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# Teaching Place: Heritage, Home and Community, the Heart of Education

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TEACHING PLACE: HERITAGE, HOME AND COMMUNITY, THE HEART OF  
EDUCATION

by

Judy Kay Lorenzen

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

Lincoln, Nebraska

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TEACHING PLACE: HERITAGE, HOME AND COMMUNITY, THE HEART OF  
EDUCATION

Judy Kay Lorenzen, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Robert Brooke

My dissertation examines my implementation of a Place-conscious pedagogy as a means to teach heritage and sense of place. This pedagogy is framed upon the premise that trying to understand our heritage and place—ourselves—are crucial elements in our ability to live well as individuals who are connected school/community members, who help our schools/communities thrive, becoming Place-conscious citizens. I argue that in teaching in such a culturally diverse community, tensions rise as immigration has become a main focus. Our school/community has experienced many ethnic groups with vast social differences for which Place-conscious education offers practical solutions. These students have a great need to feel a sense of belonging and their families need help in overcoming the challenges in school and local policies that come with immigration. Students who are native-born also experience challenges. Within this pedagogy's framework, my students were first given the task to interview family members for oral, written, and digital history narratives; then they utilized mapping exercises to create deep maps, family trees and / or diagrams to enhance learning. The end product of this heritage work was to produce authentic writing that resulted in self-knowledge of where the students' families immigrated from and to honor and give voice to that heritage, and, end in promote community and active citizenship. I examined the patterns, themes, and

understandings that emerged in student writing practices within the framework. These historical narratives involved generational connections. Students investigated how their ancestors' purposes for coming to the Great Plains impacted their lives. I examined the appreciation of place and identity as place; I laid the groundwork for or planted the seeds of stewardship, conservation, and ecology of place—sustainability. I concluded that one critical aspect of these Place-conscious assignments brought solidarity: we are all immigrants and need to feel a sense of belonging and community. Through these assignments, student realized the historical forces, which led all of their family members to America. We understood the need to all work for our mutual good, not self-interest. We need social justice. I see great hope in this conclusion. These assignments enhanced critical-thinking skills.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Preface**

My first Nebraska Writing Project class introduced me to Mary Pipher, Linda Christensen, and Paul Gruchow (among other Place-conscious writers), all who have had a great influence on my teaching. These three writers in particular haunted me for quite some time after that class because the problems they addressed were particular to the students in my classrooms. Gruchow and others also gripped me because of my love for my home, the Great Plains—their writing style made me feel this beautiful kinship with them. I felt like they had written their works with me in mind. After reading these teachers, I felt a greater need to express my love for place and felt a greater concern that others realize how much they loved their place. I loved the Place-based pieces I wrote for this class. I knew that this type of education was truly what education was meant to be—work that fostered understanding or knowledge of heritage, understanding of others, understanding of place, sustainability, and stewardship. It is the cultivating of the understanding of place, which brings about love and appreciation of place—which leads to caretaking of place in many respects, mainly sustainability. Place-conscious education had moved me deeply.

When I read Paul Gruchow's *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*, I could not help but think of my many, many students at Grand Island Senior High who come from all over the world—how strange and unfamiliar their “new home” feels to them. I wonder about their “homesickness” and what it is like for them trying to understand the “new ways” of the people they now live among and go to school with. How do “displaced people” make their new place “home”? What do they do with their past? How do they keep their past and customs and interact and become a member of their “new

community”—to have a voice in their own lives? How do they grow and thrive from this point in their lives? How do they make this “new place” their home? I want my students to care about the local, where they are presently, but I do not want them to forget their past that has shaped and molded them—and still so much a part of them. How then do I get them to live their lives presently here in Grand Island, Nebraska? Gruchow seemed to me to have that answer:

All history is ultimately local and personal. To tell what we remember, and to keep on telling it, is to keep the past alive in the present. Should we not do so, we could not know, in the deepest sense, how to inhabit a place. To inhabit a place literally means to have made it a habit, to have made it the custom and ordinary practice of our lives, to have learned how to wear a place like a familiar garment, like the garments of sanctity that nuns once wore. The word habit, in its now-dim original form, meant *to own*. (6)

How could Grand Island, Nebraska, become my students’ “own”? What lessons could I teach to help them see that Grand Island is theirs—just like their homeland? Gruchow finishes that paragraph with a powerful truth: “We own places not because we possess the deeds to them, but because they have entered the continuum of our lives. What is strange to us—unfamiliar—can never be home” (6). I do not want Grand Island to be “unfamiliar” to all of the newly immigrated students that I have, most of whom have had an extremely difficult pathway to the United States. Place-conscious educators know that students who see themselves in the curriculum are students who are much more engaged in their learning—the curriculum must be inclusive. After this class, I knew I had to implement what Place-based lessons I could into the tightly prescribed curriculum that I



taught. I knew that many of these students wanted to return home where their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins still lived. I knew some of my students and their families felt displaced and sad, homesick, nostalgia, which Gruchow defines in a way that makes heritage work a necessity:

In its Greek roots it means, literally, the return to home. It came into currency as a medical word in nineteenth-century Germany to describe the failure to thrive of the displaced persons. . . . Nostalgia is the clinical term for homesickness, for the desire to be rooted in a place. . . . if home is a place in time—than we cannot know where we are now unless we can remember where we have come from. (6-7)

We must understand this very valuable lesson that Gruchow is articulating so beautifully. We must know where we are from—and we cannot know where we are now, unless we remember where we are from. We must understand what it is like for those who are still coming, the homesickness, the lost customs—the once-ordinary practices of their lives disrupted—some displaced by choice, many by force. Understanding that we all came from somewhere and understanding or remembering what displacement feels like promotes, in most cases, community—those feelings and that knowledge that we are all in this together. However, how do we know where we are from unless we have those conversations—and have those conversations we must before those who carry the stories are gone? How can we know how to inhabit this place, to make this place—the Great Plains—home, to be a part of this community? The answer lies, undoubtedly, in Place-conscious education, the students researching, investigating those heritage questions that help them discover who they are by learning where they are from.

## Chapter 1

### Definition/Brief History of Place-based Education/Recent Nationwide Projects

#### Definition

I became an English major because of my love of words and because I know how crucial the present definitions and the original meanings of words/phrases are. I always take a word back to its origins when I want to understand the original meaning and to ponder the extent of change in original meaning, and how far we have gotten away—or grown—from that intent.

Sarah Robbins traces the original definition of “public education” in “Overview: Classroom Literacies and Public Culture.” Her tracing of the term “public education” demonstrates how far education has moved away from its original purposes:

These days, much of the conversation about school literacy casts it only as an object of standardized assessment—something to be scrutinized and remediated rather than a positive force in the lives of students and the larger community. At best, current efforts to monitor and manage school literacy aim at ensuring equitable progress among learners. At worst, this view reduces the complicated social practices of reading, writing, and oral language in classrooms to a newspaper ‘box score,’ making test results and attendance rates ‘public’ as a way of designating ‘failing’ schools. The authors of this book see literacy in public education sites as more than a set of test scores. They believe that viewing school literacy as ‘public’ can also mean tapping into its potential for culture-making. Expanding our view of school literacy in this way activates a sense of commitment among teachers and students: Instead of merely being objects of

others' analysis, students become empowered agents using literacy to make meaningful contributions to the places where they live—even, ultimately, to the nation's vision of education as a public trust.

This view shifts the meaning of the 'public' in 'public education' from what has become its everyday meaning back to a stance more in line with the etymology of the word. Indeed, while the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2004) state that the most common meaning of 'public' today is 'exposed to general view' (a definition consistent with 'public' education as constantly being monitored and assessed), it also tells us that the word 'public' comes from the Latin *populous* (people), and also means 'of, relating to, or affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state'; 'of, relating to, or being in the service of the community or nation'; 'of or relating to business or community interests as opposed to private affairs' 'devoted to the general or national welfare' and 'accessible to or shared by all members of the community.'

(8-9)

This definition sounds a lot like the definition of Place-conscious education. Brooke identifies the origins and purpose—the definition—of Place-conscious education in *Rural Voices*:

The term *place-conscious education* comes from Paul Theobald (1997). . . . But the idea . . . has a rich intellectual heritage, stretching back to the ancient Greeks and forward to a contemporary host of critics of culture and agriculture. . . as well as educational reformers [and verifies] (. . . that schooling can be a centering force in the revitalizing of rural communities.) (5)

Gruchow defines what we need to teach children: “When we fail to reach our children how to inhabit the places where they have been raised—when we don’t teach them the stories, the customs, the practices, the nature of those places—then we also fail to teach them how to be at home anywhere” (138). These “Place-conscious education” definitions are fundamental as I teach in a large school of many recent immigrants, and they need to see themselves and their concerns in the curriculum. They need to be at home in this community. And I also live in a small rural that closed down its schools (and other businesses) and consolidated as did many of the rural communities around—and still continue to do so.

In the years I have been teaching, I have implemented an ever-increasing number of district and state assessments—in addition to quizzes and tests from units of study. The teachers at my schoolwork hard with our minority-majority population to ready them in language and comprehension for all of their tests. The school also readies them by having all available English Language Learner programs and instructors as necessary. However, anyone learning a foreign language knows the years it takes to accomplish an academic vocabulary. These students have hard work ahead of them. I would have to add that in today’s classroom, I see more students from broken or single parent homes that struggle with issues that I would say make schoolwork difficult for them to focus on also. When I see Robbins’ definition of public education as pertaining or relating to or affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state, I know immediately why Place-conscious education, especially for the past four decades or so has taken off as it has. Place-conscious education includes every student.

Place-conscious education takes education back to its original meaning and includes every student. It teaches student how to live or be at home where they are, to be a part of their communities—it revitalizes communities.

### **A Brief History of Place-based Education**

In tracing the beginnings of Place-based education, the Promise of Place website reports the following facts:

Place-based education has emerged over the past decade from the fertile intersection of environmental education and community development, but it offers a fundamentally different approach to both. It bucks the trend toward standardized, high-stakes testing of one-size-fits-all knowledge by immersing students in local heritage, regional cultures and landscapes. These local opportunities and experiences are the springboard for studying regional, national and global issues, and empower students to make positive changes in their own communities. Place-based education has built on the foundation of diverse initiatives from across the country. . . .

One of the first figures to arise on the forefront of Place-based education was Eliot Wigginton in 1966 in Georgia with his Foxfire project. According to Mendonca, Wigginton and his students at the Rabun Gap–Nacoochee School decided to interview older community residents, documenting the skills, traditions, experiences, and history of the Appalachian culture. Eventually, these histories were recorded in multimedia modes and gained wide popularity. This project seeded other grassroots movements. Foxfire still continues today, “Maintaining the program's original purpose, Foxfire has continued to

empower students by giving them a sense of pride, ownership, and responsibility in both the products of the program and the continuation of the Appalachian way of life,” and later, I will expand on the Foxfire Heritage Project, which is thriving.

Other projects began around the country. The New England area’s David Sobel, among other educators, developed a Place-based educational curriculum in connecting the classrooms and communities in his CO-SEED Project in New Hampshire. In Wisconsin and Minnesota, Aldo Leopold made headway with the Leopold Education Project in St. Paul, Minnesota (I will examine this project and its growth and branching out into many present-day projects later also). In Washington, David Gruenewald—who since this time has changed his name to Greenwood and moved to Canada to lead a major PCE program—set his sights on teaching a critical pedagogy of place, ultimately instructing students how to live well in their “total environment.” Nebraska’s Robert Brooke with the National Writing Project’s Rural Voices, Country School program, provided a wellspring when he began his work with rural teachers on Place-conscious writing instruction to “increase the relevance of learning and the active citizenship of learners,” in *Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*. Many more theorists/educators have since become believers and propounders of Place-conscious pedagogy in one area or another of what Sobel calls this three-legged stool of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental.

I want to stop and camp here to look at the work that has been done through *Rural Voices* before going on to other projects. Because I am from the Midwest, the Place-based projects described in *Rural Voices* were extremely valuable to me—I knew the places and projects—and this book and these projects had a huge impact on changing my

direction as a teacher. I read this book in my first Place-based education class and have been on my journey since that time with a great desire to teach place, stewardship of place, and sustainability classes/projects.

In chapter two of *Rural Voices*, Phip Ross so eloquently makes his case for Place-based education by simply telling a family story he heard in his childhood about his grandma and grandpa's marriage gift. The whole story and after dialogue are compelling. He writes profoundly:

It's just one story, a footnote in family history. But it takes on critical importance when I use it to view the present and my future. My grandparents weathered that decade and raised three children on a farm in central Nebraska that would eventually help raise a handful of grandchildren as well. Looking back through another debilitating farm period in the 1980s, I see half century of struggle that helped shape my past and influences my present. Because of the small slices of time I spent with my grandpa and my uncle on that farm, and because of my father's face when the farm foreclosed, I know what that place meant to our family. I don't look at the agricultural industry managed by nameless businessmen who abuse the land to make a buck, or an industry motivated only to grow bigger with heavier reliance on technology and hydrocarbon products. I've looked into the sepia-toned photographs of family, heard the stories, and walked the beanfields with a hoe in hand. I understand this: Place influences identity. (44)

Ross's point about places shaping us, becoming part of us—is undeniable. Yet he furthers the point, “They [our places] teach us about who we are, but they also offer us lessons

about the world, its civics, its politics, its geography, and its whimsical forces of nature and humanity” (45).

Ross, in this chapter titled, “A Geography of Stories: Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice Through Readings, People, and Place” covers every point on why teaching place is of the utmost importance. He likens the growth in our understanding of ourselves and place to tree rings in understanding the outside world, which means we can interpret that world even better, but the blessing comes in knowing ourselves and our world—what is closest to our hearts.

Ross quotes writing teacher Lucy Calkins and comes to one conclusion:

‘There is no plotline in the bewildering complexity of our lives but that which we make and find ourselves. By articulating experience, we reclaim it for ourselves. Writing allows us to turn the chaos into something beautiful, to frame selected moments in our lives, to uncover and to celebrate the organizing patterns of our existence’ (p. 3). . . . if we don’t know where we’ve been, it’s hard to become what we want to be. Writing the maps of home, parks, first jobs, and relationships evolves into higher thinking skills and complex language skills. And students become engaged. (45)

Place-based education, for all of the reasons that Ross articulates so well, is one pedagogy that holds the promise of engaging all students.

Ross’s project is especially important to me as a teacher because this Place-based assignment will engage even the most diverse classroom of students like mine. In Ross’s project, his students engaged in the value and exploration of their places through the three main sources of reading, people, and places as the “I” grows into “we.” The growth and



critical, creative thinking demonstrated in these works are so evident in his and his students' examples in each of the three categories. Ross's assignment is a tremendous springboard for all other assignments.

Another project in *Rural Voices* that demands a closer look at is that of Sharon Bishop's. Bishop explains that she wanted her students to leave school with a sense of "the heritage of this place of their families—and see how this heritage connects them with the world beyond this community" (67). Knowing one's own family stories is as important as reading books of other families' stories. This teacher knows that our little world is a microcosm of the world. We need to know self—as much as knowing self is possible—and where we are from—as much as knowing where we are from is possible—to make the connections and inferences waiting to be made in any good piece of writing/literature. Bishop admits that she was never asked to write any family stories, so she wanted her students to understand their responsibilities to the natural environment of the place where they now live, as in stewardship, and as important, they needed to know "how to address the civic issues of that place" (67). Bishop's two main concepts of teaching and learning, connecting heritage and literature, and Place-conscious stewardship, are beautifully illustrated in her project.

I love the fact that Bishop did not try to color every student's life as all positive events. She writes that one lesson she learned from teaching place is that the writer must not fall into the temptation of focusing on all positive: "A true knowledge of place, however, must address the less-than-positive characteristics" (68). I also love that this project, the student interviews of family and community members, grew into turning the interview stories into poems and essays, becoming a book and then an every-year or

traditional project: writing beyond the classroom. This initial lesson becomes a perennial or continuous bond, a unifying act in this age of technology and distancing. I have always told my students that they and their families are bittersweet or terrifyingly beautiful stories waiting to be told. Students have wonderful ideas to write about—and that is what they know—their lives. Bishop writes of the Nebraska authors her students read, “In the hands of gifted writers these stories become universal experiences that can be appreciated by readers everywhere” (68). I believe that of my students’ stories also. Here is my question: if Bishop’s lesson turned into a traditional lesson/yearly writing assignment and classroom publication, then what happened in each student’s life as he or she was also impacted from the writing of those stories, poems, essays?

The second segment of Bishop’s lesson is one that is as lovely as the Great Plains in words: Stewardship of Place. She wanted her students to experience the natural world, which is to fall in love with it, which would lead to caretaking. She took her students to the ditches in the area to sit in the tall prairie grasses and write—their study of place could not help but expand with specificity. She then teamed up with the science teacher to teach bioregionalism—to learn the soils and rocks, the common insects and animals and plants, all the things to appreciate of the region. Finishing reading her student accounts of place, readers see that Bishop applied the real definition of “public education” to her students’ learning.

Most importantly, Bishop ends on the punctuation of what she learned:

I do not think that I could ever teach again without including the idea of ‘place’ somewhere in that subject matter. Fellow educators have told me that this kind of teaching and learning is successful only in small stable communities like

Henderson. The work of organizations such as Foxfire and Keeping and Creating American Communities, both in Georgia, demonstrate that place-based education is urban and suburban as well as rural. Student learning anywhere is deepened when they use the stories of their place to communicate that learning. When students must represent the words and experiences of others whom they have interviewed, when they must capture the sights and sounds of the prairie in a poem that will go into a book that others will read, they are more careful and creative writers. (81)

I love that Bishop predicts—after the stewardship segment of the lesson of her students’ time on the banks of the Platte and the effects of the cranes that they could have meaningful discussions on water use and rights—that these students whose works included the descriptors of the prairie at evening or the sunset on the Platte, could possibly be the future preservationists of these places.

All of the projects in *Rural Voices* are powerful and effective, but I cannot discuss them all. I do, however, have to comment on one last project by Judith K. Schafer, “Being an Adult in Rural America: Projects Connecting High School Students with Community Members.” Her student connections to people and community segments are ones to replicate. Schafer tells how she arrived at the decision to connect her juniors and seniors in her creative writing class to The Oaks, a retirement community that offered both independent and assisted living. The Oaks residents knew the only qualifier to exchange journals with her students from Wayne was to be willing to share part of their lives and experiences with her students who would also share theirs. The sweetness on the pages detailing her project is so endearing that one could only come to the conclusion

that the word love must be included in education. Schafer tells that the students not only gained valuable insights about life in the past, which was hard, difficult and made students' lives seem pampered, but they also learned that emotions are the same. Of lessons and emotions, Schafer later writes, "Another important lesson for my students concerned relationships, the importance and endurance of love. The Oaks residents, especially the women, opened their hearts in the journals" (111). The surprises that Shafer meant with in these trips of hers and her seniors to places in the community demonstrate, again, the importance and appreciation of local history and the connections and knowledge gained through visits—to find satisfaction in rural living, to find satisfaction in living in that place called home.

These inspiring projects in *Rural Voices*, readings from Mary Pipher's book *Writing to Change the World* and Paul Gruchow's work *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*, and the opportunity to write Place-based assignments joined with the love I hold for these Great Plains and took root in my life and opened my eyes to the fact that Place-based education can solve local and global problems and offer engaging assignments to the diverse students I see in my classroom. My experience with Place-based writing was life changing in my direction not only as an educator, but also as a writer. I knew that Place-based education would give my students a new resource for identity work and a new way to make meaning of their place on these Great Plains in various ways, leading to a more involved citizenship. The curriculum at my school has been, since I have taught there, prescribed, tight—and set. I wanted very much to create and teach a writing project similar to one of the projects in *Rural Voices*, but I did not know how that would ever happen. I took steps to try to make that happen when in 2014, I inquired into writing a

proposal for a Place-based writing class, but at that time was not able to as our curriculum's focus was reading. Chapter two of this dissertation details my perseverance in order to teach Place-based writing assignments, and chapter six tells of an invitation from the district that came in the spring of 2016 to teachers who wanted to write a reading or writing class proposal to be considered for 2017, which was my opportunity to write a Place-based writing class proposal, and I did.

I waited patiently for my opportunity to teach a PCE class or a class in which I could create Placed-based writing assignments. The following section includes the recent projects—their core principles—that informed my thinking.

### **Recent Place-conscious Projects, Core Principles of PCE That Inform My Work**

My love of Place-based writing centered on the PCE principles of place, sustainability and stewardship of these Great Plains because of my love for the land, and for social justice, as I teach at a minority-majority school, with a significant number of low-income and recently immigrated students, who need an advocate. Yet PCE offers ample principles to teach, and there are so many recent or on-going Place-based projects that are growing aggressively around the nation and globe. For the purposes of this project, following are the principles of PCE that informed my work, and the main principles in the work of past scholars.

### **Heritage**

The Foxfire Heritage Project is vast and far-reaching. Even the name of this project demonstrates its power—the Foxfire name comes from a bioluminescent lichen

growing on decaying, fallen trees, giving off an uncanny glow in the night. What this program has been cultivated into is a true testament to Place-based education. From its humble beginnings in 1966 in Georgia with his students, Eliot Wigginton's vision grew from a published magazine into books, events and festivals, a teaching and learning approach and Heritage Center and Museum according to the Foxfire website.

Wigginton's story is inspiring. He was a new teacher at the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School, and he saw a growing concern in the community, and he had an assignment to fulfill—a personal academic achievement at this high school:

To make his English class more interesting and practical, several attempts to motivate the students over the next few months resulted in no particular success. Finally, it was the class that decided what would interest them the most, many ideas were proposed, and the students chose to publish a local magazine. The contents of the first magazine would focus on mountain culture and student works. Poems, short stories and articles gathered from information they created and collected from neighbors and family about life in early Southern Appalachia. The purpose of the program was to help students exercise their skills in language and literature while understanding their own personal ties with the community, using their own heritage to motivate interest. It was the students themselves that raised the funds within the community to produce the first magazine.

Students continue publishing magazines and books today. The website contains the schedules and calendars for events and festivals. Educators may learn of Foxfire's

Teaching and Learning Approach and the Core Practices of the Approach, which are as follows:

1. From the beginning, learner choice, design and revision infuse the work teachers and learners do together.
2. The work teachers and learners do together clearly manifests the attributes of the academic disciplines involved, so that those attributes become habits of mind.
3. The work teachers and students do together enables learners to make connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond their communities.
4. The teacher serves as facilitator and collaborator.
5. Active learning characterizes classroom activities.
6. The learning process entails imagination and creativity.
7. Classroom work includes peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork.
8. The work of the classroom serves audiences beyond the teacher, thereby evoking the best efforts by the learners and providing feedback for improving subsequent performances.
9. The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation.
10. Reflection, an essential activity, takes place at key points throughout the work.

The building of the Heritage Center and Museum came about from the students, through the years, gathering Appalachian heritage, “chronicles of the old-timers,” and publishing them. The magazines and books garnered huge attention and demand. Then resources

became available through donations and grants. Opportunities continued to escalate until students had enough money to purchase land and build the Center and Museum.

