On the lower level of the Modern Languages Building at the University of Arizona thirteen students from Tuba City High School, a public school located inside a Navajo reservation, have gathered to discuss Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Animal Dreams*. They are participants in a four-and-a-half-week intensive English program. Michelle Taigue, their teacher, notes that Kingsolver considers one of her audiences to be high school students, thus prompting one participant, then another, to suggest that they write her a letter. Michelle, finding the idea agreeable, asks “What would you say to Barbara? What do you think of this book?” (368)

It is “bittersweet,” “moving,” “fairly long,” “warm in style,” and “grounded in the particulars of place and conversation.” While these are not student responses, but, rather, descriptors of *Animal Dreams* used by Mike Rose to build background for his readers, they apply equally well to his own book *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. So do “sensitive,” “compassionate,” “reasoned,” “balanced,” and “artfully written.”

Tucson, Arizona was Rose’s final stop on an odyssey that began at home in Los Angeles, the setting for his acclaimed 1989 book, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educational Underclass*. During seven intermediate geographical stops lasting three-and-a-half-years, Rose observed 1) bicultural education of teachers and students in border town Calexico, California; 2) interdisciplinary primary grade education in African-American, inner city Baltimore, Maryland; 3) advance placement and sixth-grade classes in the crisis-besieged Chicago Public Schools; 4) nine sites in New York City where school principals were creating small schools within the largest school system in the country; 5) teacher education in Berea, and American Studies and electronic communication in the formerly prosperous coal town of Wheelwright, Kentucky; 6) six cities in Mississippi where algebra and physics mix with social issues; 7) a one-room school in sparsely populated eastern Montana, and a university-based early childhood special education program in Missoula.

Why a search of three-and-one-half-years? And why 450 pages of “particulars of place and conversation”? Rose presents his motivation at the outset of the book:
During a time when so many are condemning public schools . . . I have been traveling across the country, visiting classrooms in which the promise of public education is being powerfully realized. These are classrooms judged to be good and decent places by those closest to them—parents, principals, teachers, students—classrooms in big cities and small towns, preschool through twelfth grade, places that embody the hope for a free and educated society. (1)

Rose is troubled by the character and tone of the national discussion about public schools, a discussion which he describes as “despairing and dismissive,” consisting of “devastating statistics” and “apocalyptic vignettes.” He contends that this “rhetoric of decline” is cynical, it precludes careful analysis, and it ignores the complexity of life in classrooms. Public discussions of education are abstract and general, rarely bringing us close to teaching and learning. Indeed, after reading 454 pages of detailed, flesh-and-blood stories told by dozens of teachers, students, administrators, and Rose himself, anyone who claims a genuine interest in American public education will never again be content with mere statistics or decontextualized prescriptions for practice.

Underlying the rhetoric about education are the public’s perceptions of schools and its inclination to project onto the schools its concerns about intractable societal conditions. Rose is dismayed by the public’s assessments, its demands, and its low level of regard for teaching, the latter reflected by the status and salaries of teachers. He writes, “For all the hope we place in what school will do for our children . . . we have a tendency to diminish the day to day practice of schooling” (3).

Rather than dismissing the public’s perceptions of its schools, Rose wants to widen their scope, to clarify their foci, to make them worthy of what they behold:

This is not a call to abandon the critical perspective a citizenry should have when it surveys its institutions. What I am suggesting is that we lack a public critical language adequate to the task. We need a different kind of critique, one that . . . opens discursive space for inspired teaching, for courage, for achievement against odds, for successful struggle, for the insight and connection that occur continually in public school classrooms around the country. Without a multiplicity of such moments, criticism becomes
one-dimensional, misses too much, is harsh, brittle, the
humanity drained from it.

Public education demands a capacious critique, one
that encourages both dissent and invention, fury and hope.
Public education is bountiful, crowded, messy, contradic-
tory, exuberant, tragic, frustrating, and remarkable. We
need an expanded vocabulary, adequate to both the daily joy
and daily sorrow of public schools. And we are in desperate
need of rich, detailed images of possibility. In the stories that
follow, I try to provide some of those images . . . Possible
Lives is part inquiry, part meditation, a tour and a discovery,
an opportunity to re-imagine ourselves through the
particulars of people’s lives, an attempt to envision the
possible from the best of the present. (4-5)

Method
Rose began with a map and a telephone—a map to identify the
nation’s major geographic regions and a telephone to call educators he knew
in those regions. Beginning with the question, “What’s going on in your area
. . . that seems promising?” he tried to “tap into the folk wisdom of good
teaching—following leads, pursuing the excitement of local perception,
getting a sense of the programs and people who engendered respect, sparked
hope” (5).

