the classroom.

From the Introduction (826-8)	Central Idea	How you would rephrase this for a friend?	Does this language suggest lack, lag, or rosy past? How?	How have you seen this depiction of the rural appear in public discourse or popular culture?	How does this depiction match or not with your own experiences with and perceptions of the rural?
To his great embarrassment, during a camping trip in April of that year, he accidentally set fire to the Concord woods near Walden Pond, burning approximately three hundred acres and causing over \$2,000 in damage.					

Shortly after this event, Thoreau decided to begin what he termed his “experiment” at Walden, building a cabin on land that Emerson owned near the pond					
and taking up residence there on July 4, 1845 – a symbolic moment of personal liberation aligned with the celebration of national freedom.					
One of Thoreau’s major goals in moving to the pond was to write a book about his 1839 boating journey with his brother (which he completed before he left after two years, two months, and two days).					
Only a couple of miles from town, his cabin became the destination of many local visitors, and he often went back to Concord for meals and conversation.					
These events are recorded in <i>Walden</i> but the effect of its					

<p>descriptions of Thoreau alone at the pond – and the book’s frequently confrontational tone – were such that many readers are surprised to learn that Thoreau could, after all, be sociable.</p>					
<p>By the middle of the twentieth century, Thoreau’s literary reputation equaled or surpassed Emerson’s, with <i>Walden</i> regarded as one of the masterpieces of American literature.</p>					
<p>It is a work that has powerfully affected environmentalists like John Muir and Aldo Leopold, who greatly admired Thoreau for his concerns about the natural habitat</p>					
<p>From the Introduction (826-8)</p>	<p>Central Idea</p>	<p>How you would rephrase this for a friend?</p>	<p>Does this language suggest lack, lag, or rosy past? How?</p>	<p>How have you seen this depiction of the rural appear in public discourse or popular culture?</p>	<p>How does this depiction match or not with your own experiences with and perceptions of the rural?</p>

Figure 2. Close Reading an Introduction.

By responding to these questions, students will be improving their skills in close reading, an important goal of the course, but the last four columns provide for a ways for students' own language to be highlighted and sought after in the discussion that follows the group work. The topoi lack, lag, or rosy past are also enacted. By following the pair work with a larger discussion, or by asking two groups to share their work with each other, the ways in which students conceptualize terms that may be regarded differently by those students with different contexts may be brought out. A following, more extended essay assignment could follow the in class use of the questions and form presented above. Students could next be assigned a more targeted assignment, asking them to explore the ways that terms have complicated interpretations, to include "environmentalists, natural habitat, pond, cabin, and camping." For example, the students' conception of a cabin is open to wide variation in a rural setting, and even more so when students' ideas about cabins are compared with photographs of Thoreau's replicated cabin, which are readily available through the Internet.

Another distinction in representations that can be explored is the difference between Thoreau's "natural habitat" that is a domesticated rural landscape that had been significantly altered by the presence of farmers, country roads, and people's needs to make a living. There are ponds that have been created or eliminated, fences that have been erected, and little out buildings, like his cabin, have been built. Students may have an impression of a natural habitat that is much less altered by people. A paper assignment that directs students to make comparisons with Thoreau's use of several of these terms with the use of these terms in the present time, along with examples, gives students an opportunity to improve their writing abilities, their analysis of text, and how these texts may relate to parallel ideas in a modern context.

A second anthology, the *Concise Anthology of American Literature*, published by Pearson (2006), has much shorter introductions to author's works. The introduction for Robert Frost is not quite a full page (McMichael and Leonard 1537). One way to question the representation in this introduction is to ask students to mark each instance where the introduction suggests something about Frost that strikes them as "negative" and something that strikes them as "positive". For example, in the Frost introduction the editors state "...Frost eked out a minimal living by teaching and farming while continuing to write his poems" (1537). So Frost was unable to make a living both farming and teaching? The editors point out that Frost had to leave, in fact to go all the way to London, to be culturally recognized. The implied solution is to abandon the rural location and go to where there is culture. This is especially problematic for rural students because they will recognize the complicated aspects of rural life that Frost foregrounds and explores in his poems. The editors' posit "To his rural New England neighbors, Robert Frost was an unlikely farmer who wrote poetry into the late hours and milked his cows at midnight. To much of the American public, he was a white-thatched, rustic sage, a poet of rural simplicity and public virtue" (1537). While this section makes clear a positive image of Frost connected to virtue, the combination of this image with "rural simplicity" complicates the connotation, and gives students an opportunity to explore the ways that language of this introduction flattens the rural world Frost himself is attempting to capture.

Frost's poems illustrate, in part, the complexity of a life that appears quiet and still from the outside but is built on turmoil, violence, variation, and dynamism. The editors also conflate the language of his poems with supposedly rural speech patterns; "He employed the plain speech of rural New Englanders and preferred the short, traditional forms of lyric and narrative" (1537). This sense of Frost as surface and simplistic is immediately contrasted with a statement that

suggests surprise that Frost's poems have deeper meaning; "his concern with nature reflected deep moral uncertainties, and his poetry, for all its apparent simplicity, often probes mysteries of darkness and irrationality in the bleak and chaotic landscapes of an indifferent universe where men and women stand alone, forsaken and perplexed" (1537). When students "flag" the language that strikes them as negative or positive, they open up a possible conversation around why these ideas carry emotional impressions, whether the negative / positive impression varies depending on the audience, and how they might alter the language to reflect a less biased representation of Frost's writing life. This in-class exercise will then provide leverage for a more in-depth discussion or a short reflective writing at the end of the class session. The editor's idealization of the rural past cannot be sustained when the poems' themes and structures are carefully examined. Unfortunately, the continuous use of the representations of a rural past that was idyllic remains, even by careful academics. By pushing back against these embedded representations in the introduction, students are better able to come to Frost's poems with a more open, more complicated understanding of the rural than that provided in the introduction, and that lens does not reduce their expectations for Frost's range of emotions and complicated depictions in poetic form.

The third commonly used anthology is the *Heath Anthology of American Literature: Volumes A-E*, published by Wadsworth Cengage Learning (2009). Flannery O'Connor's work appears in Volume E: "Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present" and the introduction is a little more than a page long (Lautner 2567-8). The introduction does not focus on the rural. There is a slight, almost offhanded, rural reference to the end of her life, "But mostly she lived quietly on the farm [after 1950] – until surgery in February 1964 reactivated the lupus; she died in August at the age of 39" (2567). There is no conversation or exploration of her deeper connection with

the rural place where she lived and died. The only other moment that touches on the rural points out what is missing; “Yet her characters are not so much fallen aristocrats as poor or middle-class whites, who often don’t realize that their lives are lacking” (2567). The blunt statement about what is missing and how people are too backward and simple to even realize what is not in their lives can be read as an insult by rural students. I was stunned to discover that Flannery O’Connor’s introductory materials did not see the rural locations of her stories as important enough for commentary. The students in my American literature classes have always identified with her, sometime quite forcefully, as a rural author. Despite the distance between Washington State and the southern United States, my rural students have spoken about her works with a sense of connection, a recognition that the difficult situations she creates not only could happen in rural spaces, but in rural areas where they live. Her descriptions of rural spaces, her use of local speech patterns, and her choices to explore complicated ideas through rural characters resonates with students.

Enacting a direct approach to complicating the missing rural in this introduction, I can ask students to complete a short, in-class activity. I have included the instructions sheet below.