This Foxfire project proved that involved, dedicated students can achieve growth and permanent results beyond imagination. The website states, “These students have accomplished so much along with their program teachers and leaders that a person would have to take up, a personal study quest to witness the many fine achievements these heart felt young citizens of the mountains have materialized over the past 40+-years.” To read the excerpts from books and magazines of the people’s stories are deeply moving as this project was birthed, as the website explains, during mid-twentieth century when,

. . .their mountain way of life began to fade, disappearing like the wilds of the land itself. Commerce and development consistently nudged them along or rather out. Modern convenience and the pursuit of material comforts made their simple ways seem impractical. They were not disappearing as a people so much as they were just simply being forgotten.

This Foxfire project has made an indelible mark on the people of Georgia, on the nation, and on education.

There are so many aspects of this project to love. The portion most powerful and meaningful, one could argue for a classroom full of recently immigrated students, is the students writing the histories of the people—writing their heritage—and publishing those stories that are so worth telling, every one of them. With my classrooms full of recently immigrated students, documented and undocumented, I knew that heritage work would work beautifully, engaging every student and making every student a part of the



curriculum. Heritage work also lets every voice be heard—which is an act of social justice.

### **Civic Citizenship/Preservation of History, Culture, Place/Authenticity**

The galvanizing Place-based work *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: Culture, Place, and Authenticity* by David Jolliffe, Christian Goering, Krista Jones Oldham, and James A. Anderson Jr., was a multiyear project between the University of Arkansas and several high schools in rural Arkansas, which invited and urged students to study and celebrate their local place. This study was extremely important because the students worked on projects that they chose. In this project, high-school students from the Arkansas Delta were given the chance to “collaborate with student mentors from the University of Arkansas on tasks designed to uncover and preserve legend and lore from that culturally rich part of the work and, equally important, to plan and complete their own extensive literacy projects—in the case of many participants, for the first time in their lives” (1). This project gave these students the opportunity and a reason to improve their writing and reading abilities (1). The authors’ goals were to have the data from this project in which students had the right to choose, and secondly, to prove that these self-chosen and directed projects would effect the outmigration and community involvement in positive ways.

I really loved this project because of its inviting and urging of student to celebrate their local place. Again, celebration and appreciation of place lead to stewardship. Also, these students participated in civic citizenship by working with mentors from the university to uncover legend and lore. This element is exciting for students—I think even of the legends and lore I hear the Senior High students pass on, how engaged they are

with learning the details. In the past twelve years, my newspaper students have written features on the stories three times (once every four years—so I am sure the students will want to cover these legends and lore this year). The most famous story is one of a ghost of a little girl who supposedly died in the auditorium some fifty years ago and can be seen in the rafters of the stage from time to time. My newspaper students who are in theater tell me that the theater students discuss the stories every year, and all of the theater teachers will give their view of if the lore is true or not. And finally, what English teacher does not want to give his or her students a reason to improve their writing abilities? These principles in a project would be a high point in their writing as it is in their discussions.

### **Land Ethic/Stewardship/Conservation**

According to the foundation website, the Aldo Leopold Foundation details its beginnings in 1935 in Baraboo, Wisconsin, when the Leopold family undertook, the “returning of health to a worn out farm.” The vision of this foundation is to “weave a land ethic into the fabric of our society; to advance the understanding, stewardship and restoration of land health; and to cultivate leadership for conservation.” The foundation, which now offers the Leopold Education Project (LEP) and many other outreach programs, has a mission to foster land ethic. The Project actually began in the 1980s by high-school biology teacher Gary Laib, who had created lessons using Leopold’s work *A Sand County Almanac*, interdisciplinary lessons exploring both the arts and sciences. In 1991, these lessons were revised: the original LEP resource *Lessons in a Land Ethic Curriculum*. In the early 90s, Pheasants Forever adopted this curriculum, which led to its

nationwide distribution and now includes additional resources: Lessons in GPS Technology and Exploring the Outdoors with Aldo Leopold. The website also reports, over the last 20 years, LEP has educated over 15,000 educators nationwide on conservation and environmental studies. The Project objectives are to accomplish the following:

To create an ecologically literate citizenry

To expand participant's experience of "reading the landscape"

To expand educators' skills in teaching outdoor education

To expose students to environmental literature and related activities

To share Aldo Leopold's land ethic, his legacy and his writings with educators and students

To help people develop a personal land ethic

Clifton Knapp writes of Leopold's beliefs that the discovery of beauty in commonplace events and places is essential and leads to caretaking of place or sustainability:

He saw aesthetics as a measure of how we view the rightness or wrongness of our actions and believed that people were motivated to act by both beauty and duty in natural communities. When we view the components of land: soil, water, plants, and animals (including humans) as members of the same community, we are more likely to make decisions that allow natural cycles to continue to renew themselves.

I cannot say enough about the Leopold Project. I want to give these gifts/principles to my students—a love and appreciation of these Great Plains, a desire to sustain them and take care of them, and a realization of how much this land gives to

them—or I want, at least, the opportunity to plant the seeds of them in my students’ hearts and minds. That process begins by inviting students to really take a look around at their surroundings and pose inquiries that make them think and ask questions themselves, to teach them about care-taking the land, soil, and water that give their gifts of crops and drinking water, respectively, and to “read the landscape” like they read their books. I agree whole-heartedly with Leopold that appreciation of place leads to care-taking and sustainability.

### **Sustainability/Ecological/Stewardship/Conservation/Civic Citizenship/Authenticity**

Nate McClennen, vice president for Education and Innovation at Teton Science Schools, reports on the recent work going on at the Teton Science Schools in Wyoming, which is so noteworthy. A symposium in May 2016 highlighted presentations that supported five key components of Place-based education, two of which I want to examine because of the extraordinary content and impact on my project, although I would mention, I do appreciate that these components covered such a wide variety of subject areas: Connection and Relevance, Partnerships and Permeability, Inquiry and Design, Student-Centered, and Interdisciplinary.

In the first component portion of Connection and Relevance, the learning was grounded in local communities. “The Journeys school faculty shared a project that connected an elementary school inquiry into food scarcity in social studies and science classes with local research and work with the food bank and homeless shelter to understand the concept locally and globally.” Understanding where local food comes from is essential for students to learn, and starting at the elementary level is the point of

entry where this learning must begin. This component also included Field Education educators worked with visiting schools “to connect watershed science, water quality testing and scientific research through actual field research. Both curricula enable personalized, student-centered learning projects around student interests.” This project, which taught stewardship/conservation of water around students’ interests, at this level is invaluable. Stewardship and conservation of water is an issue that many of my students at this point have had to face. They come from California and have been in the areas where there has been drought conditions for extended periods—no water. To teach food scarcity/supply and water issues to youth is wise. Many of my young students came to this country because of scarcity of food. Elementary is the right age to teach students life skills of this magnitude.

The fifth component, the Interdisciplinary project, is quite an interesting combination for me as an English teacher. The goal of this PBE was to increase authenticity.

Journeys School high school faculty shared a project called ‘Taming the Beast’ which examined historical context of wildland and human interfaces, scientific ecological inquiry and the reading of Beowulf and Grendel all within the International Baccalaureate framework. Interdisciplinary, interactive presentations on using animal movement to write poetry, and ecological concepts to predict locations of indigenous people in the area, stimulated creative conversation around possibilities to break down the artificial barriers between traditional areas of study. A presentation about a Reggio-Emilia/Outdoor Pre-Kindergarten student investigation of wind started with students attempting to

capture pictures of wind to a full fledged design, creation, and testing of a miniature hot air balloon.

This project's rich content in attaining its goal of authenticity is almost hard to comment on because of its wonderful creativity—which absolutely creates authenticity. I would thoroughly enjoy seeing and hearing or participating in the interactive presentations on the animal movement poetry or the stimulated conversations to break down barriers between traditional areas of study. I will tell my students that many writers started writing by imitating works they loved—but what that writer wants and what the teacher wants for every student is authenticity. While the students are honing these skills, they are learning ecology.

McClennen ends his report of these projects by asking the readers to imagine a world with Place-based education for every child in which learning is connected locally, regionally, and globally. He states, “. . .these students are the citizens the world needs for tomorrow.”

### **Civic Citizenship/Sustainability/Social Justice**

In “Engaging Students in Transforming Their Built Environment via Y-PLAN: Lessons from Richmond, California,” researchers McKoy, Stewart, and Buss showcase another Place-conscious educational project, Youth-Plan, Learn, Act, Now (Y-Plan) in Richmond, California—of the kind of citizen the world needs tomorrow. The care for this diverse student population was impressive. This project continues on successfully today, and what makes it stand out especially is not only its influence and growth, but its purpose of recognizing how place impacts young people's opportunities as this project

distinguished the fact that “. . . children and youth, and especially low-income youth of color, “are rarely invited to sit at the urban planning and policy-making table (Simpson 1997; Kemp and Sutton 2011). The result is plans, policies and built environments that largely overlook the needs, insights and potential of some of our cities’ most important constituents” (230). Every step of this five-phase Y-PLAN project (1. Start Up and Project Identification, 2. Making Sense of the City, 3. Into Action, 4. Going Public, and 5. Looking Forward – Looking Back) strengthened the research findings that Place-conscious education increases young people’s knowledge, their college skills, careers, and citizenship while working to create sustainable, healthy communities (230).

According to McKoy, Stewart, and Buss, this project is having a profound impact globally and throughout the last decade has engaged working partnerships resulting in over 12,000 workers in “75 community development projects across 16 cities in the United States, Japan, China and Sub-Saharan Africa” (230). The University of California created Y-Plan in order to challenge the status quo. The program invited youth to work in conjunction with professionals and other adults to transform policy landscapes and build their environments (230). The city of Richmond, California partnered with UC Berkley Center for Cities + Schools and high-school students to create the “South Shoreline Specific Plan. The plan focuses on taking advantage of the planned Global Campus at Richmond Bay, planned ferry service to San Francisco, and other assets, to create a sustainable South Shoreline district” (231). Together they accomplished their goals. The authors outline five essential conditions as a framework for effectively helping bring about positive results when youth are invited to be “legitimate participants in authentic efforts to investigate, envision, and transform the built environment,” termed place-

making: 1. An Authentic Project and Client Is Critical, 2. Place-Making Leads to Powerful and Critical Place-Conscious Learning, 3. Structured Research Process Builds Depth and Quality, 4. School-based Academic Projects Can Align to Community Goals—and Vice Versa, and 5. Place-Conscious Projects Can Offer a ‘Place at the Table’ for Young People to Engage Critically and Constructively in Discussions of Social Justice and Equity (240-2). The authors reiterated that Richmond, through Place-conscious education, rallied and used the energy and vision of its young people to those students’ and community’s own benefits.

This Y-Plan project’s use of every student—“especially low-income youth of color” to participate in urban planning and policy-making is highly commendable. Every student feels valuable, contributes, and learns. The goals of increasing students’ knowledge, skills and citizenship while creating sustainable, healthy communities involved every student—that is what Placed-based education does. Again, that this project went worldwide says so much for PBE. Maybe the appeal of this project, for me, is that I teach in a “blue collar” city. The fact is that so many times those in official offices think they know what is best for all—in Y-Plan, these overlooked “most important constituents” are at the planning stage giving their insight as to needs and solutions. Their potential is not overlooked in this project. This plan operates on social justice.

## **Place-based Education From Student Perspectives**

### **Stewardship/Ecological/Civic Citizenship Projects**

I often tell my students when they have complaints, “I can make that case for you,



and I will, but you do not realize that your voice carries more influence than mine. Administration wants to hear from you.” And professors and teachers may report the success of their projects, but hearing student perspectives is an even stronger confirmation of the facts that Place-based education produces results.

In *Place Based Education: Engagement from the Student Perspective*, researchers Zoe Rae Rote, Hesburgh-Yusko Scholar, University of Notre Dame Brandon Schroeder, Michigan Sea Grant, Tracy D’Augustino, MSU, reported their findings that explored the values and opportunities in recent Place-based education projects that were in collaboration with participating Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (NE MI GLSI) schools, teachers and students. The report concerned four case studies describing place-based education projects in northeast Michigan. The first study highlighted a self-contained fifth-grade classroom that used PBE as a cross-curricular link between science, math, English, and public-speaking skills. The next focused on two sixth-grade science classes that implemented place-based projects supporting their ecology curriculum and provoked community involvement. The third case featured a case study of an Earth Science elective offered to high-school students who wanted to learn more about the Great Lakes and their community’s shipping history. The last study highlighted the Place-based “Coastal Wetlands and Invasive Species” session at the 4-H Great Lakes and Natural Resources summer camp in northeast Michigan. These projects’ findings are results that remind anyone in education of what education should be:

From the student perspective, this evaluation identifies four consistent themes that youth value as essential to place-based experiences. Place-based education should be fun and engaging, applicable to the students’ futures, hands-on, and

community-oriented. This makes learning engaging and relevant to students' lives. Place based education provides a framework and strategy in which students' ideas are considered meaningful and incorporated into the learning experience. Teachers should hear these students' voices and incorporate these findings into their established or budding place-based experiences. When teachers begin teaching in a way that students identify as engaging, truly meaningful learning will take place. (27)

These projects, again, reiterate that students' ideas are valuable and incorporated into the learning, which make learning truly meaningful. These stewardship and ecology experiences engaged the students, were about the students' futures, hands on, and about their communities. Also, all of these projects, ultimately, were about producing the citizens that the world needs tomorrow.

### **An Essential Element of Teaching: Preadvocacy Work**

As I bring this brief survey of Place-based projects to a close, I want to focus once again on Nebraska projects. *Writing Suburban Citizenship* compiles recent projects that are exceptional in content, in substance and at the mapping out each step of each project—and also—I happened to be a participant in Susan Martens' 2010 Lincoln writing marathon. I experienced and know the power of the writing marathon that she is recounting. I know what involvement in that writing marathon did for me to propel me onto greater love of place and citizenship and a greater love of writing and how that marathon brought about a sense of belonging to that group. Most, if not all, of us did not want that writing marathon to end. In addition, several of these authors articulated the

reality of my research situation in what they called preadvocacy or beginning-steps type work. These authors talked of what they hoped for in student responses and what the actuality was. They recognized that their and their students' work was very meaningful, and more than that, very crucial in laying the foundation, in other words—the preadvocacy work or beginning steps for the work that would come later. They had labeled what I experienced and had not yet expressed. Some of the projects included first-year, diverse college student populations, with little in common—somewhat like my classrooms.

In her chapter “Move the Writer, Move the Pen, Move the Mind, Change the World: Writing Marathons for Place-Conscious Teaching in Suburbia,” Martens explains how writing marathons help suburban students and teachers become more engaged and thoughtful citizens. She then suggests the theoretical framework for understanding how writing marathons work and where they can lead students/participants to in being Place-conscious citizens, using her visions that are central to developing that sense of belonging in suburban communities: “both ‘seeing what’s around you clearly’ and ‘having a vision for the future of what your place can become’” (44). The physical and sensory actions that go along with the first process is walking, sensing, noticing, writing, and telling, which also include the intellectual actions of mapping and connecting; the second set of processes is what Brooke’s labels honoring, claiming, questioning, and dwelling (44). These are the processes I experienced on the marathon, as I experienced place by taking in whatever was around me—walking, sensing, noticing, writing, and then telling, which did lead to a wonderful sense of belonging when we wrote and then again, at the end of the marathon, when we told our stories as we sat around and read, listened, and

appreciated what others had written. Throughout Martens' chapter, she utilizes Flower's four forms of rhetorical agency: *speaking up*, *speaking against*, *speaking for*, and *speaking with*.

Martens writes,

For students, embracing their identities as writers can be the most powerful benefit of the writing marathon by far. Often, learning to *speaking up* through their writer's voice is the shift that opens the door for learning many other things about writing and place—for *speaking against*, *for*, and *with* their place and communities. (50)

We do have a writer's voice, which Martens points out so poignantly. Martens was teaching us to *speaking up* in our writer's voice, and she told us to call ourselves writers. Having been a participant in her Lincoln marathon, I laughed joyfully when I read this because I could not say, "I am a writer" when I began that marathon. I had wanted to call myself a writer for a long time—but I could not. It was at this time that I began to call myself a writer and do to this day. Many of my students say, "I've never been good at writing," or "I can't write." After this marathon and class, I felt great joy in being able to call myself a writer, and that ability to do so may be the reason I went home and continued to write at a capacity I had never written at before—and continue to do so to this day. Calling myself a writer was truly powerful, and I loved being able to *speaking up* through my writer's voice. After that Institute, I started making my students call themselves writers. I could comment on most of Martens' claims on what the marathon accomplishes because I experienced what she recounts. I know firsthand how beneficial the marathon was to me—and to my students, too, as they reaped the benefits of my knowledge and experienced gained through that marathon/class. In addition to all of her

points about all that the writing marathon does, Martens addresses a *preadvocacy stance* (67). She defines a preadvocacy stance as “a frame of mind characterized by an understanding of the independencies at the heart of our conception of ‘place’ and by an openness to engagement—that lays the foundation for future action” (67). This concept is critical.

Aubrey Streit Krug, in her chapter “Solving for Perennial Patterns in University Composition: Connecting Local and Global Arguments for Place-Conscious Citizenship,” addresses a barrier I meet with often in the majority of my students: the attitude from students who see their writing as problematic. My students will tell me they do not like to write; they just do not get it or a teacher told them they were not good writers—but they do want a good grade. Krug writes, “Some of them see their own writing work as a series of problems to be solved with specialized, expert solutions, and so they seek quick fixes to learn to write the ‘right’ way in order to get a good grade and therefore someday a good job to pay off their student loans” (110). I wish, as a high-school teacher, I could resolve that student perspective before I sent them off to college. Krug then tells of the first of her writing projects in which she takes one section of her class on a writing marathon “to observe arguments in their local environment” (114). She confronts the fact that she was hoping students would return with observations “about how things like campus green space, building architecture, and school-pride signage were part of a built local environment that argued for student to behave and think in certain ways” (114). Her students, however, returned with observations of the people they observed on the marathon (“lens of human community”), a social emphasis rather than a “material focus” (114). Krug examines this systems gap “between what she hoped for

and what was there” or pattern using James Farrell’s work of identifying patterns and wanting to invite students into “challenging conversations” and concludes about providing for these spaces: “My own inquiry could be a model for them, but only by inviting students to claim their own inquiry could I help them lay the groundwork for future writing for social change in our class, in other classes, and in suburban life” (115). Her insight continues as she poses questions for students to answer about university experiences, which resulted in “some real questions” about what students were really doing on campus and in classrooms (116). Though students did not address Farrell’s “physical place” questions, like where their food came from or trash goes—Krug recognizes that these students were forming their own rhetorical agency about their educational experiences, goals--their world around them. Her example demonstrates the significance of all the work that was being done, even though the responses were not presently what she had envisioned for the students. This work was important work for future writing. This work was important work for the students’ present rhetorical agency of their collegiate world. Some of their work turned out to be preadvocacy work for future writing about sustainability, but this work also turned out to be important presently in students forming their rhetorical agency of their college world. Here lies a double portion of the power of Place-based education.

Mary Birky Collier’s chapter “Suburban Identity and Change: Place-Conscious Literature in the Suburbs of Nebraska” describes the two-years she began implementing local place into her curriculum (139). At first she and her students explored their local place and then moved into social action by examining how suburbs support, promote and enact the American Dream and isolated them from of the issues of poverty, race,

socioeconomic class to name a few (140-1). Collier writes that through these tensions, she saw “students beginning to take steps toward active citizenry in our suburbs. . .” (141). Collier explains that the Nebraska authors’ love of their local place helped the students move through distaste of the Nebraska stereotypes—and fall in love with Nebraska for the beautiful pleasures Nebraska offers too—the warm sun, or the sticking the hand out the window (143). Collier’s goal was for students to engage more actively with their suburban place as the way for growing in personal understanding, which would possibly result in civic participation (149). Throughout this process, Collier began to see advanced writing classes at the high-school level as place where this preadvocacy thinking, this focus on public writing and positioning of inquiry, needed to be cultivated (149). Collier took her students further the next year with a place-inquiry project, which she divided into two parts: place location and place critique for action (149). In her preadvocacy work, she and her students talked through questions from “What do like about living in Papillion/La Vista?” to “How do you think living in Papillion/La Vista shapes us?” (150). She watched as her students moved in the direction of place inquiry to critique of the problematic side to living in Papillion/La Vista (151). Collier wanted the students to see “what critiquing their suburban place and working to change it could look like in a collective way” (155). She turns to Flower’s *rhetoric of engagement*, in which she says students take crucial beginning steps by “*speaking up*, or discovering and expressing oneself through personal and cultural identity, and then moving to *speaking against* something—against dominant ideologies, institutions, and oppression” (156). Collier wisely points out that students’ civic awareness and sense of responsibility are most of the time just developing, so identifying problems can be a difficult task (156).

She takes steps to remedy this deficit by having the students read Brooke's introduction to *Writing Suburban Citizenship* to provoke them to critically think. In student responses, Collier saw the first stages in the students' journeys toward advocacy (158). She admits that though students could identify and articulate issues, few offered "clearly articulated solutions" (161). After students received responses from their actions, like the responses from the superintendent of schools or the mayor's assistant—impressive feedback for students, they experienced the joy of being *active citizens* (163). Collier makes her case for cultivating "preadvocacy thinking," public writing and inquiry, in the high-school advanced writing classes.

Finally, Bernice Olivas in her chapter, "Teaching Native American Studies," explains, "Place-conscious education can be the focal point in building solidarity among community members with little else in common. Becoming place conscious includes becoming conscious of the history of displacement, loss, and injustice lived by communities of color" (210). Olivas is definitely articulating an issue in many of my students' lives, addressing place/space to address teaching social engagement and social justice. Place-conscious education would be inclusive of every student in every classroom. I love Olivas' powerful words to communicate the definition of Place-based education—the power of Place-based education:

What I discovered about place-conscious education is that it is a pedagogy of seeing. It demands that we see and take note of all the beautiful complexities of the places we name home. These complexities include the historical and the present-day contact zones (Pratt 1991) where peoples grapple with the lasting impact of colonization, slavery, and marginalization. Truly *seeing* our places



facilitates loving, sustaining, and enriching those places. This knowledge is a political truth as well as a physical one. Truly *seeing* the peoples who share our places facilitates coming together as a community. Too often the evidence and aftermath of colonization, marginalization, and oppression are whitewashed away, cleared from the surface, rendered invisible. Place-conscious education has the potential to strip that whitewashing away, to reveal the things our communities normal over look or ignore. The work, then, of place-conscious educators is to find that evidence, to uncover the things we do not see, to lay bare the things we walk by every day and never notice. (210)

Olivas recounts teaching her students Native American Studies and seeing their widening perspectives. She ends her chapter with a sentence that is captivating, “Place-conscious education locates us in our physical space and asks us to resee that space as a citizen” (233). We need new eyes, and Place-based education gives students the ability to see anew.

Preadvocacy or beginning-steps work is a crucial tool—one I want to have the ability to use well and recognize it for how valuable it is.

### **What This Selected Survey of Present-day Place-based Projects Means**

From my very first Place-conscious class, I had already realized that Place-conscious education is for every student, realistic and practical, teaching students skills they will need for the rest of their lives, producing citizens the “world needs tomorrow.” I knew that PCE offers the best answers for the problems that schools and communities face, and that this pedagogy utilized the ideas and energy the young are waiting to give,

the answers that the young are waiting to take part in, demonstrating the meaning of true “public education.”