In his itinerary Rose sought representativeness, not only of
geography, but of city sizes, grade levels, teaching styles, and subject matter
areas. However, economic representativeness was not a goal: most of the
schools he selected enrolled large numbers of poor and working class
students because those schools receive most public attention.

Upon arriving in a community, Rose most often was “adopted” by
local educators who typically offered him a room, guided him around town,
took him with them not only to work but to community events and places of
interest. Usually he remained in a classroom from one to two weeks in order
to “get in close to teaching and learning”—to see the particulars. In all, Rose
observed or interviewed more than sixty teachers. And, though teachers are
central to the book, its pages are markedly enriched by the multiple teacher
educators, local citizens, and Rose himself.

Sources of data are even more vast than the range of perspectives. In
classrooms, Rose took notes and occasionally audio taped proceedings. He
collected instructional materials and examined teachers’ notes, plans, and instructional aids. He talked frequently and informally with teachers, and conducted audio taped interviews with both them and their administrators, evoking in the process life histories, philosophies of education, and opinions on local issues. He reviewed policy documents, read historical accounts, interviewed long-time residents, conversed with parents, examined copies of students’ work, took photographs, and drew diagrams of classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods. Rose’s classroom behavior varied according to the wishes of the teacher in charge—always observing, at times participating in small group discussions, tutoring, reading students’ papers, even performing in a play.

As he wrote segments of the final report, Rose phoned his informants, sometimes to obtain or clarify details, sometimes to be updated. When a draft was available, he sent it for comment. The final manuscript begins with an essential ten-page introduction about the book’s aims. It ends with a synthesizing chapter and a three-page note on methods. In the vast middle are nine chapters, each with a place name, which, taken together, form “an anthology of educational possibility, a series of occasions to think about the future of our public schools” (9).

In Chapter 1, “Los Angeles and the LA Basin,” as with all the chapters that follow, the reader arrives at the classroom only after mentally viewing the whole school campus, the neighborhood, the city, and the larger geographical area; and only after exploring the cultures, languages, history, geography, economics, and politics which frame the lives of students in that classroom. Fully prepared, the reader enters the story:

It was three in the afternoon in Room 56 and Yvonne Divans Hutchinson had just kicked off her shoes and was stretching out, spent, releasing the day. She began reflecting on her long local history. “I grew up here, over in the projects, and went to school in the neighborhood, went to this school, in fact. And I can remember…” (14).

We hear the voices of students, as when ninth-grader Evonne Santiago shares with the class her interpretation of “On the Pulse of Morning,” the poem Maya Angelou created to commemorate the inauguration of President Clinton:

She tells us our faults so we can see what to do with our country, she’s telling us how to make it a better country . . .

The rock means strength. And the river—you know how a
river goes through the land and picks up different water, well, that's like different cultures. And the tree is America—that can grow big and strong . . . . She's asking all these people—the Asian, the Hispanic, the African American—she's asking them to come under the tree, to let their dream grow. And she writes it for the inauguration because the president, he has to lead the country, he has great influence. If we grow today, we will be strong tomorrow . . . (18)

Then Rose summarizes for the reader the classroom dynamics that fostered such an interpretation:

And all day long in this room, in every class—just as she did every day here in this room—Yvonne Divans Hutchinson demonstrated, encouraged, celebrated, and guided students through an active and critical reading process that undercut the common perception that reading simply involved the decoding of words, that print had single, basic meanings that students had to decipher quietly and store away. She had students write in a "Reading Journal" a dialogue between themselves and the author of whatever book they were currently reading, "agreeing, disagreeing, sympathizing, questioning--engaging the ideas in the pages"(18).