“Yet her characters are not so much fallen aristocrats as poor or middle-class whites, who often don’t realize that their lives are lacking” (2567) is a statement in the introduction to Flannery O’Connor in our textbook. If you were to write a short story that is set in a rural location, what other sorts of characters could you include? Make a list of people who could populate your story. Be prepared to share your list with the class in discussion. Why have you included these characters / types of people?

Figure 3. Rural Characters

Student's lists are the first of several steps that give students a way to capture the more complex variety of peoples they are familiar with in rural areas. By asking them to write them down in a list form, the complexity may be captured, though not completely. The next step is to combine the lists in a format where all students can comment, interact, and add to the discussion. A white board or shared electronic space works well. If there is time, a follow-up to this activity asks students to more fully develop at least one of the characters that have been briefly identified in the class list. This activity again highlights the importance of students' language and knowledge of the rural world, providing a space in an academic classroom where their knowledge adds to the value of the intellectual discussion. This is an important principle in critical rural pedagogy. When there is time, a nice follow up written assignment puts students into groups of two or three, and asks them to write a short fictional piece in which their characters interact.

A follow-up to this assignment further pushes against the bias of the rural as a place where the people are simplified or flattened in textual representations. Students are asked to find a person they find interesting from the local community and then share this person with the class through digital story telling. The impetus to find someone who is "interesting" should focus students toward sharing real people from the community who have caught the students' attention. The process of choosing a person brings each group into an important internal conversation about what is interesting. Is this person doing something surprising? Is this person doing something familiar in an especially intriguing way? The need to discover and then share more than a surface representation achieves several of the goals for a critical rural pedagogy, including giving students an opportunity to create and share their own rural representations, helping them

to develop tactics and skills that help reveal the limiting biases of the rural and speak back against those biases. While the required pace of the class may prohibit this last portion of the assignment to be used, it may be possible to offer this as an enrichment assignment for those who can take the time.

3.2 Activities that Enact Critical Rural Pedagogy: Activities for Texts in an American Literature Classroom

3.2.1 College Classroom as Context

My Centralia College students' diversity of experiences is often reflected in the variety of their clothing. There are younger, running start students who wear high school letter jackets, logoed high school t-shirts and hoodies; older students may have just come from or are headed off to work, so they may be in suits, with dress shoes. Others wear actual pajama bottoms and slippers along with an oversized sweatshirt. There are those who dress to attract the attention of their classmates, and those who dress to never be noticed. There are designer handbags and Wal-Mart sale bags. Another clothing pattern in my classes is Carhartt jackets and field boots, frequently with remnants of the fields still adhering to that footwear. The students in Carhartts often have "gimmie" hats from the feed store, their jeans have tears and holes from encounters with barbed wire fences or from irritated farm animals or from just having been worn for too long. There are worn leather work gloves in their pockets. The question for me, as their instructor, then becomes how to engage all my students, and to find pedagogically sound activities that, when appropriate, draw on the use of lack, lag and rosy past as dominant topoi for

deeply critical readings of the texts. I need to use contexts, activities, and assignments that will allow rural students to draw on their expertise.

After having explored the ancillary materials and clearly noted that those materials replicate the dominant ideas of the rural as places of lack, lag, and/or a rosy past, it is clear that students in my rural community college who enroll in the American literature survey course could benefit from an interventionist deployment of critical rural pedagogy. Using the theoretical framework I offered in Chapter 2, which provides for students from rural areas to develop their intellectual voices in the college classroom, encourages them to bring their lived experiences into their discussions and coursework, and helps them to begin to sort through the complicated power dynamics of being part of a dominant cultural group while recognizing the ways that, as rural students, they may also occupy a position that has been marginalized over time. I now provide examples for classroom activities that reflect a pedagogy that encourages rural and small town students in the class to share their expertise. Ideally, students will be able to deploy their lived experiences and their developing knowledge of the constructed nature of these texts (made by a person for a particular reason, not a transcendent rendering of “truth”) to problematize and enrich their interactions with American literature texts that foreground the rural in their locations and characters. Having these additional perspectives voiced should add to, not overwhelm or diminish other voices in academic discussions, whether at the community college level, or at transfer universities. Additionally, I hope rural students might recognize the value of their experiences in an academic world that at times may be oblivious to or even hostile to rural experiences.

Providing a context that frames the class and identifies the importance of representation, power structures, and how students may see themselves in relation to these ideas is an important

step toward creating an ongoing conversation for the length of the class. One activity, modeled on the work of Amie Kay/Kantrowitz, who writes about teaching across differences (285-6), helps students to contextualize hegemonic structures that appear in the works, and to prompt more critical interplay between all the texts read over the course. First, using the syllabus, students identify all the texts to be read in the anthology. Generally, the reading list in the American Literature survey includes 20-30 authors, with more than one reading from most authors. These authors and their work represent multiple geographic locations, let alone social and economic classes. In small groups, starting with only the clues of titles and general overview in the ancillary materials, they begin to compile a chart that points out various characters' and settings identity markers (language, dress, social status, race, geography). Since this is an ongoing assignment, which will be revisited periodically, not all the texts assigned need to be examined in one sitting. Instead, this chart can be revisited and revised. However, it is important that each session of this activity end with placing characters and or places on a visual hierarchy. Converting this information from text into images, even if they are minimalist stick people above and below each other on a white board, gives some students another entry point into their understanding of the power structures that are embedded in American literature. The visual aspect of this assignment can also work well as a digital map, created by the class in a wiki space.

The combination of the chart or map to illustrate a visual hierarchy may serve well as a jumping off point for written assignments that address questions such as: What do these stories suggest about who has power, who keeps power, who gains power and whether that system should change? For those texts that include rural characters and locations, this assignment provides a scaffold for all students to notice how the rural is constructed and gives students with

rural lived experiences an invitation to bring that knowledge to bear as they discuss the implications of this visual hierarchy on the rural images texts create.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide examples of activities that may be used when teaching Henry David Thoreau's "II Where I Lived and What I Lived For" from *Walden*, Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," and Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." While it is possible to include many more activities and works, I have chosen to highlight the following as examples of what might be accomplished when using a critical rural pedagogy. I have chosen these specific texts because they explicitly foreground rural imagery, people, or places, providing a clear path for the connection with and/or contestation against these representations by my rural community college students.