In the spring of 2015, I was asked to teach a 2015 fall dual-credit American Literature class with an emphasis on everyone being an immigrant. The syllabus did not follow the school’s prescribed curriculum because of its duality. This was my opportunity to create the Place-based writing assignments, which I had so greatly desired to write, and of which this dissertation details and includes principles from the above present-day projects including heritage, legend and lore, immigration, authenticity, place appreciation of the place/Great Plains with preadvocacy work for stewardship, conservation, ecology--sustainability on these Great Plains, and social justice—all which lead to Place-conscious citizenry.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Place-based Education and Great Plains Studies Definition: My Experience**

My admiration for Place-based education began after participating in my first class with the Nebraska Writing Project with Dr. Robert Brooke and reading *Rural Voices*—that class made me a die-hard believer, and with each Place-based class I took, I wanted to somehow find a way to implement sustainability-writing projects at my prescribed-curriculum school. Though I had to follow our school Design Map for my sophomore classes, I did find a place, in the first week of school, to add in the “I Am From” poem as a wonderful introduction of the students to me (and each other). Pipher’s “I Am From” poem is so meaningful and an assignment that I wanted to invest my time and energy into teaching because it is a piece of heritage Place-based education that would galvanize the students in dialoging with their parents and writing whole-heartedly for me. I knew my students, who over the last 12 years have been such a changing demographic, would love the assignment. Implementing this poem would have many beneficial aspects, but for me, the first and foremost important benefit would be that all students, no matter where they were from, would be able to see themselves in the curriculum and engage in this assignment, opening the door for the rest of the year. (I wondered, too, if years later I would hear from any of them about writing this poem—and I did and still do.)

### **My Changing Public Education Demographics**

The first benefit for teaching the “I Am From” poem became blatantly obvious. I live in Central City, Nebraska, a small town of 2, 895 people. Central City’s racial/ethnic groups, according to “State & County QuickFacts,” are “White (92.0 %) followed by

Hispanic (4.5 %) and Two or More (2.9%),” which are especially meaningful to me when I contrast those statistics to the statistics of Grand Island Senior High’s ethnic-group percentages. Going from living in a small town and rarely ever seeing anyone of another race to teaching in a big school with a large number of immigrants, an increasing minority which would soon become the majority, was very educational. I teach English at Grand Island Senior High (GISH), and its student body, according to the 2013 Public Schools Review “Grand Island Senior High in Grand Island, Nebraska,” is made up of a population of 2,225 student: Asian population, 1%; Hispanic, 52%; Black, 3%; White, 43%; and Two or more 1%. The school's diversity score—“The chance that two students selected at random would be members of a different ethnic group. Scored from 0 to 1, a diversity score closer to 1 indicates a more diverse student body”—is 0.55 (state average 0.25). The school's diversity has stayed relatively flat over five years. The statistics include another significant fact, “The district's graduation rate of 70% has decreased from 94% over five years.” I have been teaching at Senior High since 2004 and watched these shifts take place. Until five years ago, Senior High minority population of ethnic groups rose significantly each year. However, all of those statistic become even come poignant when comparing them to Senior High’s enrollment numbers and ethnic group percentages of the 2004-2005 year that I started: 925 student population. The percentage per ethnic groups, according to City Data was as follows: Asian, 2.5%; Hispanic, 24.9%; Black, 1.3%; White, 70.9%; and Native American, .5%. I remember when we teachers would hear administration tell us that we were quickly becoming a minority-majority school, and I wondered then how we were to make education meaningful and inclusive to all, how we could equip these students to face the challenges they would face in everyday

living. What did education need to look like? How could I make sure that everyone one of my students saw the curriculum as relevant while teaching them reading and writing? After attending the 2010 Nebraska Writing Project Summer Institute, I knew I had found the answer to that question. With Place-conscious education, all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. With Place-conscious education, students will not feel alienation in the curriculum, which among other issues, leads to disengagement from school.

### **Students See Themselves in the Curriculum and Know Where They are From**

The second benefit for students was that step in writing the poem and learning where they are from—the students loved the assignment. Paul Gruchow has much to say about the importance of knowing where we are from in order to know ourselves.

Christensen, as well as Pipher, saw the beauty and importance of George Ella Lyon's work in using her "Where I'm From" poem with students (*Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* 18). Pipher's reshaping of that poem and her words tended to revisit my memory after reading them. In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher writes, "Our writing comes from our being. The deeper we explore our souls, the deeper and therefore richer our writing will be" (32). Pipher makes good sense, and I saw how powerful such an awakening in the students would be—and I could foresee how happy they would be to start the year off with a rich piece of writing that they loved. In her chapter "Know Thyself," Pipher finely tuned George Ella Lyon's original "Where I'm From" poem to use in her work with refugees. She wanted them, in their struggles, to "find themselves in a new country and language" (32). Pipher's poem examines heritage from lineage to the geographical to the spiritual—in every way that heritage can be examined. Here is Pipher's

poem (31-32):

“I Am From” by Mary Pipher

I am from Avis and Frank, Agnes and Fred, Glessie May and  
Mark. From the Ozark Mountains and the high plains of eastern  
Colorado,

from mountain snowmelt and southern creeks with water  
moccasins.

I am from oatmeal eaters, gizzard eaters, haggis and raccoon  
eaters.

I am from craziness, darkness, sensuality, and humor.

From intense do-gooders struggling through ranch winters in the  
1920s.

I am from ‘If you can’t say anything nice about someone, don’t  
say anything,’ and ‘Pretty is as pretty does’ and ‘Shit-muckelty  
brown’ and ‘Damn it all to hell.’

I am from no-dancing-or-drinking Methodists, but cards were  
okay except on Sunday, and from tent-meeting Holy Rollers,  
from farmers, soldiers, bootleggers, and teachers.

I am from Schwinn girl’s bike, 1950 Mercury two-door, and *West  
Side Story*.

From coyotes, baby field mice, chlorinous swimming pools,  
Milky Way and harvest moon over Nebraska cornfields.

I am from muddy Platte and Republican,  
from cottonwood and mulberry, tumbleweed and switchgrass,

from Willa Cather, Walt Whitman, and Janis Joplin.

My own sweet dance unfolding again a cast of women in

aprons and barefoot men in overalls. (31-2)

After placing Pipher's poem on overhead and reading it aloud, we talked about what Mary Pipher must be like and how we know so much about her just from 26 brief lines that say so much. We talked about what each category meant and how the poem spoke to us individually. The students had plenty to say. This poem, in formulaic form, was easy for the students to follow:

#### I Am From

Parents and Grandparents

Cultural/Ethnic Foods

State, Country, Ancestry

Faith/Belief System

Talents

Appearance

Time spent

Things I care about Interests

Work

Internal Motivation

Family Personality Clichés

MottoInnate

Temperament Strengths

Unique Gifts

The students had to do some investigating at home in many of the categories, but all of them would tell you the family interviews were worth the time for a variety of reasons including new or strengthened family connections, the loveliness of the end product, and the grade.

I then shared my “I Am From” poem in digital format with the students, and being one who is mesmerized and awed by the all of the characteristics of these Great Plains, I was anxious to see if my students could see my love for Central City’s cornfields, little Silver Creek out my back door, the cattle, and the thunder and lightening that bring the Nebraska rains—all the characteristics—land, sky, plants, animals and weather. I wanted to see how my students, whether recently immigrated or native born, approached living on these Great Plains. I wondered if I would see love of place for the country of origins or Nebraska or both. I wondered if I would see how their places helped form their identities like my place formed mine. I wanted my depiction of these Great Plains to have an impact on them as listeners and readers. I wanted them to see that my “place” here on the Great Plains has permeated my whole life and to teach that awe of place to each one of them. Would these students be able to capture place or communicate the Great Plains in these poems? Before I shared my poem with them, I read to them the rich description from Rudolph Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* to help them get the images of place in their minds:

The pleasant autumn days were all too quickly eroded by the winds of time.

School settled into routine. As the cold settled over the llano and there was less to do on the farms and ranches, more and more of those kids came into school. The green of the river passed through a bright orange and turned brown. The trickle of



water in the river bed was quiet, not singing as in the summer. The afternoons were gray and quiet, charged with the air of ripeness and belonging. There was a safe, secure welcome in opening the kitchen door and being greeted by the warm aroma of cooking, and my mother and Ultima. (147)

Students appreciate examples and are always spellbound upon hearing Anaya's love of the Great Plains of New Mexico so clearly in his work. So, each year, their descriptions of these Great Plains have varied—many students described the usual or clichéd flatlands and wide skies or cornfields and blue skies like both Muhamed Talundzic's and Melissa Gallegos-Gutierrez's poems quoted on pages 45-49. Some students who are native born have a love for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Corn Huskers, so they wrote of our pop culture reference of the Corn Huskers repetitively. Some students wrote of the love of the hometowns they were from where grandma lives and has a front porch swing where they spent time together—images of experience straight from the heart. My poem follows:

“I Am From” by Judy Lorenzen

I am from Jimmie and Lois Catholos, Jack and Lena Ramel, Margaret Rowley and Spiro Catholos.

From Olive oil and grape leaves, baklava, dandelion greens, damatos, hamburgers and French fries.

I am from the Cornhusker state, Malcolm, Grand Island, Central City with its little Silver Creek out my backdoor;

I am from the land of the free, the home of the brave;

I am from Sparta, Greece, from Op pah,

I am from the land of thunder and lightening, from rain.

I am from ancient oak trees with deep roots towering over my little one-room schoolhouse, from milkweed that lines the ditches.

I am from counting the tiles on the ceiling of the little green Baptist Church, “Jesus Saves,” “Amazing Grace” and “How Great Thou Art.”

I am from piano and guitar playing, from a singing family—from brown eyed-stock with low voices.

I am from reading, writing, walking country roads;

I am from calico cats and blue healer dogs, cattle and rich green waving cornfields. I am from teaching English to classrooms full of wide-eyed learners.

I am from, “Judy, do more than is asked of you,” “Judy, do your work for the Lord.”

I am from marriage to Steve Lorenzen, from the Spinners’ song, “Could It Be I am Falling in Love?”

I am from patience, from a mother who taught kindness so sweet that it left the air fragrant as lilacs. I am from “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” “What’s this world coming to?”

I am from wait your turn, listen carefully.

I am from encouragement, enthusiasm, from songs in the heart.

Students, in turn, wrote their own poems. I sometimes had to help them word their poems, but even when I did, the words and descriptions were theirs. My help was with sentence structure and mechanics.

The students’ poems demonstrate their rich diverse cultures and the beautiful and / or painful experiences that they so stunningly put into words. Christensen also writes,

“When we create writing assignments that call students’ memories into the classroom, we honor their heritage and their stories as worthy of study” (4). This statement is extremely relevant in my minority-majority classroom. Choosing poems to take a look at underneath the fine lens of the microscope was very difficult because of the beauty and uniqueness of each student’s life, which I felt for the most part, each student was able to capture. I also can say with 100 percent certainty that with the teaching of this poem at the beginning of each year, all of my students were invested in the assignment with an igniting passion as they were the experts in this assignment.

This “I Am From” poem exemplifies honoring the students’ heritages in a writing assignment. That “honoring of heritage” was present in every poem, some poems stronger than others. Melissa Gallegos-Gutierrez’s poem, for example, is an exquisite example of honoring her people, her family, her customs, her language, her homeland—the whole poem is in reverence of her heritage and so much more:

“I Am From” by Melissa Gallegos-Gutierrez

I am from Jose and Esperanza Gallegos, Marcelino and Socorro Guterrez, Jose Gallegos and Luceli Guterrez.

I am from bodas y quinceaneras with barbacoa, sopa fria, frijoles puercos, from asado, sopas Marias, arroz, and albondigas.

I am from Durango, Mexico, my childhood home, from dirt streets to the arroyo in front of abuelita’s house, from mornings at 5:00 or 6:00, the vacas running to drink their water while the vaqueros drove them, from a messenger shouting, “vacas bravas,” from remembering times of the bulls running with the cows, from Sinaloa where the detours are everywhere, from four wheelers and sand and parties with bandas y tamborazo to beaches with

big blue waves, from my birth place Grand Island, Nebraska, cornfields and green fields. I am from Iglesia de Cristo El-Rapha, from decorations of flowers, and hermosas alabanzas, “Con Todo.”

I am from a brown-haired, brown-eyed people.

I am from spending free time with my family, usually joking around or talking about our wonderful childhood memories, from working at Red Lobster or going to school at Senior High.

I am from scrap booking. I am from helping people out, from a tenderhearted family, from “I want to go into nursing.”

I am from laughter and jokes, from loud people, from loving life.

I am from “We have to work to become someone in life,” “We have to study to become what we want in life,” and “Everything we do, we have to do it with love and passion.”

I am from a people of loud voices, from a people of banda y tamborazo.

I am from an inner strength of kindness and caring, from faith and love.

Melissa’s poem, with the descriptions of the “dirt streets of the arroyo in front of abuelita’s house” and the vacas running the bulls through the streets, is gorgeous and takes the reader straight to Durango. I could not help but feel awed by her childhood memories and her ability to communicate them. In writing this poem, Melissa had felt she had to write it in English, but I had not given that instruction in the assignment.

Immigrant students are educated or taught to write in English. I told her she absolutely could write her poem, the family saying and foods, in the way they are spoken in her home; she did not have to translate her home scenes and faith into English. The sprinkling of her first language throughout the poem brings the poem to a level that I call

a Rudolfo-Anaya level. She loved the poem when she was finished; I loved it, and the Spanish language, her mother language, added such richness in the honoring of her heritage that we both just smiled with great satisfaction. Her mother language uncovered the importance and power of language in this brief poem. The simplicity of the description of her people, “I am from a brown-haired, brown-eyed people,” creates a lovely visual. I found Melissa’s poem breath-taking in many areas, not just the honoring of her heritage.

Certain elements of her poem caught me by surprise. I did not know she was born on the Great Plains, in Grand Island, Nebraska, and then moved, with her family, back to Durango. She is a child of two worlds that come together in one, and her life is a celebration of that assimilation as she attends the bodas y quinceaneras “with barbacoa, sopa fria, frijoles puercos, from asado, sopas Marias, arroz, and albondigas. . . bandas and tamborazo” of family and friends in Grand Island, Nebraska. I can hear her love of both places as she added, “from my birth place Grand Island, Nebraska, cornfields and green fields.” Even though Melissa talks of being from a loud people in a couple of places in her poem, this student was very quiet and shy—that truly surprised me. This poem also reveals little ways of knowing the student that would never probably come up except in a poem like this—like when Melissa wrote, “I am from scrap booking.” That fact was just a simple fun fact that was just sitting there waiting to be known, and it is part of who Melissa is.

Melissa put her whole heart into writing this poem—that was evident to me when we were writing them. This was a one-week assignment in which students completed their investigating. She investigated to the end to get every word spelt correctly in

Spanish. She was proud of her poem. Although the students wrote these poems by hand, Melissa was one of many who wanted a copy of her poem typed—in final draft and as close to perfect as she could get it. That desire spoke loudly to me. The legacy that she captures in her poem—captured her.

Traveling across the world to a new land and language, the traveler would find the homeland of Muhamed Talundzic, a young sophomore boy, who is as charming as his poem. Muhamed was excited to write his “I Am From” poem. A poetry-writing assignment might cause some students, especially boys, to grumble. However, this “I Am From” formula seemed to relieve any anxiety the students had, and Muhamed met this assignment with joy. His whole poem is a celebration of his life—who he is, where he is from, of where he is now. My class ended up loving this student, and he ended up with an enduring nickname that everyone called him:

“I Am From” by Muhamed Talundzic

I am from Asim and Kadir, Mersud and Ajsa.

I am from grah, pita, cevapi. I am from Sarajevo, Bosnia, from Saarbrücken, Germany, from Phoenix, Arizona, from Grand Island, Nebraska, the Plains, from flatness and blue skies, from football fields to blue lakes, jet skiing.

I am from Islam, from prayer rugs and religious mirrors.

I am from speaking Bosnian at home and English at school.

I am from being happy hearted to smiling every day in any situation, from brown hair and brown eyes and white teeth.

I am from spending time with my girlfriend, Lauren, and with my friends.

I am from helping people, from selling shoes to working on the farm. I am from loving my family, loving my parents, from wanting a good life.

I am from out-going, friendly and kind, every teacher's delight, from charming.

I am from "Muhamed, find another job—you need to save for college," "Jebo ti cru."

I am from a peaceable, loveable mom and dad.

I am from making people happy, from making people laugh, from easy going.

Muhamed's celebration of life is evident throughout his poem, and when he writes, "I am from being happy hearted to smiling every day in any situation, from brown hair and brown eyes and white teeth. . . . I am from making people happy, from making people laugh, from easy going," he has defined himself exactly.

I found it interesting that when Muhamed was writing his poem, he wanted to get the words of his daily bread—as he called it—correct, so he had to check with father on, "grah, pita, cevapi." I call that a celebration and an honoring of ancestry that Muhamed was not satisfied until his father had given him the correct spelling of first language words.

Mary Pipher's "where" includes not only the actual, physical place of where the writer/poet is from, but all of the aspects of life that happens to that writer/poet. She writes, "You possess an innate temperament, a belief system, and a worth ethic. . . you have a sense of your weaknesses as well as your strengths, your blind spots as well as your unique gifts" (32). She leaves no angles out of the self-knowledge of the "where" in the "I Am From" poem, "Our sensibilities, our moral outlook, and our point of view are what we writers have to offer the reader" (33). Some students' poems, like Moises Zumaya, portrayed the "where" I am from as a deep faith given or taught to them by their parents. Moises writes, "I am from one divine creator, a worshiper of a single Lord,

Pentecostal. / I am from worshipers to gamers, from workers to artists, from the Lord and praising passion, from photographers. / I am from faith in the Lord, from seekers of the Lord, from those who never let their hopes down—I am from the future generation.”

Both Muhamed and Melissa celebrate the faiths of their parents and cultures, and in those lines, their chosen words bring the connotations and their emotions of this part of their lives to their poems.

Christensen addresses students’ pain in “‘Knock Knock’: Turning Pain into Power,” and she writes, “By structuring a curriculum that allows room for their lives and by listening to their stories, I can locate the right book, the right poem that turns pain into power—while I teach reading and writing.” Yet I would argue that this “I Am From” poem allows for students to present their pain in these poems in a way that permits students to mention it and move on from it as they wish. I need to take the time, here, to mention a few poems that dealt with students’ pain in a way that I understood that that pain was “where the student was from.” As teachers, this is such an important point, a point in which to honor and value students’ experience with pain, experience which has had a profound impact on students’ formation or identity—that identity which is expressed through elements of place.

Gavin Gragg wrote, “I am from parental separation for a while, from living with Grandma, from returning to nothing from what we had, a house of old ghosts. . . . I am from quietness, from I-need-to-get-to-know-you-first before I talk more, open up.” Gavin’s pain from this separation and from this house he had to return to was so powerful in this poem the way he wrote, “a house of old ghosts.” I remember when he was trying to articulate how he hated returning to that house with all those memories he did not want



to remember. He struggled with putting his feelings into words, but he ended articulating them beautifully. He taught me so much in his poem—and I told him so. Sometimes we continue to be “from that pain.” I wondered, after really getting to know him, that if the reason he was distant and would not let people in, “I-need-to-get-to-know-you-first” was a symptom of his former pain. Another student Emily Colby wrote, “I am from divorce, from waiting to see my father who doesn’t want to see me or for me to use his last name anymore, a family full of loss, from rehab.” Writing this poem for her happened to coincide with the time she was dealing with issues from her biological father. Eventually he told her he did not want her to use his last name any longer. She took his last name off of her poem and is not using it because of his request. This event had to be hurtful for her, and she was able to write honestly about this time, call it what it was, and keep writing. I love that her poem ends in joy, in celebration. She tells her reader that she is from “sweetness, as sweet as pineapples!” What a beautiful outlook! Finally, one student wrote of being “from the pain of the Immigration and Naturalization Services raid of December 12, 2006.” In this raid, she lost her mother, and she wrote of being “from without a mother.” She is from that pain felt by many of the students in this area who lost a parent or parents in that raid at the Grand Island meat packing plant. The student’s mother tried to come back to the states soon after that time to be with her children but never returned. Of course, the talk and fear amongst students in this kind of position is that coyotes take their loved ones’ money and then do whatever they please with them. I noticed that pain also builds community between students. That pain also was the bridge of a lasting friendship between students and me. This “I Am From” poem brought to light many, many situations that need social justice.

Overall, these poems celebrate life and culture—the places where the students come from across the borders or across the street. In their awe-inspiring lines, the students honor the people they come from, their ancestors, in enduring ways. Students' poems sparkle with words and phrases from their first languages, which are spoken at home by their parents and family members who live with them. My students looked honestly at pain and injustice just the same.

These poems clearly exalt the core ideas of Place-based education, and as the teacher, each year of the students who wrote these “I Am From” poems, I could see the great delight these students had in writing them.

There are two more points to make about the students writing these poems that I need to address. Writing this poem brought a sense of community among all of the students as they wrote and talked and revealed their findings to one another, not to mention the connections between students who were from the same countries but did not know they were. This community building and connections continued throughout the rest of the year. Christensen writes, “We don't build communities instead of working on academics. We build communities while we work on academics” (15). This scenario played out in my classroom. Secondly, the need for social action for many students became blatantly clear. Many of these students' families had and still have obstacles to overcome as a part of the immigration process. Here, again, Christensen says, “The classroom can be a safe place for students to not only talk back, but to affirm their right to a place in the world” (28). My students felt safe with me and with each other. We shared in these experiences, which led to a “Student Spotlight” portion of the class. We discussed what poetry festivals and read arounds looked like or a single student in the

spotlight when and if the students felt like sharing. Students opted for the “Student Spotlight,” so any student who wanted to read his or her poem at the beginning of the class period had the spotlight to do so.

Throughout the last five years, I have read the most meaningful, beautiful poems just like these, poems about the places/cultures of where my students are from, defining who they are—and just as important, I saw first hand how much they loved the gorgeous poems they wrote. I have read “I Am From” poems about being from the moonlit cow paths of Sudan, the mudslides and the sweet dirt of Guatemala, the war-torn neighborhood in El Salvador where a student watched his uncle blown up by a hand grenade, an adobe house in Mexico where a student watched his abuelo dying, and at this point, countless poems of students from broken homes in Grand Island, Nebraska—from “tears and from sitting on the front porch waiting for my father to come.” These poems have opened endearing conversations between my students and me—sometimes with tears. Where we come from definitely makes an indelible mark on our lives and influences how we learn and the directions of what we want to learn in order to make a difference in our worlds, in other words, career choices—or what Gruchow might call vocation. These “childhood” imprintings are blatantly evident in their poems. After reading their poems, I could see the influences of their places in their personalities and behaviors—these imprintings of place are their identities expressed through elements of place and could possibly be determiners of their futures. Knowing where we come from is priceless. After teaching “I Am From” poems, I argue that with Place-conscious education, students take interest and buy into the curriculum because it is so relevant to their lives. This reaction is what I saw consistently each year. I argue that with students

fully involved in their education, the issues that concern them now, their engagement would remain high and what would have to follow is that their grades would go up; students care about issues that concern them. They do care about their world as many in my area are from countries across the world. My students always scored well on their “I Am From” poems, and I can say that I loved reading every one of them. I encouraged students to send them in for publication, which really excited them—to think that I thought their work was worthy of publication!

Students’ voices can become so distinctive in writing as Peter Elbow clarifies in his introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Elbow outlines the categories and ongoing debate about voice in writing:

. . . ‘five meanings of voice as applied to writing: (1) audible voice or intonation (the sounds in a text); (2) dramatic voice (the character or implied author in the text); (3) recognizable or distinctive voice; (4) voice with authority; (5) resonant voice or presence.’ There is an ideological dispute about the fifth meaning because it is ‘the only meaning that requires a link between the known text and the unknown actual author.’ First four are ‘relatively noncontroversial.’ (xx)

Each year, after reading all of my students’ poems and hearing each of their unique voices on the page, their strengths, joys, and sorrows, and hearing students’ recognizable voices in sound—their voices become so distinct. Mary Pipher writes of her aspect on voice:

Voice is everything we are, all that we have observed, the emotional chords that are uniquely ours—all our flaws and all of our strengths, expressed in the words

that best reflect us. Voice is like a snowflake—complicated, beautiful, and individual. It is essence of self, distilled and offered in service to the world.

Recently, a friend told me, ‘I like singers who have unmistakable voices. They make every song their own, and when you hear even a few bars of a song you know it is them.’ Individual voices can be quiet or noisy, wry, or schmaltzy, self-disclosing or guarded, kind or angry. Voice comes from genetics, gender, relationships, place; from ethnic background and educational experience. Voice resonates with our sorrows and fears, but also our joys, and it sings out all of who we are. (42)

Students often find their distinct voices in this poem, and in some cases, I predict that they eventually find their purposes or passions. Pipher points out, “Passions may emerge from a tragedy—a serious illness or accident, or a parent lost—or from talent discovered, a trip to a magical place, or a relationship with a certain person (often a grandparent, best friend, or teacher)” (51). This poem lends itself to awakening realizations in the young poets in many areas.

My crafting the “I Am From” poem into the prescribed curriculum only made me want for more Place-based assignments that would engage students and be relevant to them in their own lives, their lives here on the Great Plains.

### **The Great Plains/Great Plains Studies Definition: The Place Where We Are**

Presently, the place these students call home is Grand Island, Nebraska, on the Great Plains. I wondered if my students really understood what the Great Plains consists of or if they *really* saw the land and sky, living in their houses or apartments at their

different locations. Their ancestors came to this place for a reason. What was the attraction or promise here? How did students see their *place* here? With the Place-based writing assignments, students would learn the answers to those questions themselves.

The Center for Great Plains Studies website has a vivid definition of features and the physical boundary lines of the Great Plains:

The Great Plains is a vast expanse of grasslands stretching from the Rocky Mountains to the Missouri River and from the Rio Grande to the coniferous forests of Canada—an area more than eighteen hundred miles from north to south and more than five hundred miles from east to west. The Great Plains region includes all or parts of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The region, once labeled "the Great American Desert," is now more often called the "heartland," or, sometimes, "the breadbasket of the world." Its immense distances, flowing grasslands, sparse population, enveloping horizons, and dominating sky convey a sense of expansiveness, even emptiness or loneliness, a reaction to too much space and one's own meager presence in it.

When I started Place-based work, my love and appreciation for these Great Plains grew immensely. My eyes went from seeing this place as the place where I worked and lived, the ordinary, the seasons of life—getting in the car in the spring, summer, fall, and winter, the dry dusty summer roads, the continual dusting in my little farm house, the fields of corn springing up, the harvesting, ice being scraped off the cars and sidewalk—to being transformed into seeing this place as my world here on the Plains, the land that

was so good to me, and in turn, I wanted to be a caretaker of the land, this present-day agricultural Plains—although I do often wonder what it would have been like to live on the Plains before Euro-Americans came and altered it into this “monocultural cornfields.” These cornfields and pastures are the Plains I know and love every sound of every blue jay, cricket, kitten, and cow, and the sight of every cornstalk, hollyhock, wild rose, and snow-laced evergreen. Through Place-based writing, both writing it and reading it, I took a severe look at my surroundings—the hard elements and facts—and realized that this land, with its living vegetation and animals, and sky had simply gotten into my blood, and there seemed to be a great need in me to want others to see our place here as I did. I loved all of the natural features and the fruits and flowers of this landscape. I wanted others to have that love of place here also. How does one communicate those positions but by teaching students to look at their surroundings and to investigate the world around them, and, for me, to live by what I teach, to be a caretaker of the land myself—so the change that comes is not for the worse. Jon Price communicates this sense of longing within to caretake and help heal the land as he recounts his own experience watching the land change after a “nature gone mad” flood that exposed the prior damage the land had gone through, “I have seen in a few short months a little of the wildness that had been lost to the years of cultivation and drainage and poisoning here in the ‘heartland’” (5).

Price continues in his position:

As I continued to explore those small patches of native wildflowers and grasses, I began to feel, for the first time, a sense of longing for the lost land. I began to wonder what a thousand acres of prairie, with its attendant wetlands and oak savannahs, might look like, feel like. How might living near or within such a wild

place have changed me and my relationship to home? Like many born in the Midwest, I had given little thought to committing to the place where I grew up—had, in fact always wanted to leave. Sometimes it felt as if I were already gone, a ghost in my own house. What was the source of that inner exile? Was it related in any way to my exile from the land? If so, how might I overcome it? Where might I seek the reasons to commit myself to this damaged place, help heal it? (5)

Price vividly describes the devastation of this flood in which even dead bodies did not stay buried, and this natural destruction exposed the man-made damage, toxins from toxic farming practices, to the land. Price takes his readers to the history of the Euro-American settlements bringing destruction to native plants, animals and human populations of the grasslands (8)? We have to teach love or appreciation of place right where we are at in the history of that place trusting all else will follow, ecology, conservation, sustainability, stewardship? We need to wonder what our place—where we live now—will look like in 10 years if we do not act—no matter where we are coming to that place from.

With the large number of culturally diverse students in my classroom, the new disadvantages and tough adjustments that some students contend with daily are areas to also be especially considerate about. Why would they feel any connection to this place that they might feel oppressed by or excluded from? How can the physical, social, and cultural attributes of the present-day Great Plains, which help shape my students' identities, shape them with a strong sense of respect, attachment, and gratitude?

I loved the heritage aspect of this pedagogy, and I also loved the caretaking or stewardship and sustainability aspects. I longed to teach more Place-based assignments.

In spring of 2015, Senior High had been awarded a grant to the science



department for an Outdoor Classroom, and the Outdoor Classroom is indeed about stewardship and sustainability, about the plants, habitat, and history of and the knowing of *this* place. I had asked to teach a Place-based writing/English class, particularly stewardship and sustainability as a way to introduce the school to Place-based pedagogy as a whole class, to cross curriculum—partner with the sciences, and utilize that Outdoor classroom. I was told that any new classes needed to be reading-based.

Finally, the day arrived that I was asked to teach a dual-credit class with an emphasis on all Americans as immigrants. I was thrilled at this opportunity to finally be able to write Place-based writing assignments. My account of that memorable semester follows. My prompts included a “Where I am From” essay to discover Heritage, legend and lore, immigration, and authenticity; Reflection 1, to discover Place Appreciation of the Great Plains and Place as Identity with preadvocacy work in stewardship, conservation, and ecology—or sustainability; and Reflection 2 to explore and learn about Social Justice. These combined principles lead to my overall goal of Place-conscious citizenry. The results of this project speak for themselves.

### Chapter 3

#### “Where I am From” Essay, Heritage, Legend and Lore, Immigration, Authenticity

##### Demographics of My Classes

The countries of origin of the family members my students traced were Mexico, 24 percent; El Salvador, 7 percent; Guatemala, 11 percent; Colombia, 2 percent; Sudan/Africa, 4 percent; Ireland, 9 percent; England, 2 percent; Austria, 2 percent; Sweden, 2 percent; Czech Republic, 7 percent; Finland, 2 percent; Germany, 24 percent; Prussia, 2 percent; and the Philippines, 2 percent.

##### The Research

As I began my research project, Place-Based Education and Great Plains Studies Research, which included a “Where I am From” essay, I could not help but think of Gruenewald and Smith’s questions in *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*. These authors are writing on place as a meeting ground and write the following questions that are so prevalent in my classroom:

What sense of place can be elaborated in a setting marked by conflicting historical narratives, competing claims to ‘native’ status, wide-ranging cultural diversity, and varying degrees of privilege in society? How does this impact on the lives and work of teachers in particular? These questions could be asked in many sites around the world. . . (255)

My classroom had somewhat of the appearance that some students had varying degrees of privilege in society—that the immigrants, of whom many are undocumented, felt as they did not belong or were unwelcome, especially with the 2016 Presidential Race presently making an issue out of “illegal immigration.” After the research started, the

class came up with questions: What does “native born” status really mean? What happens when we all trace our heritage back to where we came from? The class was in for some really big surprises. It was evident to the students that these paper were going to be about heritage and the family stories or legends and lore passed down, and equally as significant—immigration. These epiphanies were one of two major forces in unifying my classes and exposing the “class myths.” I will examine the second influence in bringing solidarity in my class later.

## **The “Where I am From” Essay**

### **Background**

When I was given this opportunity to teach an American Literature class in the fall of 2015, I looked over the two possible syllabi offered and saw that the one syllabus focused on immigration—as the syllabus restated several times, “We are all immigrants,” in one way or another. I was thrilled at this focus on immigration as I thought about the demographics of my class and how Place-based heritage and immigration work would be so relevant and authentic to each student. That syllabus also included the possibility of an “I am From” paper, which was perfect for refining as a Place-based assignment. I could also add other Place-based writing assignments. How could understanding where we are from change us, our classroom. . . community. . . world? After all, my students were from all around the world. What could calling students to this type of writing—this type of work—result in? What would change in the students’ critical thinking—as a result from being asked to complete this type of work? The students had to present their paper, what they learned, to the class as a final project.

I saw this offer as an important way to create space for students to research significant family history from their own lives. I encouraged them to see themselves as writers of history (I told them to prepare these essays also as some type of gift to family members).

In readying my students for their family-of-origins interview questions and research, I prefaced the writing with help from Mary Pipher in *Writing to Change the World*. In her chapter “Interviews,” she talks of the power of interviews and observations and listening:

Before commencing the interview, we want to invite questions and concerns.

Once we are under way, we want to be quiet and let our subjects talk. If we are control freaks, we will miss the gold. We want to attend the emotions, watch our subjects’ faces, and note the sighs and silences. We shouldn’t leap to fill in the pauses, but rather should stay still and see what unfurls. As a character in Joan

Silber’s book *Ideas of Heaven* put it, ‘Shutting up is a good research tool.’ (122-3)

Her advice was poignant for students interviewing family members for immigration, obstacles, and coming-to-the-Great-Plains stories. My students interviewed several relatives and decided upon one family member’s history to trace to the United States. I gave the students the prompt the first day of class, clarifying and talking about what the assignment would entail, and then brought up the prompt and their research periodically to see how students were progressing. Any type of problem was addressed that we might face such as students being adopted or in foster care—these students would choose someone in their adopted or foster family to trace or these students could choose a person who had mentored them. The prompt read as follows:

The theme of this American Literature class is ‘What is an American?’ The story of America is the story of immigration, migration, and assimilation. We living here are part of this story. For this assignment, students will use their own families to trace the way individual found their place in America. Guiding questions might include when and where did your family come from? Why did they come to this particular area, the Great Plains? What was happening in their country of origin that made them want to come to America? What were the obstacles and challenges they overcame? Has your family kept its traditions and culture from its country of origins?

The research process started, and my students listened carefully to family members as they compiled pages of facts, information, stories, fragments of stories, maps, and pictures (some students could not make sense of the fragmented stories as the relatives’ memories were failing them). They encountered joy, sorrow, and nostalgia in their interviewing months. Some were given huge family volumes of genealogies that no one in the family realized that the old great-aunt or uncle had. Facebook became a tool for many of the students interviewing family members spread out across this country and in other countries. Every part of the assignment was engaging for my students, and students soon began coming excitedly to class to share what they were learning. (As the semester was ending, four students told me that these writing assignments were their favorite assignments in all of their educational years.)

My students and I read the literature from this class of the Early American and National Expansion and Reform eras and heard the voices of all of the immigrants, paying attention to the distinct characteristics of the literary movements. Each writer had

powerful messages about overcoming obstacles and questioning why people cannot come together and get along, why people cannot unite and have unity of mind in the vein of getting along and living side by side, and why justice does not exist. We reached the Post War Era, and the students realized they had not heard from the Native American yet who had been here all along. This coincided with where they were at in their research. In taking family histories, many students realized that many of their family members could not read or write English because they were marked illiterate in the historical records—and then the realization came that we had not heard from the Native Americans yet. The Native Americans had not been taught English, but in this segment of the historical time frame, once the Native Americans learned English, we read Native American accounts of history, and their accounts were in opposition to White folk accounts, accounts that had been “whitewashed.” Their stories were often detrimental to the character of White people who purported to help them. There was a profound importance forming as to the need to understand historical perspectives—and to understand the history of our families. We needed to understand our heritage, and many of the students’ accounts included stories of their Native American heritage or family encounters with Native Americans that were absolutely unforgettable.

We also experienced these moments of what Pipher describes as an important aspect of research:

While statistical research and control-group studies are published in journals more frequently, the most groundbreaking work often has come from the careful observation of small samples. Freud, Jung, Piaget, and Alice Miller carefully observed individual patients, and these relatively few observations led them to

theories about humans in general. Science moves forward because of statistically significant research. But it also moves forward because of observation and eureka moments. (121)

When their research was really underway, the students were having eureka moments about stories and facts about their family members that astounded them, like the number of children in a family or that many of their families had farming backgrounds who came to these Great Plains for more land. When the research first started, students would tell me that their grandpa came from a family of 17 or 18. The students wanted to see who had a family member with the highest number of children in one family. One student had an uncle with 22 children, and we thought that student was the winner of the contest; however, one girl discovered that her grandpa in Mexico had 28 children by one woman, and when that woman died, he married again and had two more children. She won the contest with a family member with 30 children. Some students in my classes learned they were related to one another, and I learned that I was related to a couple of students also! None of us had any idea we were related.

It was not long, and students were reporting on some of the most horrendous obstacles family members had overcome to get to these United States. I could visibly see the change of attitude in appreciation for all the family members overcame so that their descendants could have a better life.

What more was happening was that the students were *really* realizing that their heritage included the fact that we are all immigrants; they realized that immigrants are not just the latest influx of people trying to escape poverty, genocide, or another tragic obstacle, but they themselves, their families, were indeed immigrants. This realization

had a huge impact on the students—every one of them—especially when they listened to the powerful personal stories of how each of their descendants came to these United States, which students presented at the end of the semester.

As a way to approach the start of writing the actual paper, we went over strategies for beginning the narrative—from Anderson’s getting past page fright to begin, like getting the motion started and writing (8) to strategies of my own including looking at the openings of our texts for the class or openings of mentor texts we are especially drawn to, which for me, I told them are openings such as Ross’s opening in *As For Me and My House*, Grove’s opening in *Over Prairie Trails*, Cather’s beginning in *My Antonia*, and Dempsey’s opening in *Charcoal’s World*. I used a similar introduction as Campbell’s in *Halfbreed*: “In the 1860’s Saskatchewan was part of what was then called the Northwest Territories and was a land free of towns, barb-wire fences and farm-houses” (9).

I modified Lane’s “The Story Circle” to start telling a few stories of my grandfather’s that would make the students feel that “If the teacher could write and tell that story, then I have no problem telling this story” (98).

We covered quoting our family members—whether opening with a quote or using a quote within the narrative, we wanted the quotes to be meaningful, memorable or showing the person’s attitude (Michaels 32-36). We talked about how the quotes could propel the narrative forward.

Choosing the right words to communicate our stories was a priority. Students understood that writing with accurate, specific, and concrete words and vivid verbs would really work to bring their narratives to life and set the mood and tone of the story (Anderson 206-215), and that original figurative language, metaphors or similes, of their



very own would make their writing unique—no clichés (215-220). The students agreed that they do not like reading extra words that really have no purpose in an essay, so their purpose was to also cut excessive “deadwood,” words they do not need in the sentence.

For the most part, the students knew their narratives would move along in chronological order. We knew our endings would be powerful and lead up to where each one of us was at the present moment. They knew they had to present these papers along with their maps, so reading the piece aloud in practice and rereading were already *musts* in preparation for the presentations.

So for my example paper, I interviewed my family members, so that I could learn more about my family history and share my paper and deep map with my students. I, too, walked away with a better understanding of my grandfather and my father. I learned new information about my grandfather that was monumental in my life and monumental in my connection with many of my students. My “Where I am From” paper follows, with narration interwoven for specific points:

#### From Sparta, Greece to the Great Plains

In May of 1904, 14-year-old Spiros Kyriakides boarded a boat in Sparta, Greece, to cross the ocean to France in route to the United States, pursuing the American Dream he had heard of and dreamt about. He arrived safely to France on May 20, 1904. Then he, with 10.00 dollars in his pocket, boarded The Germanic and left Cherbourg, France, reaching the port of New York on May 31, 1904. At Ellis Island, the young lad chose a new last name: Catholo. At Ellis Island, the clerk spelt Catholo incorrectly as Catholos, and so he would be Spiros Catholos for the rest of his long, troubled life from that moment on.

Spiros was his father's oldest son and destined to inherit all of his father's lush olive trees and the lamb farm in Sparta, Greece. He did not want them or the responsibility of them, so at 14, he decided to leave and left. His leaving was not a pleasant scene, nor a good memory for him or his family. As he left, his father called to him in Greek, "You are NOTHING!" or "You are catholo!" So this was the heritage that Spiros would pass on to his descendants—along with his illegal entrance into the United States of America.

This moment of learning that my grandfather came to the States illegally was absolutely just an unbelievable moment for me. I had no idea that my grandfather was an illegal or undocumented citizen—at 14 years of age. So many thoughts crossed my mind about him and his character that he could make such a trip at that age. The more I learned about him, the more I understood him. I told my students that I had expected to learn much from my investigation, but really, that was now an understatement—they would too. My heritage essay continues:

What does a young boy do, who has no skills except that of harvesting olives and care-taking lambs—who speaks a foreign language? The boy looked for work and did odd jobs for years, becoming a candy maker. When that work was no longer available, he became a skilled gambler—a professional gambler, a swindler. He began travelling the country with a couple of cowboys. They had a scheme, marked cards, and whatever else swindlers had in that time and conned other cowboys out of their money—right after they got paid. Con men know when

people get paid; they learn the beguiling tricks of their trade, and these men became smooth at cheating people out of their money. When they entered a town, they'd learn when and where the big card games were. One of the three, for the sake of earning people's trust, would join the game and lose big money—then the other two would come in with their marked cards and win all of the money. They always tried to leave a place before people become wise to their devious ways.

At this point in my investigation, I thought of all of the times that I had been rather judgmental about people in hard places in life taking on illegal activities—that was my grandfather. I could not help but think of my goal of immigration and overall goal of Place-conscious citizenry and my grandfather and his profession. What kind of citizen was he? I knew that times were hard at this time in history, and he was so young in coming an illegal way—how was I to reconcile this dilemma or could I? I knew he went on to become a skilled gambler, legendary in his time, but I did not know that he was a con artist too. The students understood that they may learn facts that might not be especially pleasant. Spiros' story continues:

However, when World War I broke out in 1914, Spiros joined the military and served in war, becoming a naturalized citizen. When the war ended, Spiros picked up his gambling friends and ways again and was on the move.

While traveling through the States, Spiros met Marjorie Rowley, a husky-voiced, gorgeous woman. They quickly married—and she became pregnant. Jimmie Addison Rowley Catholos was born on December 12, 1927, in Sioux

City, Iowa, during The Great Depression. He was the result of this surprising union. But Spiros left Marjorie sometime after little Jimmie's birth, so she did NOT tell baby Jimmie who his father was. In the course of little Jimmie's childhood, Marjorie married and divorced five times, twice to Spiros, but Marjorie really did not like Spiros. Spiros divorced her because she had done something that made him furious with her, and she did not like his always-being-on-the-move lifestyle. So his son Jimmie was a little boy who did not know who his real father was for most of his childhood (though Jimmie did not know that he didn't know who his real father was as he thought his father was another man) until one alarming day. During these years, Spiros' wild adventures across the States are difficult to trace—but his young son felt the timeless, painful effects of fatherlessness.

I told my students if they came across information that was too painful or too private to write, there were ways around writing it. I used that strategy in writing about why Spiros divorced Marjorie. I learned the real reason, and I simply could not write it for Marjorie's sake, so I did not avoid the issue but just phrased the problem as Marjorie doing something that made Spiros furious. Also, at this point in my essay, I lose track of Spiros—no one in the family knew where he was, so my focus becomes my father, to very briefly cover spans of years until I can bring Spiros back into the picture. The students were to trace the relative to the Great Plains, and if they had problems with the journey, they could apply a writing strategy like I did. So as I resume my narrative, I will

focus briefly on the impact of my grandfather's absence in his son's life until I can trace my grandfather again.

While Spiros was gambling across the nation during The Great Depression, his little boy lived in South Sioux City, at Shanty Town, a town of placards and cardboard. The directions to Jimmie's cardboard house were South Sioux City to the riverbank, to the Filly Milk sign—to home, the Burma Shave sign. For supper, many times Jimmie went fishing in the Missouri River. Often at night, his mother would have him go through the dumpsters in the back of a nearby grocery store looking for what he called *soft fruit*, usually the bananas that went bad, sometimes rotten apples, and any kind of food thrown out by the grocer. The hungry cats and dogs were there too, hoping to find a thrown-out morsel. There were no jobs for his mother, and there were times that they went hungry for days. During this desperate time, Jimmie heard of a Billy Sunday Revival going on, and the people there were giving away good fruit. He ran as fast as he could to the huge tent and was greeted by a big old Indian in full regalia, his headdress, beautiful—and big red juicy apples in his hands, along with little slips of paper. As the Indian gave him an apple for himself and his mother, he told Jimmie that Christ loved him and knew all about his troubles. Jimmie took the apples, slipped the paper in his pocket, and left. He ate his apple on the way home, and for once in a long time, ended the day with a full belly. He often wondered what it would be like to have a father who loved him, to take care of him and his mother.

Jimmie went through many years—dreaming about a man he did not know, Spiros, and upon his mother’s second marriage to George Baccacus, Jimmie and his mother moved into George’s house. George was the man Jimmie began to think was his father—and this was the first bit of stability that he had ever known, which was both good and bad. He was able to stay in the same house and attend the same school for a couple of years, but when George and his mother went off to work in the restaurant George managed, he was left in the hands of some woman his mother had found to watch over him. She locked him in the basement for days at a time. Once, the lady locked him in the basement of George’s house without food for five days, but Jimmie didn’t dwell on these times or feel sorry for himself. This is just the way it was for him. He had good memories of these years too, which included a teacher who loved him at the school he attended, and she saw the way life was for him. She always told him how smart he was and how well he did his work. One day she said to him, “Why, Jimmie Baccacus, I’ve never seen an A student so happy with a C.” He loved her. He’d remember the blue dress she had on that day, her blue stone bracelet, and the sweet smell of her lilac perfume.