3.2.2 Henry David Thoreau's "II Where I Lived and What I Lived For" from *Walden*

When approaching Thoreau, students often have a surface understanding of his work, having read portions of his work in either high school government or American literature classes, but I would like them to interrogate the text with a more critical eye. Below I describe an activity, which may start in the classroom and then move into students' own reflective writing or formal essay length thinking, and focuses on Thoreau's attitude toward property ownership (826-8). Students begin in small groups, ideally two-four people per group, and examine the beginning of *Walden*, Chapter II "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" (826-837). They are to pay special attention to the language and attitudes Thoreau displays about farmers, property ownership and farming vs. gardening. Guiding questions for their discussion, which may be projected on a screen for the class or printed on a handout, include:

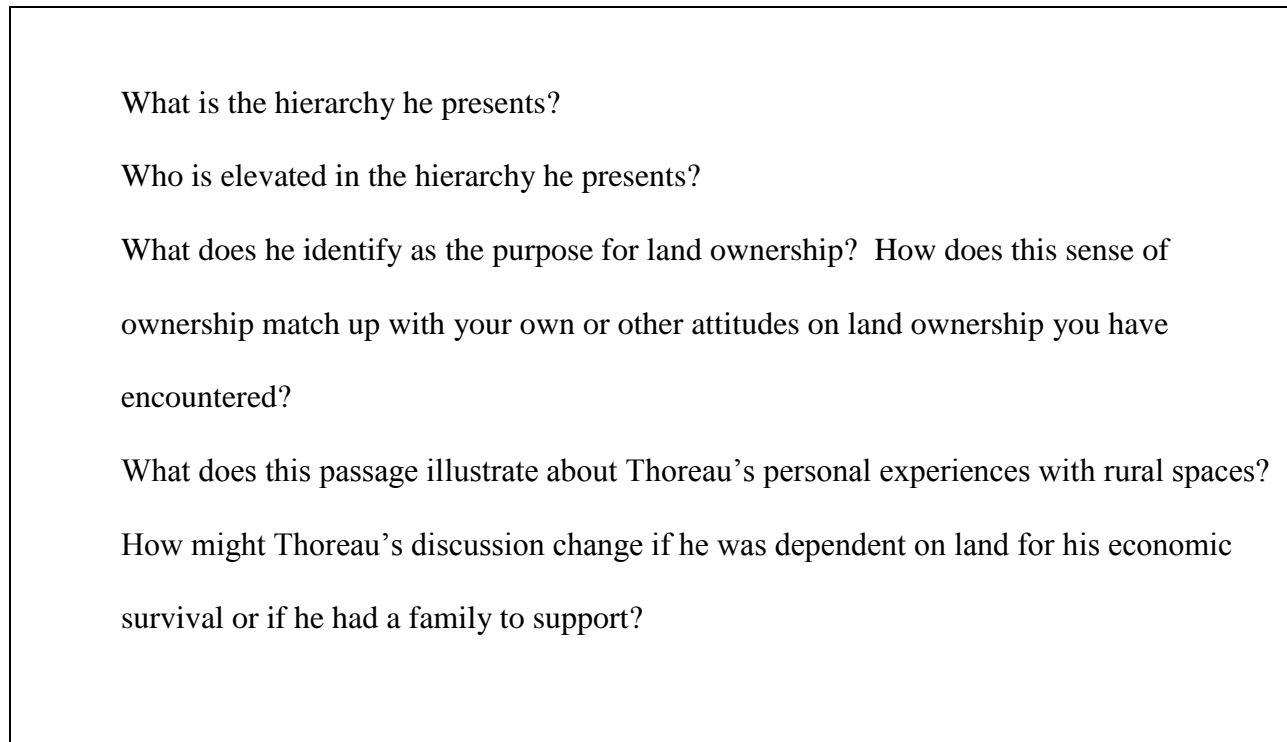


Fig. 4. Thoreau's *Walden* Questions

Critical rural pedagogy helps to position this assignment in a way that encourages students who come from farming or landowning families to articulate their perspective on what ownership means, against Thoreau's conception. Students who do not have experiences that complicate Thoreau's depictions and attitudes are also provided a context for looking at Thoreau's work from a "use of land" perspective. Students can bring their language and knowledge to the forefront of this discussion, allowing for a more robust analysis of the concept of property, not just as a label, but also to explore the cultural connections of property to power and prestige within a community. This push back against the text helps students recognize the limits of

Thoreau's ideology, and the exercise also asks all students to consider what is both revealed and obscured by Thoreau's perspective.

Another approach that could be used in the classroom builds on Thoreau's use of the term "sublime," which suggests an elevated, perhaps spiritual understanding of the transcendent power and beauty of natural space. Most often, he uses the term without a definition. A classroom activity that requires students to find all the uses of the term in the selection, and then attempt to explain what he might mean when using the word in each example provides for a concrete structure in which students get a chance to practice their close reading skills, and to develop their understanding of the rural world as Thoreau constructs it. The variations of his use of the term, and how that use conflates a natural setting with a rural, cultivated setting reveals the ways that rural spaces are created for particular purposes in literature.

A follow up written assignment asks students to compare Thoreau's use of the word sublime with another text of their choice that uses the word "sublime," though perhaps with a different meaning. A number of texts would work, ranging from the poetry of William Wordsworth to articles that extol the beauty and experience of skiing and hiking. The term sublime has multiple meanings, which students may not have considered closely before. Thoreau's essay assignment makes the pattern of land that is free of or has limited people having an exalted status, a point of contention in the modern world in rural spaces. Rural communities often want to use land to produce a living, while those from out of the area may wish to preserve the same land, at times at the expense of those who are living in the area under dispute. These negotiations and at times direct conflicts around land use also have the feature of language that creates a particular context. The topos of rosy past can rise to the surface and structure the ongoing disputes over land use, a scaffold for students to recognize and develop possible actions

in current land disputes. This paired assignment provides a structure for students' initial critical reading of Thoreau's work so that they may develop their ideas in context against another text. Ideally, students may choose a more modern text, and they may also choose from any genre, helping students work across time when evaluating the relevancy of Thoreau's ideas in the current world. This assignment, again, asks students to consider the specific language used in context in Thoreau's text and then to use comparison and contrast to uncover the more complicated nuances of his use of the term in a rural setting. Variations on this assignment are possible with a change from Thoreau's use of the word sublime to his use of hierarchy, or his use of binaries as a means of contrasting and clarifying his ideas. Rural critical pedagogy is in play as students are asked to question Thoreau's hierarchies, embedded in his fluid use of a term, which holds significance not only for this text, but within the larger Romantic Movement.

A variation on this assignment asks students, having already generated what the word sublime meant for Thoreau (or various things it could mean), to search in contemporary culture or their everyday experiences for moments that either 1) contradict these perceptions or 2) where similar ideas manifest. The overall question students may attempt to answer would be how sublime might be translated in contemporary or local culture. A journal response that records examples and students thoughts as they consider these questions would allow students to use their own language and context to explore the intersection of Thoreau's use of the word with their own. Private writing would give students a less risky space in which to question the context the word sublime. Especially for those students who have strongly opposing views to Thoreau's, having a safe space to work against his statements would support their ability to develop their own, more critical considerations around has assigned each purpose for land use.

As an alternative assignment, one might use the famous "I went to the woods to live

deliberately” (832), as the starting point for a conversation on the distinction between Thoreau’s words on nature/rural and current interpretations of his words, which may reflect current society’s needs, rather than the world in which Thoreau created his original work. The in-class assignment asks students to rephrase this paragraph in current language. Working together so that the experiences and expertise of the entire class can be brought into play, the rephrasing may be accomplished as a whole class with a student or teacher scribe to record the rephrasing. A white board, a large piece of paper, or a projected word file serve equally well as long as all members of the class can read the developing rephrase. It is equally workable to have students complete this independently before class and then share their individual versions as the entire group develops a class version on which all can agree. Certainly, Thoreau’s idealized vision, which may parallel the rosy past topoi, should emerge as part of this activity given Thoreau’s perspective. Students will have an opportunity to interrogate Thoreau’s philosophy and plans for carrying out a particular type of life. Rather than following this activity with a formal essay, a private response is written by each student, a less formal genre, with the prompt, “What was unexpected or what changed in your understanding of this passage after the class discussion?” The personal response allows students to insert their personal ideas, and perhaps, their experiences that underlie those ideas.