George then moved them to Omaha, Nebraska, to these Great Plains, where opportunities abound for George and Marjorie in the restaurant business, and life seemed good. But one day when Jimmie was around 12 years old, he was walking home on a dusty road with a kid from his neighborhood, playing kick the can. A car pulled up. A man got out of the car and asked him his name; Jimmie answered, “Jimmie Baccacus.” The man—his father, Spiros Catholos— yelled at

him, “You’re not Jimmie Baccacus; you’re Jimmie Catholos!” And so he called himself Jimmie Catholos from that traumatic day on. Before his biological father left, he told him, “I’m coming back in one week. You be here on this corner, waiting with your report card.” One week later, Jimmie was on that corner with his report card and a car pulled up and took him to his real father.

He showed his father his grades, and he was returned home. For the rest of his life until his real father Spiros’ death, his father’s visits would be as sporadic as dandelions in May, momentarily here, then like the parachuting seeds, vanishing in the winds.

I told my students that during this part of the investigation of my grandfather’s life, my heart really softened towards him and my father. Doing these interviews was in many ways heart breaking for me. This time was not without many tears. I told my students to expect tears too. My heritage work was far more rewarding than I had even expected. My essay arrives at my appearance on the scene and my memories of my grandfather:

Jimmie served in the Air Force and then returned to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he was a cook at the Compass Room restaurant. It was there that he met the blue-eyed beauty Lois June Ramel. After an immediate attraction, they married six weeks later on August 27, 1949, in Council Bluffs, Iowa. This union would begin a 51-year marriage and produce seven little girls, one being severely disabled, all who looked like their father: Jamey, Jackie, Joy, Jill, Jonna, Judy, and Jo. At this time, the old man Spiros came back into their lives briefly,

wanting Jimmie to teach these little girls about their Greek heritage. He wanted them to know the Greek dances, “O pah.” Jimmie naturally prepared Greek foods and desserts like baklava, and Spiros, when he came on his out-of-nowhere visits prepared dandelion greens for them. “Et,” he’d say. They were Greeks, and they needed to study Greek and to understand what it meant to be Greek. He wanted them to know about the greats, Aristotle, Socrates, Plato—and, of course, the mythical gods. Spiros wanted them to return to his, to their beautiful homeland.

Over his lifetime, Jimmie, though he loved the farmlands of these Great Plains, moved his family from the farm in Malcolm, Nebraska, to the city of Grand Island, Nebraska—to start a new life and job. During this time, on January 3, 1966, he got the call of this father’s death. Spiros was in the shower when a blood clot hit his brain. In the years after leaving Greece, Spiros’ brother John had come to the States, starting his own Greek restaurant in Boise, Idaho. John had achieved the American Dream, making his millions. Spiros was living in Boise at the time of his death. His brother shipped his body to Grand Island, where Jimmie arranged his funeral at Apfel, Butler, Geddes Funeral Home on Second Street. No one came, except Jimmie, his wife Lois, and their six daughters. His life played out like his leaving Greece—alone.

For Spiros, a 14-year-old boy who lied to come to the States from Greece, he had to learn a new language and new ways at such a tender age, with no one to help him. He had to make his way in a strange and foreign land. Possibly he was a rebellious boy, but whatever the case may be, he had many barriers to overcome.



Perhaps the biggest obstacle was the word that his father spoke over his life: catholo! “You are nothing!”

I knew how I felt upon finishing this paper, so I felt like I knew somewhat how my students might feel: deep joy. I also knew to forewarn them about obstacles that I came up against and advised them as I explained—for example, when I could not trace my grandfather for years, I focused briefly on my father for those years, so that I could bring my grandfather back into his life to get my ancestors here to the Great Plains. My grandfather’s illegal immigrant status and his becoming legal or naturalized by serving in World War I still amaze me. I cherish this knowledge of his illegal entrance into this country as now I had a connection with many of my students as we had grandfathers or fathers who came here undocumented and carried the heavy burdens of “getting caught.” My students and I talked about how my grandfather’s life impacted my father’s life, who impacted my life and who I became—or am still becoming. I learned so much about my family history that I did not know. My students and I knew we would continue to have these conversations along their journeys, which we did.

The time had come for the students to start writing, to start organizing chronologically all of the information they had compiled on their chosen relative or mentor and write. I only add this to say that these students never once complained about having to write or present their riveting stories.

As I read the stories, I attended to the countries of origins, forces or obstacles behind the coming of their family members to the states, repeating themes, languages, social issues or obstacles upon arriving to these Great Plains, and finally, how students distinguished what “place” was for them here on the Great Plains from these other

aspects of their personal identity in where they are from. I listened for how the students had been changed, how they had grown, because of this research and writing experience. All but five of the students identified coming to the Great Plains, Grand Island, Nebraska for work, and so talked of the Great Plains, in the vein of work for their parents. The students all wrote of the many hardships here on the Great Plains once the family member arrived here, whether recent immigrants or long-time residents.

### **An Overview of Reasons for Families Coming to the U.S./Great Plains, Themes such as Name Changes and Language Barriers, and What “Place” Meant to the Relative**

#### **Compelling Forces**

Nearly all of the students wrote that their family members left the country of origins for a “better life,” mentioning the American Dream. That “better life,” then, or force that compelled the relatives to leave was defined as leaving the country of origins because of no work, hunger and poverty, famine, war, religious persecution, the promise of farmland, and the promise of marriage.

#### **Repeating Themes**

Many students told of name changes once the member came to the United States, voluntarily or involuntarily, which was surprising and very meaningful to the students. In *Giants in the Earth*, the Norwegians pick new names for themselves to better comport with their new place and their new roles as citizens and land owners—that was not the case with the students. The students repeated three main reasons: 1. too many people with that same last name, so their family members changed the spelling of their last name so it was different from the other last names, 2. postal problems, 3. simple errors in spelling

when coming to the United States (I was surprised to see that students' relatives had this same problem my grandfather had—from Catholo to Catholos).

Many students, especially recent immigrants (54 percent) learned a new language or are still in the process of learning the academic language. Student whose family had immigrated generations ago did tell stories of the family members having difficulty learning a new language. Some of the recent immigrants will be first generation students to have the privilege of graduating from high school; many of the recent immigrant students talked of the possibility of being the first family member to graduate from college. Not one student wrote of problems encountered with schools or school systems in their essays. I was expecting to read of school system problems. In my years of schooling, I have read numerous accounts of immigrants' unpleasant and unfair interactions with schools. Only one student wrote of having to be alone in a room because no one understood her and she understood no one. The school hired someone to be her assistant when she first encountered the Grand Island Public School system around 13 years ago. Her experience was a good experience, and she learned English quickly.

### **What “Place” Is, What the Great Plains Meant to the Relatives**

Almost all of the students saw “place,” the Great Plains—Grand Island, Nebraska—as a “place” for work; some called that work “opportunity.” Not one student wrote of the relative coming for the natural resources. Of all the essays, one student wrote of coming to Nebraska because another relative was here, but that relative told the student's family of the promise of work and a good wage, so ultimately, the family came for work. Students whose families are recent immigrants, mostly coming from California,

wrote of the Great Plains meaning work for their parents, a better education for them, and thirdly, many mentioned a more peaceful life for their families. Those families were trying to escape the violence and gangs so prevalent in California now, so they came to the Great Plains and saw the Great Plains in those terms.

### **An Important Realization to All Students**

Much learning and self-growth came from this assignment, and another important aspect that came from this writing assignment occurred in the presentation of each student's findings, which I will expound on later, but in this segment of the Placed-based assignment, students came to realize that we are all immigrants. This fact seemed to even the score for those who have felt like the people in this country are telling them "they" cannot come here—this is "their" country. If any student had a dislike or a prejudice against those students who are here undocumented—that attitude changed upon the realization that this is no one's country and everybody's country. Attitudes changed when the students heard the hardships of each other's in the presentations. I was deeply moved by all of the stories—and by the time the class was over, I had students writing extra essays about why we cannot all get along.

### **Essay Excerpts: Examining Students' Accounts of Immigrants' Journeys**

Here I want to look at three students' stories in particular, two that are recent and similar immigrant stories and one of the 1800s. I want to look at the forces behind their coming to the United States, the obstacles encountered on the way and once here and the remaining difficulties and successes. I want to also say that the work this writing

produced in the students was even more than I had hoped for. These accounts softened all of our hearts, and the writing of them gave each student such an appreciation of their family members—this paper ended in a time of every one of us honoring our relatives.

In this first student's excerpt, the student wanted to focus on her mother's life of coming to the States, and she tells of the compelling force that made her mother make the trip. She wanted to focus on her mother's difficult trip, and she did. She was so amazed at all her mother went through, but she also knew of the hard, hard event that would come a little later after her mother had achieved her destination to the United States.

In 2000, T. decided she wanted to give A. a better future. She didn't want her daughter to have to work so hard at a young age as she had. So, she decided to come to the United States. Coming to the U.S. was hard for her. The route that she came through was hard and tiresome. She wasn't a U.S citizen, so she couldn't just get on a plane or car and come here. So, she did what most undocumented people do, she crossed the border illegally.

This was the first time that T. crossed the border. She walked with a group of people who were also looking for a "better life" for themselves and their children. The whole group was scared of the dangers that they could encounter. They had to walk a very long time. They knew that if ICE found them, they could get in federal trouble and get sent back. After hours of walking, the group came across a wall. On the other side of that wall was Phoenix, Arizona. That meant that once they climbed that wall, they had made it to the "other side," the United States. It took a lot of effort for everyone to climb it. The whole time T. was climbing, she

was thinking of the “better life” she and her husband could give their daughter A. Once she was on the “other side,” United States, and safe from ICE, she was reunited with her husband M.

This student knew she wanted to tell of all her mother went through to get her to the United States so that she would have a better education, which equaled a better life, but she also let me know that there were too many troubling circumstances to get through to tell of her mother’s plight. She told me that it would be painful for her to write. I did tell her she did not have to write the painful parts—she could write what she needed to write for the painful details. Then she told me that her father had committed suicide, and she had never spoken of it, nor did the family ever talk about his suicide at home. A week later, she told me she was ready to write about it, but that writing would be painful but beneficial. When I read of all that this student’s mother overcame to get to the United States for a better life, I did not feel worthy to even comment on this essay. Christensen writes, “Teaching for joy and justice also means locating the curriculum in students’ lives. Many of my students experience injustice. . . . But often my students and their families are targeted because of their race or language or immigration status” (4). This student certainly has suffered injustice because of her status, but even more, this family had to deal with her father’s suicide on top of all the injustices and obstacles. This student is very, very quiet, and after reading her story, I believe I know why. We have talked several times since, and I asked her how she felt in articulating her story. She said she felt an incredible sadness but also great mixed feelings of joy and surprise that she had gone through so much and was still alive, here, and focused on succeeding. She is going to college and bound and determined to be the first person in her family to graduate from

college. She wants to make both her mother and her deceased father proud. Christensen also writes about putting students' lives at the center of the curriculum also tells them they matter—their lives, their ancestors' lives are important (147-152). This student was glad that she could remember her father and talk about him in her narrative—it was a way of getting to know this man she never really knew. Telling her story was bittersweet, a way of telling her mother's story and keeping her father's stories alive, but she fiercely admired her mother for all of the hot, long miles she walked to get to the United States.

The second student's narrative of the actual journey to the states to examine is one that reads like a movie script. This student captures the desperation, fear and plight of her father's journey. As I read her father's account, I held my breath wondering how his story was going to turn out—as she wrote her father's story and learned what he went through, her admiration grew for him in tremendous ways—and so did mine upon reading the account:

June 16, 1979, was the day J. began his journey to the Great Plains. J.'s journey started in San Salvador, El Salvador, and slowly he made his way into the city of Guatemala. By car, it took J. six hours to arrive to Guatemala, where he stayed at a motel overnight. J. took advantage of that night to eat as much as possible before the real trip began. By morning, a bus full of 40 strangers arrived to pick him up. All the passengers were people who were also going to attempt to cross the border along with J. and the coyotaje. The bus was on its way to Mexico and took a total of two days to finally arrive to Mexico. During these two days, all the passengers were starved and tired. When in Mexico, only 19 passengers and J. stayed at a hotel for five days. During the first two days at the hotel, they were

finally able to eat; the owner of the hotel only had a few leftovers to offer. After that meal, the next three days they were starved. Anxiously waiting for the coyotaje to return, J. and 19 other immigrants were left abandoned at the hotel. With the danger of being caught, no immigrant was able to stay at the hotel for longer than five days. The coyotaje had left on the first day to drop off the first half of immigrants at the border. Though he promised he would come back the next day, he never returned. By the fifth day, the owner of the hotel kicked J. and the others out. While, the immigrants were leaving the building another coyotaje arrived. This coyotaje was from Mexico instead of El Salvador. He came out of the car and asked the immigrants where they were heading. Of course, the immigrants responded to the United States. There was only one problem. J. and the others had no money to pay the coyotaje on the spot. The coyotaje made a deal with all the immigrants that when arriving in the United States, their families will have to pay him upfront. This coyotaje boarded them on a train to Mexicali, Mexico. J. was on the train for three days. Though the trip felt long, this coyotaje fed and treated the immigrants well, so, it wasn't as bad. When they arrived in Mexicali, Mexico, they got on a bus to their next destination, Tijuana, Mexico. This bus took them to a desert in the middle of nowhere. When they got off the bus, the real struggle started. J. and the others walked until 8 a.m. The only safe place to rest was in the middle of a grain field.

At this time, the coyotaje went to the other side of Tijuana and made sure there was no immigration so that his passengers could cross the border without being seen. While the coyotaje was gone, all the passengers had to sleep



on dirt ground, having only but sewage water to drink within the two days the coyotaje was gone. Relieved that the coyotaje had returned in a small van with goods, their excitement had disappeared once they found out there was not enough. After sharing the meal amongst one another, they were packed into the van and driven to the nearest river. When they arrived to the river, no one was allowed to bring any personal items except their passport. Out of the whole group, only one person knew how to swim, and it was not the coyotaje. This person tied a rope connected to a black tube around his waist and swam the people to the other side four by four. When J. and the others finished crossing the river, immigration passed by and they all had to jump back into the freezing, strong pulling water. Once immigration left, they all got out quickly and covered their tracks with a wooden tablet so that immigration could not trace them, but immigration kept searching. J. and the others jumped off a hill, landing on the ground, and beginning to crawl on their stomachs for two hours straight so that they couldn't be seen. When, they arrived to a safe spot they stayed lying down while the coyotaje went to go check if immigration had left the Tijuana border. The coyotaje arrived two hours later with the same small van, packing the immigrants once again as if they were sausages. Desiring to get to their destination, they all rested on top of one another and waited for the signal that they were almost there.

In San Diego, California, J. was greeted by a Mexican-restaurant owner. The owner had let them stay at his restaurant to eat and freshen up. After everyone was done, the coyotaje started dropping everyone off to their destination

one by one. J. was the only one that stayed in San Diego for two days, because he was the last one to be dropped off. J. didn't stay at the restaurant; he was kept locked in the small van. The coyotaje had locked him in there so he wouldn't run away without paying. The coyotaje tried contacting J.'s stepsister, Selena, but she was nowhere to be found. J. was threatened to be beaten and deported back to Mexico if there was no answer.

Luckily, Selena answered and told them to drop J. off at her house, willing to pay the coyotaje at the door. The coyotaje charged her another 600 dollars for the ride from San Diego to Canoga Park, California. When J. arrived to the house his boots were torn and worn out and had no heel. The total number of days it took him to cross the border was 22 days. He arrived to the United States on July 8, 1979.

Again, I heard the same comment—that interviewing her father and writing his story of coming to the United States gave her a cherished knowledge of her father that she did not have before. To get the small, terrible details of all he went through, really for her, was overwhelming. Her appreciation of all he went through grew in ways of loving and deep admiration.

This third student's family has been on the Great Plains for generations now. Researching her heritage was so meaningful to her and her mother and grandmother—and affirmation to her that we are all immigrants. This project ended up being a generational project for her, and she realized immediately that this researching, interviewing, and writing was going to be, for her, one of the most precious tasks she had ever taken on. Her grandmother had a book she had kept her own family history in, and

they shared unforgettable memories. (This student did end up sending this paper in for a writing contest that she found advertised on the website of the Nebraska college she was already signed to attend. She won third place—which included a nice sum of scholarship money toward her tuition. She also submitted this essay to a publication for UNL Bison Press, and she is waiting for Bison Press to announce who will be published in the anthology.) Her relative's journey account was due to war:

Many fellow Americans, like my ancestors have moved to America for a better life; the reasons they do move vary from war, family, or money. My ancestor Johann J. B. came to America due to the war in Prussia according to D. A., my grandmother.

Johann J. B. came from Prussia, a leading state in the German Empire. In the late 1700s, Frederick Wilhelm III ruled Prussia. Prussia was drawn into the Napoleonic Wars in 1806. Like many, my ancestors likely marched with other soldiers to battle Napoleon's army as it invaded Prussia, as it was the law that all young men serve in the military. In the 1820s, Prussia began its long wars of unifying the German states. During the unification of the German states, beginning in 1848 and lasting until 1871, many young men entered the compulsory military service, and many left Prussia to escape the seemingly endless wars.

By 1860, Johann was forty and had Americanized his name to John. He lived in Muskego Center, Wisconsin, and worked as a farm laborer for another German immigrant. A short while later, he moved to Dane County, where he found his wife, Sophie N. They later married on November 17, 1861. After their

marriage, John and Sophie moved to Cross Plains, Wisconsin, a short distance west of Madison and began farming. While living near Cross Plains, their first of five children was born.

John moved his family one more time before moving to Nebraska.

Although this student could not get the account of the exact way the relative came to the United States, she was able to find that John had come from Prussia in the 1800s because of the war and traced what she could of this fading, important knowledge.

All of the actual journey stories were profound, from Peregrin, who crossed the ocean with the Pilgrims on the Mayflower—to Walter, who rode in the trunk of a beat up car throughout Mexico and swam across the river—these stories were fascinating and awe inspiring, and the students realized how easy their lives were compared to their relatives. The accounts of coming to the United States included every way to come—walking, riding (in cars, trunks, trains, on bicycles), swimming, sailing, and flying—with combinations of ways. Not one student had a family member whose journey was easy. The value of finding out what that journey cost each family member was truly a type of life-changing moment—and the research and writing caused the students to think further than themselves and their families. Throughout the time that these students researched and wrote, they shared their findings. Then one other reality struck them—these histories reminded them of all the students still trapped in destitute situations in their countries whose family members did not make it or have not yet made it to the United States. The work of their writing, at this point, made every student have to admit that we were all immigrants who came under hard circumstances. The work of their writing here made their thought and emotional worlds so much bigger. The work of their writing here made

their appreciation for family grow. This work began the roots of community in our classroom. The students learning of the struggles that their family members faced once they arrived in the United States also had a “community-type” effect on each student. They realized that all of the students or students’ family members went through either the same or very similar struggles of equal difficulty.

The Legend and Lore portion of this writing assignment was distinct and memorable. I told my students of the legendary stories of my grandfather’s gambling dealings. As students collected their family histories and stories, they were also listening in particular for family legends and lore. This element added delight to their work. As the research got underway, there was a contest going on as to who had the strangest family legend—which I would share with all of the classes of someone’s family legend that was on the verge of questionable any time a student learned of one. At the end of the semester, Lindsay’s story received that honor. Her strange story follows:

Etta and George eventually married and had 4 children: James, Mary, Charlotte, and Thomas. They grew up in Scotia, NE, in a modest farmhouse. Rumors were that the previous owner had murdered his wife in the home, but they weren’t going to ignore a bargain like the one offered.

Once the family moved into the home, they started experiencing strange events. Although it seemed ridiculous to think there was something in the home, the happenings were hard to ignore. Gusts of wind would blow through the house knocking things over without a single window or door open. Cupboards would all be ajar in the morning, cans everywhere over the floor. The beds would rock as

the children were trying to fall asleep. The kids were frightened, yet the parents remained calm. They couldn't leave their farm nor buy any new one because of small fear. Early one summer morning, George, not liking the smell of lilacs, dug up the lilac bushes that lined the house. Deep in the dusty soil, George found a broken, bloody bat. Knowing that the house was once the scene of a murder investigation, he took the club to the police. There, he learned that the unfaithful husband had claimed that his wife 'accidentally' fell down a flight of stairs. After the trial, he walked away 'not guilty' as no weapons or evidence had ever been found. George knew the house must be blessed by their local priest. During supper, before the blessing ritual, baby Thomas' crib started slamming against the wall. Once the priest finished blessing the home and land, all was calm in the house from then on. Through the years, Mary, George's eldest daughter, relayed this story to her children and grandchildren to share her eerie experience.

Students discussed whether they believed these stories or not. The writing in the class connected the students and me in ways I never would have dreamed of being connected. This assignment brought out such a wealth of knowledge, from the profound to the legendary, that I can say, what I saw taking place in my students and in my classroom was more than I had hoped for.

From their places of immigration, accounting the relatives' journeys to the United States, their family histories were all so different. These students' authenticity made every story engaging, many times riveting, to read. I have to admit that in my 12 years of teaching, this was my favorite essay to read.

At the end of the semester, in the presentation portion of the class, the lessons students learned went from being ones of gratitude and honor of family—growth from the hardships family members went through so that the family members’ families could have that “better life”—to one of the utmost respect for one another. Students’ knowledge enlarged from knowing their “place” in the world, their homelands—to their present “place” here on the Great Plains, a “place” of work for their parents—to a “place” in their heart for other people. Their worlds seemed to no longer focus on their problems but on what they saw as their duty as to pay back their communities for this life they seemed to realize they deserved no more than the person who is still struggling to get here, leading to Place-conscious citizenry. The “where” of “place” is “wherever” they are being one who contributes for the betterment of all. We need to be good citizens, documented or undocumented, to help bear one another’s troubles. I could almost see the way their reflections were going to read. How would all of this work carry out to the community? Time would tell.