Lastly, another possible activity asks students to consider the way Thoreau’s quote has been appropriated over the last 50 years to represent a connection to unspoiled, unaltered nature. To start this comparison, a Google image search of the phrase “I went to the woods to live deliberately” creates a visual montage for students to consider. I have included an example screen shot below to demonstrate the patterns that quickly emerge when students see the ways Thoreau’s language has been placed in locations, combined with images, or embedded in

contemporary artwork.

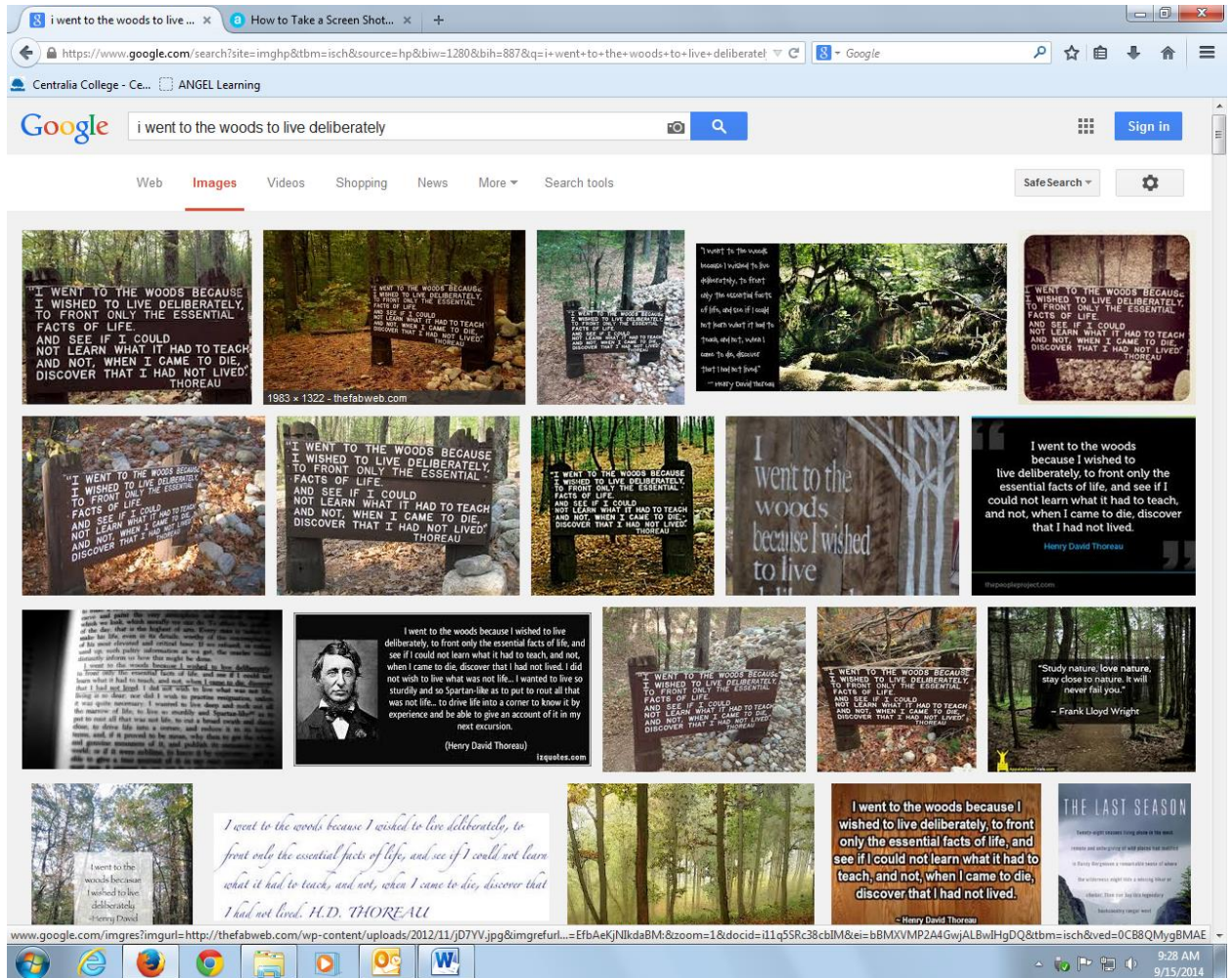


Fig. 5. Google Screen Shot, 15 September 2014.

The ever shifting nature of image searches on the Internet allows for a conversation by students that reflects up to the moment interpretations and expressions. This assignment also asks students to first recognize the ways that language is taken up by various people for multiple purposes. The exploration of these images should bring forward the ways language and imagery together alter the perception of Thoreau's initial statement. I have included an assignment sheet below to clarify this assignment.

“I went to the woods to live deliberately.”

For this assignment, consider the way Thoreau’s quote has been appropriated over the last 50 years to represent a connection to unspoiled, unaltered nature.

1- Complete a Google image search of the phrase “I went to the woods to live deliberately.”

2- Be sure to make a screen shot of the images that appear to include in your paper later.

3- Write a short paper (5-7 pages) that compares what Thoreau may have meant when he used the phrase “I went to the woods to live deliberately” in Walden, and the way the same phrase is used by people in your Google image search. Be sure to consider the following:

Explain Thoreau’s use of the phrase.

Look for patterns in the ways the phrase is represented in the Google images.

What are the various contexts in which the images of the phrase exist and how do these contexts affect the meaning?

What sorts of images accompany the text and to what extent do those images alter your understanding of Thoreau’s language?

What are the messages people are trying to share when they use Thoreau’s quote and how are those messages related to the places they include in the images?

What patterns emerge in the types of messages or visual formats?

Consider the messages that conservationists present about land and how it is to be used. Do their messages and goals match Thoreau’s? To what degree? What other responses to land ownership and use have been obscured or removed by both Thoreau and conservationists?

Figure 6. Living Deliberately Google Assignment

Because this assignment explicitly calls into question how language is used to create a particular vision of how a physical space should be considered by a community, and there are tensions that circulate around how land is used, this assignment brings the biases embedded in both the perspectives and assumptions that underlie conservationists' idealized vision and biases of other groups who wish to use land for profitable endeavors. The rural serves as a nexus through which these tensions may be expressed. There will be students who identify with multiple interests. Students may align with conservation efforts, with agricultural needs, and/or with recreational / tourist uses all at the same time. This assignment reveals these tensions and asks students to grapple with the competing ideas as they are expressed in text, a goal of critical rural pedagogy.

3.2.3 Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

When approaching Frost's "Mending Wall," there is a common experience that students can use as a starting point for their interactions with the text (1539-40). Prior to coming to class, students should complete a personal response to the following questions:

What fences have you encountered? Choose one fence from your experiences to consider further. Who built it? Who maintains it? What kinds of fences do we have in Centralia or on campus? What are the purposes of these fences? Have there been any changes to the fences over time? In what ways is the fence a barrier or if it is a liminal space, how does the fence operate as a site of transition?

Figure 7. Fence Questions

The purpose of this assignment is to provide students a space to consider the structure of fencing and its purpose in their own lives before exploring Frost's poem. Again, this technique encourages students to bring their own experiences into the classroom as legitimate perspectives to be considered in the discussion and exploration of the poem. Asking rural students to use their own experiences as a framework for approaching a text is an important component of critical rural pedagogy. Additionally, rural students will be both asked to share their experiences and vocabulary around fencing and will then see their work included with equal status to the text, able to serve as a point of comparison with Frost's use of a fence both as a literal conception and a metaphor, helping students develop tactics and skill for critical work that is built around their rural knowledge, a key goal for rural critical pedagogy.

A variation on this activity that will accomplish similar outcomes is to present fence imagery in class. Because the North Eastern United States stone wall is not a universal construction, and is certainly unusual in rural Washington State, students may have not seen the type of fence that Frost is referring to in his stone wall imagery. Other professors who use critical rural pedagogy will find they need to make these sorts of adjustments as well. All rural spaces are not homogenous, and these particularities of construction, land use, or means for living in a specific rural space are, of course, part of connecting students at a rural community college with their own understandings. For my students to understand these forms of fences, using projected photographs of NE style fences, along with fences from other parts of the country, can help students formulate a more complicated sense of how fences might be used. This context can then be transitioned into a class discussion of the poem. Contextualizing Frost's dominant image then

allows students to place their own experiences against this poem, an important aspect of critical pedagogy and especially important for rural critical pedagogy since the generalized fence/wall Frost uses is a familiar construct in rural spaces.

To close out this conversation and to provide an experience in which students find ways to talk, to add to the conversation in the academic setting, I ask students to create a “poetic list.” Poetic lists are collections of images, words or phrases that are not yet polished or complete. They may function as a form of poetic outline early in the creative, explorative phase of creating a poem. Poetic lists are designed to help students play with language and imagery before they attempt to choose specific portions of these lists, or to make formal revisions of the list into a recognized poetic form. In this case, I use them to give students a space to play, to explore developing language that is metaphorical, lyrical, or draw on any number of poetic devices so that they improve their written skills, to increase their appreciation of the difficulties in writing poetry, and to give them insights that will lead to more critical insights when working with poetry in American literature. I am asking students to explore not only the different connotations of the idea of “fence,” but to explore Frost’s use of the poetic form by attempting to develop poetic language of their own in response to Frost’s original.

Either individually or in pairs, the students choose a fence that is associated with something important for them, perhaps because of an event that happened around the fence, or because the fence represents a shift or change or border they have negotiated. They then make a list of images, words, or phrases that they would want to include in their own poem about their fence. Because most students in American literature at Centralia College are not creative writing or English majors, I would not require a formal poem. Instead, all students can then share their poetic lists with the class. This way, students have a low stakes activity that engages their

perspectives, provides a platform for sharing the variation and value of their ideas, and helps them to further develop strategies for speaking back against or in more complicating forms than the dominant cultural representations of the rural have allowed for previously.

Another in-class activity that may push back against the idea that the rural is simplistic and lacking in value is to do an in class exegesis of “Mending Wall.” Each student starts with a copy of poem to write on. Line by line, the class discussion walks through the major ideas and structural choices Frost makes in the poem. For example, why is the poem all one stanza? And if traditionally each stanza represents just one idea, does this hold in this poem? What is being suggested by Frost’s use of this structure? What are the complications within the poem? Why are there multiple modes of destruction that damage the fence? What is suggested by the specific imagery of the neighbor? The in-class activity can be followed with an essay assignment that encourages student to explore the complications and layers of meaning in the poem. Students would be asked to address how the poem represents more than one idea at the same time. Students would also be guided to explain the undercurrents in the poem and how they are answered or addressed. Using this more step-by-step approach, students can meet the course outcomes and improve their skills in responding meaningfully to poetry.

Finally, a larger project assignment that problematizes the poem and connects with students’ lives is a multi-modal assignment. After having discussed the poem in class, each student is asked to create a presentation that shows how an image of one object / idea that seems simple yet may be used to represent a personal perspective on more complicated set of ideas. Ideally, the image must refer to a chore or task the student is familiar with and each presentation must include images/music, as well as written text to explain the student’s ideas. The written text may appear in the presentation or may be a written document to accompany the presentation.

Critical pedagogy suggests that this opportunity to mimic Frost's strategy for compressing complicated ideas into a single image encourages students to think much more critically and to interrogate their own relationships with both the text and their own lives.

Soliciting a student's personal response, experiences and perspective on the poem allows my rural students to bring in their perspective in a way that validates their perspectives in the academic space. If students are also asked to share their work with the rest of the class, each student is also given an equally attended to voice. Working in the multi-modal form models the importance of these forms in the academic world, again, reinforcing the value of rural students' experiences and expertise. Rural students have a variety of experiences and degrees of expertise in multi-modal environments, and this assignment encourages them to not only share, but to improve on these skills. Connecting a multi-modal form with students' experiences further illustrated the ways that rural people do not lack cultural awareness and technological savvy.

3.2.4 Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People"

An outside of class response that answers the following questions serves to contextualize the discussion for "Good Country People" (O'Connor 2001-4). Students would be asked to write a page addressing the following questions and bring it with them to class.

Preparation Questions for O'Connor's "Good Country People"

What does the phrase "good country people" mean to you? How is this defined in the story?

How is it defined in the larger culture?

Figure 8. Good Country People Context.

By bringing their individual answers to class after having read the story, but before discussing the story in class, a variety of responses should be created. These responses will create a direct refutation to the idea that the rural is limited, as reflected in the idea of the rural as lacking, lagging, and/or just a reminder of a rosy past. Critical rural pedagogy seeks to give students a chance to work through their own revelations about texts, in order to support and value their responses to the dominant culture's accepted representations of the rural. O'Connor's phrase enacts and works against exactly those limitations, assuming that readers will see the minimization of country people embedded in the phrase and the ways it is used in the story.

In class, because students have already committed some of their ideas to paper, the discussion can begin with the following questions: What images, characters, and ideas do you connect with this phrase and what are the assumptions? This resulting conversation can be made visible by creating a concept map that both records students' ideas and clarifies their ideas in relation to other ideas presented in class and with a possible hierarchy that is established, reinforced or rejected by students' interpretations.

Following the discussion, a short in class activity explores where the phrase appears in O'Connor's short story. The speaker can be identified, along with the tone / intent of the statement when used by each character. Students can then write privately, or in a response journal, or have a small group discussion that encourages them to respond to the hierarchy in these statements. Possible prompting questions for this portion of the activity include:

How do you think of the phrase “good country people” as the reader? Does the use of the statement make you elevate or diminish the speaker? When is the phrase “good country people” a positive statement, a negative statement, a neutral statement? What does that say about the general use of the term and how it is used by/ for/ against specific characters?

Figure 9. O’Connor Story Title Questions.

The complicated relationships and the power structures between the characters may be revealed in the completion of these activities, disputing the ideas of rural places having a rosy past filled with simplistic people.

A second approach to O’Connor’s short story can also be used to show that rural places and people are not adequately represented by the dominant cultural ideas of lack or through the forced lens of a rosy past. An examination of O’Connor’s names in particular (Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. Hopewell, Joy / Hulga, Manley Pointer, Mrs. Freeman’s daughters Glyneses / Glycerine and Carramae / Caramel) can be a fruitful exercise. A series of columns, each with a character name at its top, can organize students’ examination of O’Connor’s characters. In each column, students working in pairs can list the details that emerge from the story for each character. Using columns can be a relatively quick way to demonstrate which characters are given more space in the story, and this can serve as a counter point to student discussion of the importance of each character in the story as a whole. Once students have their responses mapped out in the column, they can work next on a closer discussion or analysis of the names of the characters. Are these

names that students have encountered before? What does each name reveal or hide about each character? How do these characters compare with real people from our local area? To close the activity, students may be asked to answer the following question, “How might the story be categorized: allegory, myth, or cautionary tale? Support your choice with specific information from the story and your analysis of those examples.” This activity allows for students to meet the objectives and course outcomes of the course and encourages students to work through their own understanding of the power dynamics at play in the short story.