## Chapter 4

### **Reflection 1, Place Appreciation of Great Plains, Identity as Place, Preadvocacy Work for Stewardship, Conservation, and Ecology—Sustainability**

After writing their “Where I am From” papers, the students and I discussed Sarah Robbins definition of “public” and what the full or true definition of “public education” originally meant. We talked about Robbins’ view and the purpose she states for writing the book, “to promote a view of learning as reaching outside the classroom walls both in the content of what is studied and in its influence on society” and how she confronts the present-day goal of education, standardized assessments: “The authors of this book see literacy in public education sites as more than a set of test scores. They believe that viewing school literacy as ‘public’ can also mean tapping into its potential for culture-making” (8). My students loved Robbins’ stance as they are exhausted from all of the standardized testing they have “competed in” throughout their school years. Robbins’ framework of classroom literacy—I knew—was a framework for my richly diverse classroom as she purports that instead of students being just “test scores” of someone else’s standardized tests, students become, “empowered agents using literacy to make meaningful contributions to the places where they live—even, ultimately, to the nations’ vision of education as a public trust” (8). Robbins appraises the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) project in a rural community in north Georgia—three classrooms, kindergarten, high school, and university—in which the project developed “a conception of classroom literacy as public work, in line with *all* the definitions of ‘public’ . . . not just the first or everyday one” (9). Robbins outlines the two basic tenets of the KCAC program:



‘Keeping’ community invites students to participate in cultural stewardship. In this role students critically examine cultural forces operating in their communities and self-consciously join in civic preservation. Through the ‘keeping’ dimension of KCAC, students do community-based research such as gathering local stories, interpreting public history sites, and analyzing visual culture in their own environments. The ‘creating’ component of the project is equally important, because it encourages students to see themselves as active composers of their communities’ identities. As students assemble, analyze, and disseminate their newfound knowledge to public audiences a clear sense of communal identity emerges. (10)

Students, through their “Where I am From” papers, had not only honored and celebrated their heritage, but for many, their essays were a “keeping” of cultural stewardship as the members of their family were now local community members who recounted how and why they came to these Great Plains, which included local history. Several of these families own businesses and are very much a part of visible local history, which changed the face of Third and Fourth streets, which are now filled with vibrantly colored Latino and Asian markets. This second writing assignment was one of “creating,” in which students began to see themselves as active composers of our community identity. They did understand that they were composers of our classroom identity through our sharing of findings along their journey of research and writing their heritage.

After my students wrote their “Where I am From” papers, they were given a couple of weeks to write a reflection on what they learned. I was excited to listen as they defined their place here on the Great Plains and their goals—as they saw themselves as

active composers of this community. I wondered what I would hear—or would I hear the strong echoes of Marquart’s words, “We children of North Dakota are programmed for flight. . . We grew up wild in the middle of nowhere with nagging suspicion that life was certainly elsewhere” (69)—their longing for their “outmigration.” I wondered if they had a true appreciation for the Great Plains and the water resources that we have here, the fact that we are the “bread basket of the world.” Their family members left their countries because of starvation, famines, civil wars, persecution, and poverty, and almost every reason given for family members coming to the Great Plains—to Grand Island, Nebraska, was work. I tried to make a forceful point that since food scarcity—starvation and famines—was a major reason many of the students’ family members came to the United States, was it not important that they understand sustaining agriculture—our food supply? Even though almost all of my students’ families were not farmers, most all of the students whose families had been here for generations had farming as a means of livelihood in their families for a few generations in their histories. Many of the newly immigrated students’ family members had agriculture experience in the way of being fruit pickers or seasonal workers or slaughterhouse workers in their family member’s occupational history. Agricultural sustainability was definitely an element that students needed to delve into and understand the importance of. They would have to think about these discussions. In addition, because science is a required subject, and our science classes each year participate in a water conservation unit, ending with the Water Festival in conjunction with other schools, these students have a nice understanding of being caretakers of our water supply, learning from where our water comes from to how much

water someone wastes when a faucet continually drips. Agriculture sustainability discussions were definitely preadvocacy work.

We discussed also that to live on the Great Plains is to appreciate the beautiful landscape that surrounds us. The students agreed that the wide sky was sometimes overpowering and that they were grateful for the rich, beautiful landscape that gives life and beauty to us inhabitants. We talked about really appreciating these Great Plains and not taking for granted what we see and use everyday. I told the students how this landscape, the face of the country, has changed immensely in my lifetime—technology especially has given rural Nebraska a facelift, seen both in equipment in field and farmhouses. We now have giant steel arms that reach clear across a field, giant pivots that water the crops, where farmers used to irrigate by using tubes and pipes. The tractors are now 450-horse power and run by GPS. Sixteen-row equipment combs the fields—and we need less people to run rural America. Johnson et al. confirms this shift taking place:

The demographic data suggest several general conclusions. First, population growth was widespread between 1950 and 2000. The one notable exception was in the Great Plains. Second, the population has shifted from east to west. Third, the population residing in the vast agricultural region encompassed by the Great Plains has remained about the same size as it was in 1950 but has become more concentrated in metropolitan areas. Finally, a larger proportion of the American population resides in the nation's metropolitan areas in 2000 than was the case in 1950.

To date, understanding the role of urbanization in the loss of both natural habitat and of agricultural land has been impeded by a lack of data that

differentiate land-use changes at and beyond the urban fringe (Theobald 2001).

(12)

Although these scholars do not explain the “why” or the role of urbanization in the loss of both natural habitat and agricultural land, the data demonstrates what has been occurring. What does the data predict for the future—the students knew they needed to be thinking about agriculture, their food supply—their futures.

As for the farmhouses, they used to be two-story plain white farmhouses. Now the houses are elegant and ornamented and look like they belong in a rich suburb or in the elite part of the city and there are far fewer of them than there were 100 years ago. My students and I talked about these changes and how to sustain these Plains. What would the students’ part, their goals—goals of social and environmental responsibility be?

One of my hopes for this prompt was to lay the foundation, or preadvocacy work, for students to question their part in the sustainability of these Great Plains. I believe so strongly as Aldo Leopold did that the discovery of beauty in commonplace places or the aesthetics is “a measure of how we view the rightness or wrongness of our actions,” and that people are motivated to act by both beauty and duty in natural communities, which includes humans, soil, water, plants, and animals as members of that community. People are more likely to make decisions that allow natural cycles to continue to renew themselves. The prompt reads as follows:

You have learned about your origins and what your family members faced in coming here to the Great Plains. Write a Reflection about what you learned about yourself and how you feel about your *place*, your home now here on the Great

Plains surrounded by the prairie and cornfields, flatlands and vast skies. Now you know what brought you here to this place, how does that influence your perception of this place, the land, the people, the animals and plant life—of your future goals?

My example follows:

Knowing how my family came to these Great Plains has made a huge impact on me. I learned that I am from Greek (German, and Indian) descent. I learned how difficult life was for many of my family members—and I realize that those difficulties played a role in forming who I became or am still becoming as a person. The more I learned about what family members went through, the more I have sympathy for them—like my father—I understand why he was the way he was because of the father he had. (I also wonder what life was like for my grandfather being undocumented for probably about four years.) I have also a greater admiration for my father because of all he overcame—the poverty and hunger, the instability of his father who immigrated here at the age of 14 and never learned or didn't choose a stable or legal job. I have an even greater appreciation of the prejudice, hunger, poverty, illnesses and losses that he and my family members had to overcome that my essay did not have room to mention, but through my inquiry, I learned of, so of course, I have a bigger heart for people in these kinds of situations.

I had hoped that students would see, in my essay, in their essays, and in this reflection, that we had all experienced similar events, though very different, making us all valid

sources of experience of which we make meaning—a social literacy of multiple viewpoints and life experiences with shared goals for community actions (Robbins 12).

My father ended here in the Great Plains area and stayed. I wonder if that was because he, too, did not want the wandering lifestyle his father chose. I do think that I understand why my father did not stay in Omaha as in my research I discovered there was an active KKK clan in Omaha at the time he lived there, and that clan hated Greeks. We left the Omaha/Malcolm (he worked in Omaha while we lived in Malcolm) area and came to Grand Island, and he stayed here. When my father came to G.I., there was a small Greek community here at the time—a Greek Candy Kitchen, which is gone, a Greek Orthodox Church, which is gone—the only two Greek businesses remaining are Jim’s Gyros—the owners are Hispanic (a former student of mine)—and Coney Island (the owner Gus Katrous was a good friend of my father’s). Whether for community or for work, my father stayed here and died here. I love these Great Plains for that reason, and too, for the aesthetic reasons that I grew up around: beautiful orange sunsets over the fields and meadows that I remember seeing as I child in Malcolm, Nebraska. My years there were sweet years, when my mother taught my sisters and me about the birds and their songs, and we listened for them in the hollow. I remember loving the little creek through our hollow where I played everyday. My memories are good. I never plan to leave these Plains; they are a part of me. Not only does our cultural history form us, but our local physical place helps form us—and the Great Plains has had a powerful impact on me. Anything I want to accomplish can be accomplished right here—where I live. I don’t have the lush olive groves of

Greece or the ancient structures of Greece and Germany, but I do have the Nebraska sky—and lots of it. I do have the prairie grass, an ocean of it. Knowing what brought my grandfather here just reaffirms my perception of the life-sustaining place Nebraska is—even with the natural disasters that occur, especially tornadoes, which the June 3, 1980 tornado destroyed my parents' home. There is comfort in this place, and I love the people, the animals, the plants—and the skies of this place I call home, and I will keep asking how I can be a better caretaker of all of them, how I can serve them better. I know my place personally—I am a farmer, and my husband raises and butchers our beef. I know where my septic tank is—and that it is pumped rather than run out to the ground or creek. I know that Heartland Disposal picks up my trash, and it goes to the landfill in Grand Island, which is a few miles from Engleman Elementary, the grade school I attended. I use recyclable products—and reuse my brown paper bags from the grocery store. Every day when I walk my three miles on the country road my house sits by, I pick up the trash that people fling out their windows. I pick up nails and glass on the road that could puncture tires. I know the intimate little details of my place and want to be one who contributes and sustains my world.

My goals are to continue teaching English and writing, so again, staying here, is right in keeping with those goals. To continue to teach students to love writing and to write of their heritage and life experiences and place, which are so valuable to our school and community, is a privilege I take seriously. For students to understand their role in creating community through their writing is to revitalize

their communities and play an active part in how it evolves. Finally, I have to end on my inspiration—to be bathed in the beauty of these Great Plains everyday is my inspiration, and I would not want to be any other place.

I read my example to the class and posted it on our Google Classroom for those who were absent. We talked about how I had become an active composer or creator of our community's identities—they were my audience. I talked about having plans to further my piece by sending it out for consideration of publication, beyond these classroom walls also. More importantly, my students were “creating”—they assembled, analyzed, and eventually disseminated their newfound knowledge to the public audience of our classroom. (Many students took their essays and reflections to other public audiences in and outside of these school walls, which I detail later.) My students then wrote their reflections, which were heartfelt reflections on their growth as people. They also wrote that they learned that they enjoyed being active writers and historians of their family heritage. Through this shared experience with their classmates, they were actively creating a classroom history, which was really fun for them and enjoyable for me. Their reflections demonstrated that they began to see that they were actively creating a community identity, which brought with it myriad realizations.

One student wrote, “After researching all of this, I feel like simple small things can change the world.” She went on to write, “All of us today are struggling with everything our ancestors had to struggle with,” and she ends with, “I feel more respectful towards what I have and how my life is now. Seeing how tough they all had it makes my eyes open to life, and I look at the world in a different way.” This girl articulated the transformation that I saw taking place in the students towards one another, a sense of



community in my classes. I had several reflections of this type. Robbins writes about a school literacy of multiple viewpoints that school literacy will become “public in a powerful way—in the content of the curriculum, as we study community culture; in the open, respectful environment we develop for the public space of classroom learning; and in public schools’ direct engagement with the world beyond its walls” (12). I could see this respect and powerful engagement with the assignment and each other. The students loved sharing with each other their histories that they may have been too embarrassed to share at the beginning of the semester, and because their views were changing because of their sharing of stories, especially towards one another and their preconceived judgments they held towards one another, sharing became effortless and on some points contest-like.

Another student admitted, that she herself, in just one generation, had quickly forgotten what her family member went through to come to these United States, “I am very lucky to have been born in this country full of opportunities. I learned that my father had to go through many sufferings in order to get to the U. S. and be able to get his permanent residence here. It is crazy how many of us had not realized how hard it is to get to this country as an immigrant.” This student said she wants to give back to her parents, to live in and give back to her community for all of her success. She said her place in the world is the Great Plains, and in her reflection, she talked of coming to Grand Island, Nebraska, from California where there is a shortage of water and so much crime. That hard history—she was aware of, but she was not aware of what her father had gone through to come to the U.S. from Mexico. This student’s reflection validated her first steps in participating in sustainability for her community—her love and want to give back to her community, to stay in her community and be an active member. She said, “I am

aware of the need to realize the importance of natural resources in a place and to take care of them.” She said she was aware of the knowledge of what place has to offer coming from California where her family had experienced living there in the midst of a great water shortage and drought.

One young man reflected of his love of growing up in Nebraska, “One of the main reasons that I love where I live is the beauty of nature, being able to look out my window and see the open plains, trees, and cornfields. I just cannot get enough of corn as a Nebraskan.” Although he is not writing of the ecopolitics of corn, he is writing of what his eyes see. His thoughts are on the cultural, social realities, and he wrote of wanting to stay in this area in the Midwest and having a family, “I want to be the best father I can be, with a stable job establishing a strong base.” His reflection carried a note of paying back also, “I feel obligated in a way to repay those who have sacrificed their lives before me so that I could live here in these great lands.” This student’s reflection affirms Leopold’s point about the aesthetics of the Great Plains giving people a measure of the rightness or wrongness of their actions. He also felt strongly about his ancestor’s sacrifice for him. Combined appreciations makes his voice especially strong.

Concerns about giving students examples are valid because students may focus on one or two aspects of that example or even try to replicate the example rather than writing from what they have learned. Many students reflected on the aesthetics of the Great Plains, and I wondered if I had not been clear enough in my example to explain the need to know the intricate details of everyday living—the eating, the waste—all that goes with everyday life. Clearly these students recognized the beauty of the Great Plains. Leopold’s belief this recognition leads to treating the environment right. Donehower, Hogg, and

Schell make a poignant point also about students writing about the physical details of their place:

The idea of writing about place can bring to mind notions of rendering one's place descriptively, creating a 'sense of place' on the page, and this work can either be preservationist or dismissive of rural experiences. In such work, 'place' often connotes only the literal physical space rather than other cultural, social, and material realities experienced within a place, and as a consequence, place-based identities become tethered to the physical locale. (181)

I would add that for the most part, along with the beauty and this sense of place, I noted a preservationist attitude in many of the student reflections, especially of students who had been here for several generations.

One student defined her place on the Great Plains in terms of appreciation in the aspects that were important to her— aesthetics, people, land, and nature:

Upon learning about how my ancestors came over from Prussia and why they came, I now have a deeper respect for living in Nebraska. At some point, Nebraskans say that they want to get out and move to someplace bigger and better. If all Nebraskans knew how they came to be where they are today, I feel like they would have a deeper respect for the Nebraska culture and land. The Nebraska culture is just simple. We eat as many fried foods that we can possibly think of, treat people with respect and live the good life. In Nebraska, time slows down; in New York City, the city is in such a rush that people miss beautiful moments that they wouldn't miss in Nebraska.

Here again, this student's reflection confirms Leopold's belief about the aesthetics of a place producing right and wrong actions in a dweller. I have to comment on her insight in her sentence, "If all Nebraskans knew how they came to be where they are today, I feel like they would have a deeper respect for the Nebraska culture and land." This statement tells me much about how this student perceives her personal growth and understanding from this assignment. She sees heritage work as extremely valuable in people's respect of place.

Almost every night this October, I could have taken a picture of the sunset. The sunset is one of the most beautiful things in Nebraska. Sometimes we take the sunset for granted. Not every state has the beautiful sunsets that we do. New York has so many skyscrapers that people can only see the sun till it goes beneath the skyscrapers. Lucky for us, we do not have tall buildings like that and can receive the full effect of the sunset.

I also have to go on many road trips, whether for basketball or softball. Living on the prairie land makes the road trips worthwhile. Being able to look at the pastures, prairies, cattle grazing and Nebraska land makes driving two hours to Omaha bearable, especially in the winter, when the pastures are coated with a layer of snow—it looks like something out of a movie or something an artist would paint. I love it when it snows and I am on a road trip (not icy roads, though).

Her continual awareness of her surroundings, even on bus trips is engaging and tied to the “physical locale.” I wonder if she would have taken such note of her surroundings if she had just went to school, work, and home.

I am also very thankful that my ancestors did come over when they did. My family has been established in Nebraska for at least five generations now. This has allowed us to grow as people on the land and to be able to settle down in one area. My great-great-grandparents set me up for success and where I am today by moving to Nebraska. They allowed my grandma and mom to go to college, which has led me to my going to college next year.

Even though Nebraska doesn't have mountains or oceans to explore, it does have great people, In Nebraska we live a much simpler life than one does in Florida, California, or Texas. We also love our football. Nebraska football is one of the highest traditions in the state. If you haven't gone to a football game, then you are missing out on a lot. Husker football is the pride and joy of the state. I am glad my ancestors choose the Plains of America to settle down. I would not have wanted to live anywhere else but Nebraska.

Her reflection includes so much of what she recognizes as the valuables in her life and appreciates that they have molded her as a person. She views the beauty of these Plains as many of the Nebraska poets do, and her love for that beauty, the people, the culture, the land and sky, the traditions, and the simple life exudes from her thoughts to her pen. She is preservationist. In a conversation with the student, she told me that she is attending a

Nebraska college. She never plans to leave this state because her family is settled here. Her family-of-origins essay included amazing stories of the member who came—her encounters and relationships with the Native Americans, endearing stories of good relationships with them. She wants to hand down the history. She wants to be recognized as one of the multiple viewpoints in a social literacy. She expressed how much history that she learned and will remember because it was personal and she can connect the family member to that date in history now. This student's essay and reflection were the "American" story. This student's narrative and reflection could easily fit into one (if not two) of the categories/themes which Robbins talks of—drawing from Michael Kammen's proposal "looking at subnational units of social organization" to promote "rich understandings of what it mean 'to be an American'" (13): 1. Educating for Citizenship, Reclaiming Displaced Heritages, 2. Building Cities; Cultivating Homelands and 3. Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples (15).

Another student who started his reflection defining his struggle and mixed feeling about the Plains explained that researching his heritage and the family struggles changed his mind and transformed his attitude about the Plains:

Through the research I've done on my family and how they've come to Nebraska, I've learned a lot. I've learned a lot about their struggles and the adversity they've had to face. Most importantly, I've learned about how their dreams of a better life had persevered and overcome everything thrown at them. I've always had mixed feelings about the Great Plains. It never felt like the land of milk and honey my ancestors sought after, but now that I know what it took for them to come here and what they left behind, it feels more like a home. It feels like the Great Plains

is the place where I belong. I know now that it's here that I want to stay. It's not that I want to stay here out of fear of anywhere else but rather out of love for Nebraska and all she has to offer, everything she has given me. It's not just the Plains that I love, though, it's America. When I learned of my Mayflower ancestors, I learned of the place they left. I learned about the place traded for this great land, the land of the free, the home of the brave. I would rather die than give up the United States. It is here that I truly belong. My great-great-great-grandfather came to Nebraska with 60 dollars in his pocket and a wagon filled with kids. He was looking for a better life, and that's exactly what he found. Now if that's something I have to do, then so be it, but Nebraska will always be my home, and it will always be in my heart.

Most of these students came to really understand the courage of the undertaking of their family members and what those members had gone through for them, so their descendants might have better lives. This student knew his ancestors had chosen this area for that great promise that was given to so many at that time, the land, a better life, freedom from persecution. The ancestor could have chosen another place, but that great-great-great-grandfather wanted a place to give his descendants. How differently this place looked to this student after grasping what was done just for him. Several reflections read like this one showing that the students had to reconsider Nebraska—not for just the work that brought the family member here—but also for what the family member and the Great Plains meant to them. Students had to think about what the Great Plains meant to them and then write that response—which was a way of looking at its qualities, affirming their appreciation of them, and celebrating their growth in these realizations or new

understandings, which they admitted that they had never had to do before. These steps are beginning steps to sustainability and active citizenship.

One girl talked very lovingly of the Great Plains and said that this assignment “has been my absolute favorite project that I have ever done” of all of her years of schooling. Again, this was another student who talked of what a great way to learn history—as she was pulled in more and more by the research of her family members, who left Germany because the potato famine’s effects. She said that she would always remember the history lesson learned, “dates and all.” She wrote, “I am so grateful that we are living on the Great Plains. I love going to my grandpa’s house and helping out on the farm. I couldn’t imagine growing up any place else. My whole childhood was based on the life of the Great Plains.” She defined her place even further as an old chair she used to sit in with her grandfather, a place she loved where they shared time and memories.

Some students talked of having their perceptions changed of the Great Plains since realizing all of the danger, hard work, and heartbreak their ancestors went through to get here. One student wrote, “It gave me a new perception about this place and that maybe there is more to it than what I originally thought. Even though my future might take me away from the Great Plains, I know that I will always come back, and it will always be my home and have a special place in my heart.”

Another student’s new perception awakens her calling, and her calling may take her even further—she puts out a call for people to make a change, and wants to spend her life working towards that change:

Throughout this essay, I learned a lot about my origin and where I came from. I learned so much about my father’s family and what he sacrificed to get to the



United States. I am very fortunate to be living on the Great Plains. I'm so grateful to have a place to call home and be able to come home to food and shelter.

Knowing what happens in El Salvador makes me appreciate all that I have and should be thankful for having. I have visited El Salvador before; it was a life-changing experience. It really opened my eyes to the poverty and gang violence that was happening. Writing this 'Where I am From' paper and comparing it to my trip really changed my perception on life and answered my question: Why do people want to come to the United States? Not everyone has the same opportunities as we have here in the United States. Living in a third-world country is a constant struggle to survive. I believe people from any country should have a chance at a better life. If that can't happen, my future goal is to travel around the world helping others in need. I love home here in the Great Plains, but knowing there are people out in the world needing help makes me want to step up and make a change.

Other students articulated the "opening of their eyes to really see" or "new perception" of taking for granted the life they now have on what a few called these "boring" Great Plains.

Students realized how, no matter where place is, all of the issues people face in life—war (the longing for peace), hunger, poverty—are interconnected, and the only solution starts with them. They realized that the solution brings a big problem—or I should say question—which was right in keeping with all of the literature we were reading for this American Literature class: How do we get people to agree, to be of like mind in getting along though they may not agree with one another—to bring about the

solidarity or community that was happening in our classroom? Christensen writes, “If we intend to create citizens of the world, as most school districts claim in their mission statements, then we need to teach students how to use their knowledge to create change” (8). As we reflected together on what the Great Plains meant to each one of us, we reconsidered what the writers of the works we were reading had as their target for change in writing in the places they were: to bring community or a “sense of belonging” to the people in these United States. Here again, Christensen writes, “The books we choose to bring into our classroom say a lot about what we think is important, whose stories get told, whose voices are heard, whose are marginalized” (6). In class discussions about these authors’ messages and our reflections, students summed up the writers’ works to the fewest words they could: Winthrop saw that if people did not submit their wills to a belief in God and obey the command to love, there would be no unity, and de Crevecoeur wrote that in America there were no more class distinctions and imparted this wonderful “American Dream,” where people were all farmers and equal (although de Crevecoeur admitted there were bad people). Franklin wanted people to use their reasoning and be virtuous people (Franklin saw how hard or impossible this task was to carry out). He was sure reason would bring people together. Whitman wrote of the collective “I,” wanting everyone to be accepted including slave owner and slave. We read of the terrible hardships and anguishing injustice of Frederick Douglass, Zitkala-Sa to Sherman Alexie and Sandra Cisneros—and we wanted justice for these people. Students were deeply moved by the messages of the marginalized voices. Many of my students saw their voices as marginalized voices, but voices that mattered just the same. Now they had the chance to speak up and be heard many times, which they spoke up and were heard. They

saw that an attitude of gratitude was one needed response towards their ancestors who went through so much for them, and again, that the answer to everything was within them—not someone else. Their reflection portion was mainly aesthetics of the local wonders, consisting of praise for these Great Plains in their beauty, but it was also in praise of the Plains giving work for family members. That praise of the Plains was evidence also of the realization that I saw taking place, gratitude for the place they lived in. Derek Owens sees this type of work as important as he says that, “Educators have a responsibility to help students resist the cynicism and hyperboredom of contemporary consumer culture by discovering the kind of self-worth that comes from being amazed at one’s local worlds” (69). In many, if not most, of these reflections, I did see an amazement of the student’s world, almost as if the student were looking at his or her physical world with fresh or new eyes. However, if I could rewrite this assignment, I would revise my rhetorical assignment and break it into two parts.