When pressed for time in a survey course, another option when reading a short story is to focus on one character. One choice is to examine Joy / Hulga in O’Connor’s short story “Good Country People” and how her interior thoughts and motivations influence the reader’s response to what happens to her. When being mindful of critical rural pedagogy, this exploration can look closely at the themes of anti-academic and intellectual ability that emerge when the young man’s use of cues to manipulate tradition/culture/manners are enacted to take advantage of Joy. Critical rural pedagogy suggests there is another step to take after the class has critiqued this aspect of the tale. How students see their own academic goals reflected back to them in the story, and more importantly, in the people in their lives can be a linchpin to more complicated thinking. This conversation could take place in small groups, through a number of the tactics Joan Wink has described in her book *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World* (2000), e.g.: popcorn, pair-share, or four corners, or in an extended essay. In this situation, it might be fruitful to have students write in pairs or small groups, comparing people’s responses their educational aspirations with each other and with the response to Joy’s advanced degree. A personal written response would finish this exercise with a tangible space in which students can consider their own position in the academic world without needing to share their thoughts with the entire class

right away. Instead, they can begin to formulate more thoughtful responses to their own position within higher education that can be expanded or questioned as they continue on through the course.

In this chapter, I have developed the context in which American literature is taught on my campus, and that may parallel the situations at other small, rural community colleges. It is my hope that the activities that I have developed and shared in this chapter will serve as a starting point for inserting a more critical rural pedagogy into the classroom experiences of my students. I believe that these activities can be used in other rural community colleges, and the larger ideas of a critical rural pedagogy are here illustrated in a way that other professors and instructors can make use of these pedagogical moves in ways that have resonance and usefulness in their individual situations. As stated before, critical rural pedagogy aims to accept and problematize students' use of language in relation to their rural experiences, to give students opportunities to develop tactics and skills the critical work that makes use of their rural knowledge, and to explore the context in which rural students find themselves as simultaneous members of multiple groups with varying degrees of power within the dominant culture, in rural locations, and as undergraduates. I turn now to my conclusion, where I will outline possible next steps that I and other teachers and scholars may explore in the future.

Chapter 4.0 Conclusion and Future Work

This dissertation began when I first confronted a disconnect between what I believed a small subset of my rural students should and would want to share in my American literature classes and the reality of what they were willing to share. It was only upon further reflection and study that I began to realize that the difficulty had multiple causes. First, I was focusing on only one small portion of my rural students, those who had direct experience with life on a farm, or with animal husbandry, or with ranching. I was overlooking the totality of experiences that all of my students bring to the classroom, the tremendous variety of perspectives they contribute. I was also assuming that the experiences they brought with them from their K-12 education would be somewhat consistent, relying on an implied set of rural literacies and pedagogies, which was not the case. Secondly, I was overlooking the three consistently recurring topoi that could be used in my classroom, the idea of the rural as a place of lack, and/or lag, and/or a slice of a rosy past. Because these topoi circulate variably and widely in our literature, public discourse, and everyday lives, they offer powerful access points for critique, reflection, local connections, and possibly action and intervention for my students. Thirdly, I was attempting to use critical pedagogy, but I learned that there are substantial aspects of critical pedagogy that are not useful or accurate when applied to classrooms in rural community colleges. As this project developed, I discovered the gaps in what I believed and classroom reality. The gap between my expectations and my students' expectations would lead me to develop a critical rural pedagogy. The insights I have uncovered in the process of this dissertation are useful not only in my present teaching situation, but can also be used by other instructors of American literature working in similar rural community college settings.

Vignette: Reaching the Goal, Rural Students Moving On

Each spring, Centralia's graduation takes place on the lawn in the center of main campus. There is always a raised dais towards the north end, and folding chairs set out in the lawn in a radiating pattern. Faculty and students typically take up most of these chairs, and another couple of hundred people fill the remaining empty chairs. Behind, there are family members and friends who were not able to arrive early enough to snag a folding chair. There are no tickets for our graduation. Instead, an invitation is extended to all who wish to attend. That also means that the back of the lawn is generally filled with small children playing games of hide and seek, tag, or peek-a-boo throughout the ceremony. Families arrive in large, and at times astonishing numbers. All the cousins come when a student is the first in the family to graduate from college.

But, what happens after these students receive their diplomas? How might we support those students who have just completed their course of study in ways that will allow and encourage them to move on to their next goal? Because Centralia College students complete a wide variety of credentials, certifications and degrees, some students will be moving directly into the local workforce while others will be continuing on to complete a bachelor's degree. Out of the year's graduates, there are those who will transfer into programs at universities and private colleges where they will complete bachelor's degrees. Additionally, there are students who have not completed a degree, instead having taken several transfer level courses, who then transfer on to university without completing their associate degrees. Out of all these rural community college students, a small percentage will have taken the American literature survey offered at Centralia College, and it is my hope that the information, theory and practices I have developed will in some small way help those students to not only successfully complete my course, but also

to leave our campus with an improved skill set for participating in the next phase of their academic and professional lives. The time between when a student first enters an American literature course and when that same student completes the course is the focus of my dissertation. Creating experiences in the academic classroom that build on the skills and knowledge that are unique to the configuration of rural students who inhabit a rural community college space is important for students to not only progress academically, but that see themselves as relevant and important contributors to the world of higher education.

4.1 Contributions to the Field

My project's aim has been to clarify and develop a more focused definition of rural literacy that builds on Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell's work in *Rural Literacies* and that can be deployed as part of a critical rural pedagogy that is useful and theoretically sound for rural students. Specifically, my project developed pedagogy for freshman and sophomore level college students attending rural colleges who are enrolled in American literature classes. My project also developed a theoretical approach to working with students in my rural community college, and later, in larger transfer college and university settings. While emerging from my literature courses taught in a rural community college in Washington State, the insights of this dissertation are applicable and can be adapted for other professors in rural community colleges and teaching in rural contexts, more generally. Hopefully, rural students who may not have seen themselves as full members of the scholarly world have a more complicated understanding of their importance as members of the academy, and as full participants who should bring their rural experiences with them into higher education.

Due to the invisibility of rural people and issues in most college classrooms, my rural

community college students crystalized a point of intervention for me, and this dissertation has been my attempt to begin to close gaps in understanding the myriad experiences of rural students and pedagogical practices that might be attuned to their needs. The space between these students' lived experiences and the representations of the rural they encounter provides a lever that allows them to draw on their expertise, to see themselves in the curriculum, and to reveal the constructed nature of the representations of the rural encountered in American literature texts. It is my hope that those students who have taken my American literature course will have developed not only an ability to discuss and analyze literature, but also to speak with some confidence in an academic classroom. It is also my hope that my project has enabled some of these students to practice bringing their expertise as rural students in higher education.

There are larger issues addressed in this dissertation that are useful beyond the boundaries of my classroom and my campus. The specific course assignments I present in Chapter 3 are intended to be picked up by other professors of American literature teaching in similarly geographically isolated community colleges. These exercises are a sampling of activities and assignments for other instructors to build upon, and I expect conversations about developing activities to appear in the regional two-year college English conferences.

For instructors and professors working with rural students across the country, my work has made visible several points of tension. Most importantly, the need to work with rural students who concurrently occupy multiple spaces of power along a continuum of hierarchy necessitates a variation on critical pedagogy. As I have conceived it, a critical rural pedagogy creates a space in which these students' multiple positions are not an impediment to their learning. Instead, their ability to work from multiple perspectives of power leads to a richer, more complex classroom environment. Additionally, by using a critical rural pedagogy, rural

students will be empowered, will increase their skills with language, and, I hope, create a stronger sense of their importance and connection in the larger world of higher education.

Although I have demonstrated ways to utilize critical rural pedagogy in an American literature course, these same principles can, and I would argue, should be used in related language and cultural disciplines. Just a few courses of study that can utilize critical rural pedagogy include composition, literary studies, language studies, and sociology, for example.

Another point of tension my work has identified and grappled with is the ambiguous and variable use of the terms “rural literacy” and “rural pedagogy.” While my dissertation has taken an initial stride to define these ideas without rarifying the conception of the rural in monolithic terms, more research needs to be done on creating consensus, or perhaps more finely tuned terminology to gain a better sense of how rural literacy and rural pedagogy may have interplay, both controlling and altering the spaces they attempt to describe. It is critically important to me to determine the validity of my theorizing around critical rural pedagogy. Scholars in the field of composition and literature pedagogy should also pursue research that examines the boundaries of a critical rural pedagogy and its implications for rural students because my work has established an area of sub-study that has not yet been fully developed. I look forward to contributing to this work, but I also value the perspectives other scholars will bring to this developing theory and the application of critical rural pedagogy in the classroom.

Although no one course, no one set of experiences, can accomplish all of the goals I have set, I have developed first steps toward enriching students’ classroom experiences via a critical rural pedagogy and expanding my theorizing so that others can engage critical rural pedagogical practices and make use of these concepts in the construction of their classes and programs in rural community colleges. In summary, critical rural pedagogy foregrounds rural students’

experiences across multiple contexts of power and powerless, building on their own language in an academic setting, which is then used by students to speak back against limiting representations of the rural. This context allows for students to improve their skills in and around their own and others' language, resulting in students who are more empowered and connected to their value within higher education. While I believe my work makes strides toward the goals I set for my students, for my own professional growth, and for other teachers interested in pursuing such goals, there are quite a number of next steps that I would like to explore after the completion of this dissertation. My work up to this point now illuminates numerous features of study that require further attention. Next, I outline several directions for future study that I and others may pick up.

4.2 Next Steps: Practicing Critical Rural Pedagogy

Within the context of my own campus, but with relevancy for other teachers and scholars, there are a number of projects that could be initiated to explore how critical rural pedagogy can be refined, and how it may be altered or improved through observing students and listening to their thoughts after having experienced a literature classroom where critical rural pedagogy was enacted. First, as we study and discuss "rural students" it would help to conduct qualitative studies that more accurately document who rural students "are" in various institutional settings. The term rural is itself quite slippery, and the dominant culture's impressions of rural people help flatten how rural peoples, and my students in particular, are depicted. For this reason, it is important to more accurately identify the diversity found in a group of rural students.

When I speak of diversity, I am envisioning the varieties of experiences, cultures, ages, economic status, abled-ness, home languages, and more that are included within my conception

of rural students. Because a critical rural pedagogy calls upon the students to participate in their learning, to push back against hierarchies of power that are limiting their perceived position in the classroom, and perhaps in the larger society, it is important for a classroom instructor to understand what these students bring, in all their cultural, experiential, and ideological variations, to classroom discussion. In my own research and teaching context, I would like to improve my direct understanding of who my students are, both in the present, as each literature class is formed, and over time, by looking at an amalgam of accumulated data about rural students in my American literature classes.

While each rural community college gathers data on student populations, this information is fairly general. I can access those databases without difficulty as part of a research project that gathers this data, but I am interested in something that is more specific and ethnographic. It is important to have a more complete understanding of who rural students are, so that their strengths and knowledge can be nurtured and encouraged as they move through classroom activities. Critical rural pedagogy, just as the critical pedagogical tradition it is built from, advocates for students to develop their own voices and push back against false understandings and complicate simplistic interpretations, helping to empower these same students. In order to improve activities that can tap into rural students' experiences and areas of expertise, a clearer understanding of what these students bring to the classroom is needed.

One way to clarify who rural students are is to develop a survey instrument that students could complete when they first enter my American literature class. Ideally, having multiple classes working on surveys would provide a larger data set to work from, and would inform my colleagues, professors of American literature at other rural community colleges. Now, a survey is just a survey and students fill out way too many of these, so the trick would be to find a way to

make the survey meaningful to students, and in the best sense of the critical rural pedagogy I am developing, students should be a part of the construction of this instrument. A survey that is built on the premise that all the students in class bring experiences and knowledge that we can tap into as a collective provides a workable framework for drilling down into what could be revealed in a survey. Included in this survey might be ways to make visible experiences, lifestyles, and backgrounds they bring with them. Are students parents, what are their previous experiences in higher education? Do they have farm experiences? Have they been members of FFA, 4H, other agricultural organizations, like the grange? Do they own property? Did they work part time while growing up? Where have they traveled? What languages do they speak at home?

However obvious these questions are to me, what students bring is already obscured by my limited perspective, so engaging students in the development of a survey would bring in those aspects of rural students' lives that are harder to discern, and that add to the complexity of the discussions they can have when engaging representations of the rural in American literature. I would like to call to my professional peers to do parallel surveys on their campuses. The diversity of rural students has not yet been fully explored and documented. I believe my professional network through the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) provides a coordinating nexus for organizing others to complete similar surveys. TYCA also provides an excellent avenue for sharing this information through regional conferences and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, the journal it publishes.

It is important to mark changes in students' abilities and awareness after having taken a class that uses critical rural pedagogy. The assessment movement has made noting these changes not only important, but also necessary to retain accreditation for individual institutions. With this in mind, a follow up project would allow exploration of students' more in depth responses to

activities assigned during my American literature course. A pre-class intake “interview” with each student could determine their expectations for a literature course, as well as the types of assignments / reading they have engaged in during previous literature study. Again, when using critical rural pedagogy, learning about and from students is central to success, and a conversation prior to the start of class would serve best because students will not be constrained by a limited set of options provided in a survey instrument or a desire to finish up a short answer form to get on to the business of class.

The second portion of this project would then include a post-class interview. Again, this interview would be limited to two or three questions, with the opportunity for additional student initiated conversation to occur. This second interview would be compared with the students’ initial expectations, as well as their perspective on the success of the class in encouraging them to speak back against representation in more complicating ways to the assigned texts and providing practice. I also envision tracking individual student work to observe markers of increased participation and instances when students use their prior knowledge to inform class assignments, assignments or discussions. The interviews and tracking student work would, ideally, give a framework to monitor changes that do or do not occur in students’ thinking and writing.