First, I would have my students focus alone on their personal growth and understanding. I wonder how their reflections would have read if I would have had them focus on growth/understanding alone. The first portion of the prompt would be as follows: “You have learned about your origins and what your family members faced in coming here to the Great Plains. Write a Reflection about what you learned about yourself.”

After the students had time to reflect on self-growth, I would give them another two weeks to focus on the second portion of the assignment reworded: How do you feel about your *place* now, your home here on the Great Plains surrounded by the prairie and cornfields, flatlands and vast skies. You know what brought you here to this place; you

know the issues your family still faces in this community. How do these particulars influence your perception of this place, the land, the people, the animals and plant life—of your future goals? I would teach about the geographical issues facing Grand Island and the surrounding area, so students would also have those discussions to draw and reflect on and ask them to focus on specially on stewardship, conservation, ecology, or sustainability. These student reflections confirm Mary Birky Collier's proposal in *Writing Suburban Citizenship*. Students need to be thinking and writing about such vital issues, especially because of the troubles the world they have been born into has:

In the process, I began to see some of the major responsibilities of advanced writing classes in high school as doing the work of cultivating what I call preadvocacy thinking. Where as many college composition classes focus on public writing and positioning students toward the work of inquiry and finding ways to enact personal and public agency, high school (and often early college) students have little experience with this type of thinking and writing. Writing classes in high school can be a crucial place for this kind of work to begin. (149)

I do believe my students have an urgent sense about how important it is that they be informed and able to speak to environmental issues because of the writing assignments, class discussions—and world issues they hear about. As these students continue on to college and acquire new rhetorical agencies, they will build on these beginning steps of public writing and inquiry.

Also many of my students realized their need to give back to the community because of being seniors and having to fill out scholarship application forms, they know how these foundations want to see that students have volunteered time and effort to better

their communities. They are community aware for this reason. However, when they wrote these family-of-origin narratives, they became even more aware of the need to give back or contribute to their community. First, they realized the next person is as in need as they are—and the way a community takes care of its own is realizing that they are part of that community—they are the hands and feet of that community, and they need to help others, others who are in need as they once were. This writing assignment planted the seeds to make them think about what Grand Island, Nebraska, the Great Plains meant to them in possibly new ways—ways of stewardship, conservation, and ecology—sustainability. Many of them came to realize that they have an appreciation for this place or even a deep, loving connection to this place. Some never want to leave; others are planning on coming back. All of them recognized that we have to be participating citizens, place conscious.

## Chapter 5

### Reflection 2, Social Justice

In this final segment of the Place-based writing assignments, I gave the students Reflection 2 two weeks after the first reflection, and they had two weeks to think about and write their final reflection, social justice. Students had already experienced the freedom to write their stories free of judgment. Now the time had arrived to speak back freely to that injustice. The students were operating on the premise that change in thinking is possible—not necessarily painless. Even though students realized we are all immigrants, we knew that we could face strong disagreements on immigration and undocumented immigration. However, they knew other conflicts existed as well. Nancy Welch writes, “Of course composition’s histories of the public sphere have always been about class and class conflict” (481). Grand Island has been labeled the “blue collar” worker city, a label that also carries with it a stigma of not caring about education—so social injustices would include the working class conflicts, which of course, includes documented and undocumented workers, among other issues of “glaring inequalities.” For this assignment, we discussed the hot issues Grand Island residents face like minimum wage, undocumented workers, economics, and educational opportunities. Welch also confronted the fact that it is often the public sphere that promotes significant barriers for ordinary people seeking political voice (481)—as a class we added to her statement—how much more difficult when the people are undocumented? This reflection would be the platform to talk back to injustice, offer solutions, or both—which we agreed that no one would experience a barrier to *speaking up*. These reflections, once written,

became the topics of class forums as we discussed and read our work throughout the remainder of the semester. The writing prompt follows:

### **Reflection 2—Talking Back to Injustice, Building Community**

In *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, Linda Christensen makes a statement saying that she wants her students to examine why things are unfair, to analyze the systemic roots of injustice, and to use their writing to talk back.

In completing your “Where I am From” paper, you have learned what the greatest obstacle your family has had to face is just like in the literature we read. . .

Assignment: Talk back to the injustice. You may write a poem, narrative, editorial, etc. or create a video clip to show the class or a poster to hang in the hallway or at the Grand Island Public Library in which you address the injustice.

With this prompt, the students knew they were free to offer up another option, such as a Youtube video, so as to create a public audience.

As a class, we addressed that sometimes we make inaccurate assumptions—or pre judgments—about other students. This part of the writing would ask all of us to withhold any prejudices against other people or issues, and in effect, listen as students freely examined their lives—this would be discovery, learning of oneself, where the peers then educate each other about issues of injustice in their lives.

The students and I talked about how many of us had wanted to talk back to or act upon injustices we have been involved in, whether directly or indirectly. All of my students said they had suffered injustice and also, at one time or another, acted unjustly towards others to where they wish they could take back the actions or words. Some

students told stories where they actually had stood up against injustice in the hallway or on Facebook. We talked about the injustices their family member had suffered and the injustices that their families still suffer.

My example for the students for this prompt was first a discussion of the social action I took a few years ago to help a student, Karen Banda, help her undocumented father who had been taken in the 2006 J. B. Swift raid, held in detention, and at the time she came to me, was in the process of being deported. Karen had come to me because I had her as a student in sophomore English. Remembering that I was also the newspaper adviser, she asked if I would help her write her story, publish it in our school newspaper, and help her father by translating her father's two letters from Spanish to English to send to Nebraska's two senators. I explained to Karen that I had to get the principal's permission to print her story since Nebraska is a Hazelwood state, meaning all story lines are approved by administration, and that I would certainly help her tell her story and translate her father's letters. Karen and I put her story together, and I took her story to my principal. My principal said we needed to publish her story in the school newspaper. I then translated her father's letters and sent them to our senators for Karen and her father.

Utilizing Linda Flower's *rhetoric of engagement, speaking up, against, with or for* was powerful for the students. I explained that according to Flower, Karen was *speaking up*, to discover and express herself and her personal and cultural identity (78), and she was *speaking against something*, "against the media and ideology, against their own assumptions and inclinations as well as against institutions, oppression, and power. It conferred the certainty of critical consciousness and the authority to resist the status quo" (78). For Karen, she was going to speak against the terrible situation she and her family



found themselves in. As for my part, I was *speaking with others*, namely Karen, “across the chasms of difference” by assisting Karen in her ability to *speak up*. Flower writes about the difference between *speaking with others* to *speaking for* others: “Although they prompt us to worry about (and repeatedly critique ourselves for) thinking we can speak ‘for’ the powerless, they have little to tell writers about how they might achieve the difficult role of partners in inquiry with those ‘others’” (79). In Karen’s case, I knew that I could *speak with* her, and that I was doing everything I could to help or empower her to *speak up* because she wanted to and needed to—she said the time had come. We worked together and her story came out in the newspaper. She was thrilled and relieved.

Following is the story I helped Karen write and that I discussed with the class:

I have asked myself over and over again in my mind a question: *How do I begin to tell my story?* I also wonder *will anyone care*. I can only start where I am at. I was born in the United States; I am seventeen-years-old now, a senior at Senior High, leaving for Michigan on Friday, and my heart is breaking. The last two years have been the saddest years of my life.

The students and I conversed about the double difficulty here—Karen is a citizen and her father is not. She is *speaking up* to express herself, but she is also *speaking for* all of the other students in the same situation as she is who do not have the opportunity to speak.

A few years ago, the INS raided the meatpacking plants, and my father was taken in the raid. Please don’t shut down because you read of an undocumented person being taken from his family—don’t make any judgments yet. My father never claimed that he was right in coming illegally; he really didn’t want to come that way, but he didn’t know what else to do to support his family—times had

gotten so hard in Topic, Natick, Mexico. Work was worse than scarce; it was nonexistent—and Dad, in his early 20s, was already considered an old man in Mexico. He could not get a job. Mom and Dad had a little girl, and his decision was made at this time when they found out that Mom was pregnant with me. Dad felt he had no other choice—right or wrong, he came. He could not wait 15 years or so for a visa.

Karen's motive here is plain—she wants her voice to be heard, and she is hoping that by asking readers to not shut down and hear her first before they judge, that she will really be heard for the first time. By admitting that her father came to the States “illegally,” she is hoping to establish integrity—and authority. She is asking, “What is a child supposed to do in this type of situation? What, really, was my father supposed to do in his situation?” She is practicing her public rhetoric, the rhetoric of a young citizen whose father is undocumented, in an honest way.

My father is a wonderful dad. He has taken good care of our family, and he has worked hard, bought a house—put the proverbial roof over our head and food on the table, paid his taxes, and we have been law abiding and contributing people in our community that we grew to love so much. After me, Mom and Dad had two more children: a boy and girl. Grand Island, Nebraska has been our home, and I have loved Nebraska's big open skies where no boundaries exist between wind and skies—and the boundaries between skies and land are so far off on the horizon that they look illusive; I have loved the green summers, iced winters, purple sunsets that have always been such an assurance to me—those beautiful starry nights, constellations of promise—yes, I have loved everything about

Nebraska. This is my childhood home that I will always remember. My father worked hard here for 18 years, and then the dreaded day at the meat plant happened that threw my life, my family's life, and so many children's and families' lives into a historical moment that changed our lives forever. I wonder how history will look back on that day—as it has so many other events that were detrimental to human beings. Whatever name history records that day as, I will always remember how my dad was taken that day, the newscasts, the reports, and I will never forget the fear—the day I knew the real meaning of love. Since that day, each day has been an eternity. I know that he did not want to miss my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday or the Thanksgivings and Christmases. I know he loved us and wanted to be with us.

Here she has taken a serious look at her life in Grand Island with her family—Grand Island is her home, not Mexico, not Michigan. She expresses appreciation for her place here through many lenses.

My father got a lawyer that was going to help him, and the judge in Omaha had told my father not to worry—they were getting him a Resident Card, but two months ago, we were told that my father had to leave the country voluntarily or be kicked out. He is leaving voluntarily. We had to put our house up for sell; it sold. He has to be out of the country by September 29, and the rest of us are moving to Michigan to be with family because of these difficult economic times. In Michigan, I will work and send money to my father in Mexico because he has already been told by his family in Natick that they cannot afford for him to live with them—they are not making enough to feed their own families the way it is.

They have informed him that no jobs exist, and now my father, in his mid-40s, considered an old man, will return. My worries about him are many. So I have chosen to work and send my money to him, and I am so grateful that I am young and healthy and can. I am continually told how important college is, but there is no question about what I should do in my situation; college isn't even a question—my father is all I care about right now.

She is *speaking up* to express the hardships that she knows are coming and that she is preparing herself for.

These have been hard times, harder than I could have ever thought possible, and if tears were rain, flood warnings would be sounding. I remember a teacher saying that we read great authors to become better people and quoted Elie Wiesel's saying that the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy, explaining that apathy was the ability to look at someone's situation and simply not care. I had not read any of that author's work, but I felt like he knew how I felt. Our difficulties cause us to think, and I am sure I will come out a better person no matter what happens—but I wonder *why did people ever draw up boundary lines? Who gave the land to whom in the first place so they could say it was theirs?* I have vowed to become better, not bitter; to keep my eyes open to see people's situations; to have ears that hear the cries of people; to keep a heart tender to people's situations.

Karen now moves to speak up and ask for social action from others. She is writing for change, and she is hoping that her audience hears her.

Thank you and good-bye friends and neighbors that I love; good-bye and thank you Senior High for an awesome education.

Here, she ends with gratitude and hopes of intervention from someone who is reading what she says, listening, and willing to act. After our discussion about social justice and action, I told my students that I did not know how Karen's story ended for her and her family. They had moved to Michigan, and that was the last I knew of her. She did get a big response from the school, which was very empathetic and strengthening. After the article, students were less fearful of speaking up in their situations. Many teachers in the school came straight to the journalism room to tell me what an outstanding article her story was to shed a new light on this hard situation. The teachers said they read Karen's story in their classes, and spent the day in discussion over solutions. I do wish I could have communicated that to Karen. Through this example, my students understood the power of social action.

I told my students that the newspaper staff knew there could be a huge unfavorable reaction to the publication of Karen's story. I knew I could possibly take heat for the story being published also because Grand Islanders feel strongly both ways about undocumented citizens working here, but we had to take that chance. The students understood quite well how *speaking up* in this case could cause myriad emotional responses from readers. We talked about all the possibilities this social action portion could offer them—and not necessarily pain free. At this point in the class, we discussed the timeline of American literature and how movements came about in resistance to one another. Flower writes, “This rhetoric—the art of making a difference through inquiry, deliberation, and literate action in the name of equality and social justice—has been a

distinctive voice in American life” (75). We knew the likelihood of starting a movement was nil, but we knew there were individual steps we could each take to *speak up* and be active, participating citizens in social justice.

For poetry, we touched on the life of Native American Leonard Peltier, an activist and protector of his people of Pine Ridge from violence “secretly and illegally condoned and initiated by our government” (xvi). He is called a “political prisoner,” and since the 70s, he still sits in prison for a crime, the killing of two FBI agents, he said he did not commit, and of which the government prosecutors admitted, ““We did not know who shot the agents”” (xx). Not one who witnessed the killings ever identified Peltier. We read and talked about Peltier’s message to humanity in the following two poems:

“We Are Not Separate”

*We are not separate beings, you and I*

*We are different strands of the same Being.*

*You are me and I am you*

*And we are they and they are us.*

*This is how we’re meant to be,*

*Each of us one,*

*Each of us all.*

*You reach out across the void of Otherness to me*

*And you touch your own soul!*

Students saw great strength in Peltier’s poetry, especially that it was not bitter or accusing, but that the poems remind readers that no matter what, we are one race—the human race, and we need to look at the way we treat one another. We then read “Forgiveness.” Students understood his message that unforgiveness to others, in any awful situation, means prison for that one who holds the grudge or unforgiveness. Forgiveness frees everyone.

“Forgiveness”

*Let us forgive the worse  
in each of us  
and all of us  
so that the best  
in each of us  
and all of us  
may be free.*

We talked about these poems’ messages and tones, which have a generous spirit, a pardoning essence.

I also gave the students questions to consider as they thought about and wrote regarding this reflection: How could the community have helped your family overcome these obstacles? How was the problem overcome or handled in your family—what was the result? Or if the problem is ongoing, how can we as a community solve the problem and help families meet their needs? What is the solution to this problem, and how do you see the community coming together to solve it? These questions then lead us to the obvious reverse questions: How can we help our community help families overcome

obstacles? How can we help our community solve its problems? How do act on what we know to come together as a community? We talked about what the best features of our community and school were. Although diversity can bring many problems, the students in these three classes all loved being part of a huge school that was so vibrant with different cultures. They all felt that the diversity made them more exposed to others' views, even if they did not agree with the students; they all felt like it made them more cultured and experienced. We talked about how our school could be a better place for all of the students. We looked at our school's way of acknowledging its past and what was highly valued in the school. We considered what students were voiceless, invisible, or marginalized. We analyzed how our school and community could be more inclusive of all. Overall, we looked at what we saw that needed to be changed and what needed to be preserved.

However, in spite of all of issues our community faces, the prominent issue in class discussions was the fact that each one of us is an immigrant or was a descendent of an immigrant—that fact, we felt, should dispel any claim to status or any claim to class. In spite of the fact that we could say that, though, we were all very aware of the problems surrounding this topic. Immigration has been, is, and will continue to be a hot issue for Grand Island, so I was not surprised that almost all of the reflections confronted the fairness or unfairness of immigration.

The students concluded that in knowing all that they knew now, they could not understand why people/races would treat each other unjustly, yet they acknowledged all of them had suffered injustices, some, of course, far worse than others. We answered this wonderment through our classroom discussions: when people in our own families cannot



get along, why would we expect the world to (a huge insight for them)? Again, the question became how we can act justly on what we have learned, and these students knew that the answer only pointed to one place—them. They had to speak up; they had to act justly.

One finding I was not prepared for was the fact that many of the students wrote poems to capture the solution or their feeling of being treated unjustly, which would lead to action to solve injustices. This strong sense of right and wrong, justice and injustice sprung up in all of them to write strongly, confidently in what they now saw the problem and solution as—mainly in race relations or immigration. Most of the solutions they saw as in them, yet beyond their control as they could not make people see the world the way they saw the world, but they could do whatever they could do to help them get to that understanding—the answer was in them.

Following are three of the editorials that students wrote. These editorials utilize Flower's *rhetoric of engagement*. This first writer's grandfather immigrated to the United States from Mexico, and she admits that her family still experiences bullying from being immigrants. This student is one who has always defended the victim of bullying. She told me that the bullying she has suffered has made her a defender of "underdogs." She has definitely become more vocal about the injustices of the world—all of them. She is going to *speak up* to express her self on many issues. She is going to *speak against* many injustices. Her voice is strong.

Life is full of cruel people who only care about themselves and their wants/needs.

The community does nothing for one another and that is the sad thing about the world. Although there is a small percent of us who do care, who are wanting to

help, who are taking a leap into others' lives to care for them when nobody else is, that is not enough. People who want to make a difference, even if it's a small one, and are trying, are my favorite kind of people.

The community needs to stand up and do something. IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU! If you see a family struggling or know they are, take a basket of rolls to them just to show you're thinking of them. Volunteer at a fundraiser to help raise money for the people who are without a home. IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS that make the BIGGEST DIFFERENCE in one's life. If a foreign student or kid/adult or someone from a different race is getting bullied or picked on, stand up for the victim. If they have someone show them that at least somebody cares, it could make a world of difference.

Maybe if you have special talents such as a singing or writing ability, sing a song to the community about these people and families who are just like us and deserve help! Writers, write a poem, a book, a novel, a journal entry, be an activist! Open the eyes of the surrounding people and help make a difference. Life may be all raindrops and lemons for you, but it's a crawl in a mud storm for others. It shouldn't be that way. We are all EQUAL, why can't we come together as a community and give a little or shed a little to help? Wouldn't you want help if you were struggling?

During this class, the last issue she spoke with me about and then acted on was the fact that healthy food is too expensive for the poor in our community to buy. She composed a letter to the wife of the President of the United States about making organic foods affordable to the poor—and even to the middle class. Her thoughts about community and

sustainability were spurred on by this reflection, and she asked me about the possibility of starting a community garden of fresh vegetables for those who cannot afford healthy foods. We talked about what the cost would entail and whom we could get to help advance this idea. She was going to research “how to start a community garden.” After this class, she told me she had signed up for the next class I was teaching—however—that class did not offer any Place-based assignments—back to poetry explications and literary analyses. This student, though, has put herself in others’ shoes, and she says she has never forgotten where her family came from, and from now on, would never stop *speaking* loudly *for* the disadvantaged.

This second writer’s father is the family member who immigrated to the United States from Guatemala through Mexico. Her father came in the trunk of a car and was treated terribly at the hands of unscrupulous bosses. She is a quiet young lady, and she told me that it felt good to *speak for* herself, *speak up* about her father, *to speak against* his injustice, *to speak with others* who have suffered the similar situations and who really want to find solutions to the situation she and so many other people find themselves in.

The community could have helped my family overcome injustice by providing programs that could help immigrants learn the language here. I believe that language can sometimes become a barrier for people to progress. It is an injustice because when people move to this country they may come here because of extreme circumstances they have faced in their home country. This country for them was a way to escape those challenges and begin a new life. They may not know the language and that makes it difficult to understand what people are saying. The problem in my family was overcome by perseverance. My father

knew some people here but that did not stop him from getting exploited. His first job was as a construction worker and because he did not know the language his bosses overworked him and underpaid him. He soon learned how to understand the language after years of living in this country. The solution to this problem would be to offer a program where people can learn English. The program would need to be low in price that way if families are having problems financially they could still afford to take the classes. This would bring the community together because everyone would understand each other. The language barrier would no longer be an obstacle for these families and they would be grateful for the help.

This student and her sister both told me that community help came from neighbors. That was another small pattern that emerged as to where the solution to community problems lay—in the “quiet people of the land.” Three other students wrote of immigrating and all of the harsh treatment and almost insurmountable obstacles of getting here. The help their families found was not in any government program or family members who had arrived here earlier—but in the “sweet quiet neighbor” who wanted to help. Also, I told her that Grand Island has offered free English classes for at least the last 20 years through Central Community College and many local churches. (Gas money, transportation, and class hours have continued to be a problem for immigrants wanting to learn English and take advantage of free classes.) We discussed that as a community we could look at advertising these classes more visibly for English language learners. Transportation issues have been addressed in Grand Island continually in recent years—no solutions have been offered.

This third student is from a family who has been in these United States for several generations now, yet she understood the situation of the undocumented citizens who have great difficulties every day. She spoke of the effects on the children that her mother sees in her elementary classroom. She *speaks with others* in this situation:

When my great-great-grandpa came over to the States, he was very fortunate. He had family already established; he knew the language, and he had a place to settle. What he didn't have was a job. However, the problem was overcome by my great-great-grandpa finding odd jobs until he saved enough money to buy farmland. My great-great-grandpa also had to deal with that fact that it was years before he could get his youngest son approved to come to the United States. The rules for coming into Ellis Island were tough, and one little thing like having a blind eye could send people all the way back home. The problem is similar to today in that for illegal immigrants, it takes so long for people to get approved for a green card or citizenship that they opt to come the illegal way. Much like my great-great-grandpa these new foreigners can't get well-paying jobs, and maybe aren't as lucky to know the language or have family here. My mom is a kindergarten teacher, so I hear first hand the struggles these kids face and the teachers face with language barrier. These things have gotten better, but we as a nation still have a long ways to go.

I love to learn from my students, and I was startled by her reflection—I did not realize people could be denied entrance for blind eyes and such disabilities. Her reflection led to a classroom discussion. I cannot help but reflect on this student. She was very quiet, very well known in this large school because of her athletic talents, so I saw her as an athlete

when she entered my class—it was rewarding getting to hear her writer’s voice, to hear her heart long for social justice for other students.

Six of the following poems are samples of vibrant forms of protest or resistance the students conveyed, which were communicating the same message in such gripping, yet different words. The seventh poem captured the overall solution that all of the classes concluded, which could be achievable and recognizes the answer lies in each one of us doing our part of being just. Many of these students sought a larger public audience for their poems and sent their poems in for consideration for publication. (I had posted three links that ask for student submissions.) I wondered about their own literary movement—giving voice to students who want solutions and see the solutions in the heart of each human being born. What would this generation’s literary movement look like?

In this first poem, “Injustice,” the young poet uses repetition of lines to speak effectively on how blind, deaf, insensitive we are to the luxury we live in—this semester’s grand realization that all of us are immigrants and can grow apathetic to the cries for help from those in great need the longer we are here.

### **Injustice**

We all see  
but we don’t realize  
the luxury that we live in

We all feel  
but we don’t realize

that we can change it

We all hear

the call for help

but no one answers

We all see

but we don't realize

the luxury that we live in

In our read around, this poem was a reminder for us to never become dull or deaf to the others' cries for help. Our discussions centered on how effective the commercials are that ask for money to feed hungry children in other countries. We talked about the students creating their own commercial about the people in our community who need help feeding their families. Many of the students felt like this poem expressed their feeling, too, that we must not forget the luxury that many live in here.

This second poem, written by a newly immigrated citizen, details the fear that she and her family still feel sometimes—even though they do not need to. She has that same cry for community and freedom that we heard again and again in the literature we read this semester. Her allusion to Donald Trump places time on her poem. She and many other students were troubled by three words of Trump's in his public speech—as a stereotype for people of her ethnicity. Those unforgettable, troublesome words were rapist, killer, criminal; they were printed on headlines everywhere. Her poem is powerful and she *speaks up* to express her reaction to her father's and many immigrants' plights

and to Trump's words. She speaks to the feelings of hopelessness, yet longing for a new beginning. She acknowledges that this new beginning will take all of us working together—she longs for community.

**Walk Hide Run**

Officer drop down the gun

Let this be over and done

To become a family, a different society

Walk Hide Run

All around poverty and death

Want to start fresh

Make a new living, seeking for help

Walk Hide Run

But borders and walls

Unjust laws

Blocking us out, destroying our hope

Walk Hide Run

Please open the doors

We'll stop the wars

Between the free and the distant, let's become one

Walk Hide Run

Tired of hiding

Scared of fighting



Please stop the prejudice, the stereotypes

Walk Hide Run

“Rapist” “Killer” “Criminal”

Trump that is not the visual

We want a new beginning, not only one but all

Walk Hide Run

Change cultural-diversity view

Make the community new

Asian Arabic African Indian, beautiful people from all around

Walk Hide Run

Please open the doors

We’ll stop the wars

Between the free and the distant, let’s become one

Walk Hide Run

How long is this going to last

Why wasn’t it left in the past

Time for a new start—end the judgment

Her cry for solidarity, “let’s become one” and to stop judging one another resounds in the ears of the hearer. She makes a point that closed borders destroy hope. These students, I noticed a while ago (right after the time J. B. Swift raid), like Karen, are asking, “Whose land is this anyway? Who gave it to whom? Why can we not go where we want to go on

this earth anyway?” In an indirect way, this student gets at some really important questions that should provoke critical thought in every reader.

In the next poem, “The Hard Life,” the poet’s words embody the hard life people find once they arrive here—instead of the opportunities and the feelings of community the family is looking for. Her words provoke those feelings in her listeners of her wonderments she has of *whose land, whose government, what’s the difference*, etc. I love the way she poses the question, “Why can’t we be the same?” She leaves me with the questions—could I turn away my family member at the border poor and hungry? Who is my family? Her poem has this whisper in it, *Am I my brother’s keeper?* Her hour-glass shaped poem tells of her time here in the States—I could not help but notice that she was emphasizing community in how wide her line on her family being part of the community stretched.

### **The Hard Life**

I cross the border poor and broke.

All I had was enough for a coke.

It was hard to understand,  
that illegal immigrants are banned.

Why can’t we be the same?

The government is to blame.

I’m not looking for sympathy,  
just speaking honestly of this reality.

For many families that are a working part of the community,

only search for opportunity.

One especially formidable message is found in the following poem, “Gunpowder and Smoke.” This student’s hopelessness is evident. She sees the only answers that have been given for justice among nations or races are the answers of guns, bombs, and wars. In spite of people hoping and praying, the only answer is that man is going to destroy himself—there is nothing left to do. The way she shapes her poem also speaks so powerfully of the long history of war.

### **Gunpowder and Smoke**

Why does this happen?

What can we do?

Bombs have been going off.

I can hear them.

When do they stop?

People are hoping.

People are praying,

but it doesn’t stop.

Will it ever stop?

The countries around us are helping.

They are helping us fight,

but it only creates more and more bombs,

more and more

bombs that surround me.

Sometimes they bring us food and water,

but  
there is nothing we can do.  
There is nothing anyone can do.  
All we have left  
is  
gunpowder and smoke.

This student had a great point during our read around and discussion. She said that headlines always claim the U. S. and other countries are making progress in immigration or making efforts towards peace talks, and then all of a sudden, there are more and more terroristic attacks or retaliations for past offenses. She has lost hope in any solutions that politics has to offer and thinks that with politics, offenses will always end in “gunpowder and smoke.”

This next poet, a young recent immigrant, is saying I am from here—and I am happy to be here. She is *speaking up* to express herself about the ideology she has come to live by in all of her short life’s experiences. I am from every place, and I want to learn—that is part of my story. She sees no boundary lines—and obstacles are a minor part of life. They will not hold her back. She loves everything in her life that is shaping her into who she is. This student had a perspective or attitude about life that said, “everything—all the struggles and everything—happen for a reason.” She felt life was a school or a test, that it was going to make her bitter or better, and she told me she chose “better.” Her life message seemed to be—do not be a victim no matter what your circumstances are.

### Where Am I From?

From my mother

From Los Angeles

From Grand Island

From all these places

And in all these places, I feel at home

My makings make me who I am--

After all the struggles

Here I Am.

The new language

the new environment

The obstacles could not

hold back my story.

Finally, this last poem captures the sentiments of what most of the class really came to the conclusion of—we are all the answer in searching and wanting justice. The answer to injustice, she told me, was being just, that being just has to start with each one of us. The answers to world peace begin with each one of us. The answers to community problems are in each one of us. The responsibility lies in each one of us. This poem is significant as it uses the lesson from an old fairy tale that all of the students knew so well—no matter what country they were from.

**The Mirror Speaks**

Mirror, Mirror,  
On the wall  
Where lies justice  
For men all?

Mirror, Mirror,  
On the wall  
Where lies  
Sanity for all?

Mirror, Mirror,  
On the wall  
Where lies peace,  
Community for all?

Mirror, Mirror,  
shattered glass—  
broken, scattered  
this I ask—

Mirror, Mirror,

On the wall,  
Is there no answer  
For us all?

“You, You,  
looking in this mirror,  
you’re the answer,  
do you hear?”

This student told me that this was an opportunity for her to *speak for something* that would actually make a difference. She wanted others to realize that they have the answer—and it is in them.

The students had so many explosive feeling they articulated in this segment of the assignment—whether poem, editorial, or journal—they saw solutions, simple solutions that they knew that people made complicated.

In an interesting turn, one student, through all of the problems that her family faced, found the positive in all her family went through. She is able to acknowledge the injustice but ends of the benefits:

Coming to the United States, sounds easy right? Living the American Dream for most, that's an easy accomplishment, but those migrating here from a different country the language barrier, racism, and lack of money is too much. The noble souls you meet along the way help ease the blows, when life hits you hard.

Growing up, my family faced many life-changing experiences because my dad

wasn't from here. He didn't always have good luck when finding a job. Providing food for the family meant having many odd jobs. That also meant both my parents leaving to work, but lack of income meant my siblings and I would have to be well behaved while home alone. Having more programs available for struggling families would've been of great help.

As a family, it made us more tightly knit. We overcame racism and poverty by learning what worked best for us. The kids learned when not to push things too far and learned to get along. We were lucky enough to have an uncle who would donate his time to ensure we stayed safe and well cared for.

I had this student's older brother a few years ago in class, and this family is a very close-knit family that loves each other dearly—that was very clear to me (family love is evident in all of their essays). This family had faced racism, her parents being one of the first families to this area, but had overcome that. This family is really well known and liked throughout our huge school. They are a family of very well-behaved kids. Seeing the good in a situation does not cancel the injustice the family suffered.

Finally, one student wrote the following short response I'd like to end with because, again, realizing that every one of us is an immigrant was a powerful understanding for all of the students, and he states this fact so beautifully:

My father's journey here to the United States was not easy. All he wanted was a better life for himself and his loved ones. If immigration from another country to the United States was easy, my father and thousands of other people would be in this country already, but it's never easy. Since no one from another country cannot just come into the United States and live here, people choose to come into the



country “illegally.” As I explained in my essay, my dad’s journey was long and difficult. How could the community have helped my family overcome this situation? I believe the community could have helped by not having this policy or law. In our government’s eyes, illegal immigration is a major issue in the United States. I disagree with this because I don't think people understand the reason why immigrants come into this country. My father’s goal was to escape the poverty and violence to make his family's lives better. This exact same reason is why millions of other immigrants come here too. Why does the United States government deny the right for immigrants to come make this country a home for them? Aren't we supposed to be the “land of the free”? My father sure wasn't free. I believe this is still an ongoing issue. Even though both my parents are now residents of the United States, it took years for them to achieve this long process. To solve this issue, the government of the United States needs to abolish the law. If immigrants desire to come live here, let them. Every day many people struggle, suffer and sometimes die to come here because they have to come in illegally. We need to put an end to this suffering and understand the reason why they want to be here. Aren't we all immigrants anyway?

His ending question was persuasive, his voice strong, and he told me that—maybe, just maybe—there really is a solution if people have the courage to *speak up* and other people, to listen.

Undoubtedly, students came to realize that our local issues were tied to the political events of global dimension. Global issues brought them here, and local people in action hold the answers. They understood that answers could just as well lie within them.

If we want to transform our community, the students realized that they are the answers. They are the future. Transformation, school justice, and community involvement was all up to them.

These poems, editorials, and reflections were the Eureka moments Mary Pipher wrote about in *Writing to Change the World*. Watching students think about what they wanted to say, and seeing students *speak up* and express themselves was gratifying. I saw first hand that students were deeply strengthened by this ability to do so. They loved having a public forum in our classroom to *speak up*, to *speak against*, to *speak with others*, and to *speak for*—and not be afraid. Many of these students used this assignment as their next speech in their public-speaking class. The preadvocacy work for advocacy work down their paths was evident.

This social action assignment was extremely valuable, increasing the students' ability to understand that addressing conflict can be positive, aiding us in developing our communication skills—writing, speaking, and listening—while building community. Although we knew that we might encounter strong disagreements, we proceeded in agreement to listen. And as we ended, some students had a change of perspective on immigration issues.

And finally, the work of this writing lead every member of these three classes to one conclusion: that the answer to our family, school, community, and world problems is in each one of us and starts right within our own families because if we cannot get along there, we know we cannot expect other people, nations, races to get along. So how do we solve the problems with our parents not getting along with their sibling or parents? How do we stop bullying in the school or community? The students realized that forgiveness

can only begin with each one of them. Here, I could see adding a segment on writing about times we have forgiven people who hurt us or people who we have seen forgive others—forgiveness modeled. I could also see adding an assignment of a time when the students were unjust to someone or a time when they did not stand up for someone when they should have. Again, the students knew that to bring about justice, they had to live justly and never be a part of injustice.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

This investigation was an affirmation of the work that Place-based education accomplishes in this age of the standardized test and prescribed core curriculum. The work of these Place-based writing assignments galvanized students and produced new knowledge and myriad benefits, especially Place-conscious citizenry, through beautifully written stories and poems to hold on to, add to, and pass down to the next generation.

The students' heritage work was so valuable to them. The students had a tremendous time interviewing relatives, looking at old pictures, seeing old signatures, and strengthening family bonds. Interviewing relatives and learning old family legends was, for some, one of the most enjoyable aspects. In seeing old photos, some students saw how much they looked like a relative of long ago that they did not even realize they had. Some students discovered during these assignments a great appreciation for writing that they did not have prior to the assignment. I knew that each student really liked his or her personal narrative. The students voiced that again and again. Students saw family patterns in the history that they could see could be a problem—which they did not want for themselves. Some students had changes of attitudes towards family members, like Steven, who came to realize, through writing the paper, how difficult his mother's life was during his early years, which that difficulty showed itself in her parenting skills—he felt the pangs of empathy for her. They learned so much. Whatever their heritage and discoveries, their papers and presentations were authentic. These students wrote from the heart and worked hard to tell the relative's story justly. Their voices were real and their desire to know the stories was genuine. This fact was evident to me not only in their

behavior, enthusiasm, and attendance everyday but also in my conversations with parents as I had many parents bring up the paper and research at Parent-Teacher Conferences and tell me family stories about the relative. As with any seeds planted, in the fruits of this heritage, legend and lore, and authenticity work, the mature fruit is yet to come.

Through their immigration work, students realized that they were all immigrants in that they were the descendants of immigrants, many of them illegal/undocumented immigrants. New immigrants have no way to forget that they really are immigrants like those who have been here for a few generations. This finding was a rather humbling finding for some of the students. Through writing the narratives and reflections, they realized the forces, places, and situations that shaped their ancestors, impacted them also—indirectly. For the students who had just recently immigrated, they wrote effortlessly as they spoke on culture shock, leaving their homeland and having that homeland perspective from their lives at that locale and then moving to the Great Plains and gaining that new perspective of their Great Plains's locale. These students really have a double-perspective or even a globalized perspective. They are so appreciative of life, but simply admit that life here is much more difficult than their families had ever dreamed, but even as hard as life is, life is still better here than it was in their countries. Technology had an impact on the students' immigration focus also. An interesting facet that technology offered the students is the ability to locate any place around the world, which one student demonstrated to the class. He located the home of the ancestor (whom he had never heard of but bore a portion of his name) in Ireland, the exact spot where the man had lived, on Google maps. He was shocked; the rest of us were amazed. This ability made his research even more engaging for him. After his demonstration, other students

also Googled to see if they could find the home of their ancestors. Technology has powerfully affected their lives in many, many ways. As a teacher of twelve years and using technology in the classroom as technology evolved, I have watched immigrant students be less homesick by using Facebook, Snapchat, Facetime, or any of the technology applications—but that nostalgia is still alive in them, and sometimes can affect their learning as their thoughts are continually on home. Writing on immigration has helped some to clarify their career choices. Many of the immigrant students in these three classes want to be immigration lawyers in order to help people who are in the spots they were in. Some want to work in medicine and outreach programs, especially for immigrants or persons of low income. Many of these students already lend their translating services free to the schools and community, at Parent-Teacher Conferences, the free clinic, Elementary Days, etc. The generational Grand Islanders' perspectives were of appreciation of place and family—although a few of these students expressed boredom of place and want to go to the bigger cities and “experience the world.” This immigration work brought a solidarity to my classes that was beautiful.

Asking my students to write a critical reflection about living on the Great Plains and the Plains impact on them caused them to think about the Plains in new ways. I had hoped to move them past the celebratory aspect of the aesthetics and consider the importance of understanding where their water and food comes from, the significance of being stewards, caretaking the land and water resources, leading to sustainability. Here is where I trust that the foundation was laid for this work and will continue to pervade their thought life. I learned that for my students, this Place-based assignment offered them a new resource for identity work and a new way to make meaning of their present place in

the world, these Great Plains, and the people who live here, a way to honor their ancestors for all they went through and accomplished in harsh conditions. Although the local—the school, the Place-based assignments—was the point at which I entered this study, this study was also a study of global issues, in which my students learned about themselves and the student in the next desk, from another part of the world. They learned about other cultures and places by listening to the students present their papers; in these Place-based assignments, they learned about the world.

Through Reflection 2, I learned that these students feel strongly about social justice. They want their voices to be heard and for their voices to matter. Though quiet and scared about telling their stories at first, they wanted to tell their stories. I learned that this feeling for justice from within was stirred in every student with every author we read like Frederick Douglass or Sherman Alexie, with every presentation we listened to, and with every poem or editorial they wrote and shared.

These students carried their work in this class into other classes and the community. Many of the students gave speeches in their Public Speaking class about all of us being immigrants, about all of us needing to realize we are not better than the next person and need of all of us to be forgiving, helping people, about the possibility of justice and world peace starting in each one of us. Several of these students submitted their papers and poems for publication as they felt their message was important.

I would conclude that these Place-based assignments, from the “I Am Poem” to the “Where I am From” essay and two reflections, reduced, if not eliminated, any alienation that can characterize school curriculum and engaged every student.

**Two Outcomes of These Place-based Writing Assignments:****Listening to My Student and Taking Their Advice**

Ultimately as this research came to an end and I read and saw the results of the Place-based assignments first hand, I listened to what my students were telling me. Time would tell what these assignments brought about in the students' lives and in our school life—two actions resulted. The students said these were the best writing assignments they had ever had—the best throughout all of their school years. I needed to hear what they were saying to me, so I wrote a course proposal for Fall 2017, submitted in April of 2016. The timing of the writing of this proposal was perfect. We now have an Outdoor Classroom, with many of the native plants and grasses of Nebraska/the Great Plains. This classroom was implemented to preserve place and history. When the planting time of this Outdoor Classroom arrived in early May, many of my students joined me, and we helped to plant the native grasses and scrubs. This “science” classroom is to be used in conjunction with other classrooms—and perfect for Place-based and Great Plains education, the proposal I wrote. I have yet to hear whether the School Board will accept the proposal or not. The proposal is as follows in the school's format:

**Course Title**

Writing About Place

**Course Description**

“If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are,” Wendell Berry.



The framework for this Place-conscious writing class is for the writers to realize that the sense of place in a work contains a mighty power particular to that place, its history, its issues, its people—them and their families. Many writers have taken upon themselves to communicate the fact that when they profoundly feel place—that place bears its marks upon them. Landscape plays a huge role in people’s lives, whether people realize it or not. Writers of place portray the fact that surroundings—rivers and trees, winds and rains, and flowers and fields, skies—that landscape gets into observant dwellers’ very bones. Stories then can be told against the huge background of place—where themes run through people’s lives like the rivers run through the landscape. Students of this class will write their memoir—the place they came from to the place they now live, personal essays (nonfiction), poems, and other genres.

This course will consist of students’ personal experiences and research, discussions, and practice of the conventions of writing about place from a local and global perspective for various audiences. Assignments will consist of readings of contemporary authors of Place-based writing, informal and formal Place-based writing assignments, research assignments, lectures, group activities, and a final portfolio. Students may produce any of their pieces into a multimedia presentation.

**Student Credit Hours: 5**

**Course Level: Junior/Senior**

**Special Designation: Writing Intensive, Place-based/Rationale**

Students will write about place to gain self-knowledge/growth. This course will increase students' rhetorical awareness of writing and critical thinking skills. Students research their family histories, using both online sources and personal interview, to write a "Where I am From" paper. Students will choose a variety of other modes of writing to tell their stories (poems, creative nonfiction essays, etc.). Students will choose local issues to respond to in writing such as letters to the editor. Students will read Mary Pipher's *Writing to Change the World* and Paul Gruchow's *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. Students will conference with each other and with the instructor during the writing process to help writers improve their thinking and writing skills. Student will compile a portfolio of their best work.

**The Writing:** Students will be writing those pieces of literature that they have always wanted to write and never found the time.

**Questions to consider when writing:** How does knowing where we are from change our perspective? How have I gained a sense of place through my experience and knowledge of my particular place? Sense of place forms through knowledge of the history and geography of an area, the flora and fauna, the legends of a place, and the land itself—after one has lived there for a time. What are the history, geography, flora, fauna, and legends of my place? What are the issues here? There are environmental influences that help define a place: the winds on the prairie through the tall brome grasses, the rough

textures of the land, the pink skies at morning and neon purple sunsets in the evening, the fragrance of the fields and plants blooming in season, the songs of birds and the sweet does or sly foxes. What are your environmental influences? What are the memories of personal experiences over time that make your place special or the songs that were born out of the people of your place, which help to define your place and ground you in it? In belonging to a place, you feel an at-homeness? Place is complex and as layered as time itself, blending the physical characteristics of the land with one's memories of life and stories, yet, in this too, place also includes that unspeakable feeling from within that every writer tries to capture—to write from that perspective that place has left on the writer's soul. Students will capture their place in three major pieces for their final portfolio.

**Reading to Write:** Students will read the works of Place-based, Great Plains writers, mentor texts, with the objective of discovering how place and the issues of that place in each work are very much a major force in the piece. Reading these works can change students' worlds and make them more aware of how their places and spaces—their environments have and are shaping them.

Learning to convey the power of place comes from reading writers whose creative powers of place come through their realization of how place molds them. The diversity of place and the variety of themes of these stories will transfix readers and teach writers the power of place, the power of small details.

**Course Goals and Outcomes:**

**Students will focus on place writing in memoir, creative non-fiction, and poetry.**

**Students will research—find, evaluate, integrate, synthesize information utilizing MLA documentation for a completion of their “Where I am From” paper.**

**Students will discuss impact of place in the works they read.**

**Students will discuss writers’ strategies.**

**Student will workshop, revise text, respond effectively to peers’ works in progress, participate in activities and class discussions.**

**Students will produce and polish a piece in three genres for their final portfolios.**

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Finally, in my Place-based writing assignments, I realized that the outcome asks Place-Conscious Education to expand the definition of “social justice.” My students came to the conclusion that justice has to start with us, even when we have been treated unjustly. So, the second action was one that did not have to have any one’s acceptance. My students’ voices about righting injustice and living justly were so strong that we created a website titled Righting Injustice, Writing for Justice. This would be a community site where we could all continue to add our voices to any conversation on justice and helping our community members deal with issues. The website’s purpose is to voice what we know—that we will not find justice in this world, that we have all participated in injustice some way or another, so the one behavior we must be sure to use is just actions—we must never cease to be just—and to invite others to speak up. The website reads,

Everyone seems to want to right the injustices that are visible everywhere. History books tell of them. Headlines shout of them. News media commentators report them. People talk of them. People cry personal stories of them. People might be able to turn their heads and not look at or care about injustice in the world when it is happens to others. However, everyone cares about injustice—when injustice happens to him or her. How do we right injustice? How do we stop injustice? These are a couple of questions that have been addressed throughout time.

### **Final Word**

I must conclude that the heritage essays and place and social justice reflections were the most rewarding essays that I have ever read also, and I loved the way the class ended with students presenting their essays and deep maps or family diagrams. These Place-based writing assignments did what no other curriculum assignment has done: linked family generations, built or rebuilt some family relationships, helped students in self-discovery, wove student's story into community/Great Plains story, taught students unforgettable history relevant to their lives, created a caring, risk-taking school community, taught preadvocacy thinking skills regarding sustainability issues of place, and taught hope in social justice issues, empowering students to create change by speaking up—in addition to all of the grammatical and documentation rules they had to learn and apply. Through these assignments, many students experienced that sweet nostalgia Gruchow wrote of, and all of them partook in Robbins' true meaning of

education, in these Place-based assignments, which were fitted for each student. Heritage, home, and community need to be the heart of education. I believe their ancestors would have felt very honored. By the end of our semester, we Place-conscious citizens, documented or undocumented, discovered our worlds had changed.

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