Another future project could include interviews or surveys for the end of class. Interviews would be conducted after students had completed a section of American literature foregrounded in critical rural pedagogy. The focus of the interviews or surveys would be to determine students’ responses to the class content, rigor, inclusiveness, students’ ownership of class interactions and materials, and finally, to determine how students may or may not make connections between course content and activities and the larger world outside of higher education. Instead of

conducting the interviews myself, it would be interesting to use grant money to pay for another person to collect that data, which I could then compile alone, or with a team of other researchers from my institution. Because my institution prioritizes teaching over research, there is not supportive structure for large research projects. However, a grant could be secured through funding options tied to retention and completion available through the State Board of Technical and Community Colleges, the Lumina Foundation, The Gates Foundation, or the Centralia College Foundation. A grant would provide support for several of my colleagues in the English department to work with me, creating the added benefit of drawing from multiple perspectives while tapping into the additional expertise my colleagues have in working with rural community college students.

Another obvious set of next steps includes developing materials that rely on critical rural pedagogy for related language based courses. At my rural community college campus, students also take courses in composition, introductory literatures, and interdisciplinary humanities. In this dissertation I have developed a limited number of activities and assignments to make use of critical rural pedagogy, but along with needing to “test drive” them more formally with students in my classes, there can, and should, be more activities. I have done important theorizing to undergird the development of a greater range of activities and assignments. What is needed now is time and energy put into expanding those materials. Longer term, scaffolded assignments need to be outlined and reconceptualized for rural students at the community college. The complexity of these assignments also can be increased in terms of content, length of time on assignment, and number of skills to be practiced or improved on while completing the assignment.

A more complicated examination of how critical rural pedagogy may play out in an American literature classroom could be developed around a directly observable approach. At this

point, my work has set out theory and initial groundwork, but the field would benefit from an examination of how the theoretical plays out in practical application. Direct observation is necessary to determine to what extent the theories I have expressed about encouraging rural students to be the center of a classroom where critical rural pedagogy is enacted are successful. Are there nuances that influence the effectiveness of this pedagogy? What unexpected blocks or limitations need to be identified and ameliorated?

It would be fascinating to record each American literature class session for one term. I would like to complete a more precise record of how critical rural pedagogy works, and does not work in my classroom. Because the embodiment of this critical rural pedagogy is new, I am aware that there are multiple perspectives and theoretical connections that I have not yet considered. A record of one class would give me material to explore these concerns more precisely and provide a platform from which to develop these ideas and their implementation further. While this would certainly require a level of funding that is unusual for a community college, the results would certainly break new ground. A visual and audio record of a class session would allow for a close system of coding, which would provide data in a form that has not previously been recorded or analyzed. A project of this type would certainly require working in tandem with other scholars who would advise a local research team. The nuances of this form of research, which is not part of the typical training of community college faculty, would necessitate working with more experienced scholars, those who understand the concerns in building a structure for analyzing recorded data, as well as in coding and data analysis, than currently resides on my home campus. However, with my connections through professional organizations, I believe I could develop appropriate tools for determining to what extent the goals that I have set for a critical rural pedagogy can be identified in student behavior and work.

Again, my concern is the intersection of theory and practice, so direct observation would provide a record that could be analyzed more closely after the end of the class. My campus is in the process of setting up an IRB process, and it would be exciting to have the first project up for them to approve. A project of this complexity at a rural community college, administered and analyzed by faculty from my school who are more aware of the community college world would have a new “spin” when compared with university researchers using a community college as a site for their study.

I have long had concerns about researchers with an urban or dominant cultural bias using my rural community college as an exotic location at which to do research. I have been concerned that that despite their best intentions, researchers embedded in an R1 institution may be blind to the limitations and persistence of their urban perspective. By combining more senior scholar’s expertise with rural community college faculty’s awareness, important information could be included in the scholarly conversation. Although funding would be a challenge, because this project could be packaged to grant funding organizations as part of retention efforts, a hot-button term of the moment, I think it would be worth exploring. It may be possible to develop a network of community college American literature instructors in rural community colleges who could work through a framework for such research and then replicate portions of this work on their own campuses. With a little seed money and my professional connections, this project could be done across multiple rural community colleges.

Using data that has been collected as part of tracking students from community colleges to their transfer institutions could be yet another project to grown out of this dissertation. I have based the work in this dissertation in part on my knowledge of where students in my American literature students go after taking my class. It is possible to determine what their original

intention was when they registered, but that information is not compared with students' eventual trajectory. While I am not overly concerned that my understanding of their transfer to other institutions of higher education is not unreasonable, it is based on anecdotal information I have from staying in contact with former students and from the general intent to transfer data Centralia College has kept. However, due to accreditation demands on all colleges and universities in Washington State, it is now possible to track students more closely and determine exactly where they are transferring, if they are transferring, and to what level they are completing upper division university work. Student ID numbers are now used across multiple community colleges, making it possible to see how students may move back and forth between two-year colleges, and the transfer information is now more available.

Although not easily accessible, it would be useful to follow the students who take my American literature class, where I have made a conscious effort to use critical rural pedagogy, to see their persistence rates. Persistence rates alone are not sufficient for supporting the use of critical rural pedagogy, but persistence rates, and the movement of students who transfer on to urban universities could be an important context, a new perspective to add to our understanding of how students move from the start of their academic careers to completing their undergraduate degrees. For my rural community college students, this information is not easily available. Because solid research is thorough, I would be interested in developing this data set. My purpose in exploring this information is to be sure that my underlying ideas about what happens to rural community college students who have taken my class are accurate. If I do not check, I may not be aware of something important that I have missed.

Finally, this dissertation has made plain the gaps in our current knowledge about rural students and their interconnections with Centralia College and community. I have more

questions about how they negotiate the space between the academic environment at the college and the community where they live and work. Rather than working from secondary information, this gap between what is known and what is guessed through data collection might be best closed, at least in part, by an ethnographic study. Students can provide as of yet unseen insights into what it means to be a rural community college student. Learning from students would provide clarity to some of the questions raised in this dissertation. Just what do students need to be able to move successfully through American literature? What are the impediments to the ownership of their own learning? How do they bridge the spaces between community and home expectations and the demands of the academic world? What helps them to make these intellectual and cultural moves successfully? Who are their most helpful supporters? What systems the college has put in place are used, or are unknown, or are abandoned because they do not meet students' needs? What are the social aspects of being a student at a rural community college that are important to achieving goals? Are there ways in which other students create support systems or cause problems? Does the language and vocabulary students use at home create dissonance with the language and vocabulary they are expected to learn to use in American literature?

Following several American literature students over a quarter, perhaps with periodic reconnects until they have completed their programs would begin to construct a more accurate picture of what it means to be a rural student, and how my classes can help them to complete their class goals, and perhaps, the successful completion of their programs and transfer on to other institutions of higher education. I am concerned that such a study would yield information that is applicable primarily to students at my community college. Therefore, it is important that such a study provide insights that are useful to others in the field, so this work would need to be

replicated or duplicated by others scholars in similar locations.

4.3 Last Thoughts

As I complete this dissertation, I am convinced that the work I have begun here can serve as a springboard for a professional lifetime of exploration. The complications of working with a student population that has not yet been studied in detail leads to multiple possible projects. The crossroads between American literature, representations of the rural, and critical rural pedagogy, at this early point in the work, is a space in the scholarly conversation that has not yet been fully outlined, let alone explored and thoroughly examined by scholars and teaching professionals. I find myself at a fascinating intersection. One foot is firmly in the community college world of literature instruction and the other foot is planted in the need for research to further develop both theories and practices that will inform work with rural community college students in American literature classes. Although I was not looking for it, I have found an area of study that can occupy my professional life for years to come.

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