Rose promises no final list of good practices, no curriculum framework, no set of instructional guidelines. Instead, he aspires for much more:

I hope not so much for prescription as for an opening up of the way we think and talk about public schools. What we come to know, we know by settling in, staying a while, watching and listening. There may be no uniform road signs on this journey, but there are rest stops, places to take stock, to reflect on the slowly developing landscape of decency and achievement, to try to leave behind the reductive charts and the stultifying, dismissive language, and ponder the intricate mix of mind and heart that defines the classroom. (9)

In taking stock, Rose turns on its head the expression, "The devil is in the details." For in the matter of educational discourse, the devil is in the generalities. By portraying the diversity and specifics of good teaching—teaching that responds to unique sets of circumstances—Possible Lives
challenges its readers to purge their assumptions and generalizations about education, to look at schools anew.

**Snapshots of Teaching’s Unique Circumstances**

Calexico, California: “Originally a labor camp, then a cow town, Calexico, by the late 1920’s, had become an established border city with the extensive agricultural base those early developers had envisioned. It is not surprising, then, that the city’s old local histories lavishly celebrate the ‘courage,’ ‘ingenuity,’ and ‘pioneering spirit’ of Rockwood, Heber and the other engineers and businessmen technical achievement: turning a desert into lush farmland. Like the writers of those histories, the entire leadership of Clexico was Anglo and would remain so well into the 1950’s” (74).

Chicago, Illinois: “... the intellectual work of all these students was so threatened—by public perception, by cuts, by chaos, by violence, by what an editor of the *Chicago Tribune* called ‘an extraordinary combination of greed, racism, political cowardice, and public apathy’” (192).

Martin, Kentucky: “Bud and Patty’s house was a converted general store, about twenty-five feet from the railroad tracks. ... I would be staying there, at his home. ... That night Bud took me to the one place in town where the locals gathered to have a drink and relax and, occasionally, hear music, the AmVets Club. ... As the night progressed, the residents of Martin came and went. ... Our topics of Floyd County: local politics ..., the treatment eastern Kentucky receives from the balance of the commonwealth, ... and coal—the complicated, bitter, wistful, begrudging, dependent, grateful attitudes the locals have toward coal” (259-60).

Hattiesburg, Tupelo, Jackson, Indianola, Hollandale, and Webb, Mississippi: “Teachers ... work not only within the boundaries of institutional mandate, but within the context of local history and culture, as well. The teachers I saw in Mississippi, many of whom were either natives or long time residents, were raised within the knotted memory and codes of the state--repressive and closed and brutal, communitarian and brave and melancholy. This was what they came from and pushed against, in their lives, in their classrooms, creating new possibilities amid the wisps and traces of the past” (293).

**Who Are the Teachers?**

Among the countless revelations about the teachers in this book, one seems particularly salient: Many have returned to the place or the often
painful circumstances of their youth, their reasons being varied and deep and personal—to prove a point, to do better than their own teachers, to repay a debt, to live out a personal dream. In their convictions, commitment, empathy, and hope, they demonstrate a profound sense of identification with the students they teach:

Yvonne Divans Hutchinson of Los Angeles grew up in the Watts' projects and was a member of the first graduating class of Edwin Markham Junior High School, where she now teaches. As a youth, she seldom heard positive comments about her school, yet “[W]e needed teachers who believed in us” (15).

Luis Garden Acosta of Brooklyn, New York, believes that “If the village raised you, then you have a responsibility to raise the village” (314).

Debbie Murphey of Indianola, Mississippi felt compelled to become a teacher. Having been ridiculed as a student of algebra, she worked “from her skill and commitment and her own knowledge of hurt and confusion” (314).

Bill Ling of the Manhattan International High School had limited proficiency in English when he came to America. “I knew the difficulties of picking up another language. So when the opportunity came to create another school in the service of such kids, I was very, very interested” (227).

Sharon Davis of Tupelo, Mississippi High School did not pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. “I think it’s real important to have a woman teaching chemistry and physics. I see girls around me in school who look and act the same way I did, and I want to tell them, ‘If you want to do something . . .’” (302).

Michelle Taigue of Tucson refused to accept a teacher’s judgement about a story she told. “[T]hat refusal was at the core of the curriculum she was fashioning for the students from Tuba City. She knew, in a very personal way, how language and traditions could limit and oppress, but she knew as well what was possible” (378-79).

Elena Castro of Calexico, California spoke with authority about bilingual education, “an authority grounded in the beginnings of her own history in the classroom, a history that developed out of the multilayered history of the border town that became her home” (77).

Rose summarizes as follows the strength of such teachers:

Elena . . . and the others shared a history and a community. They knew the families of the kids they taught, knew the
Defining Good Teaching

Through the many and varied stories that are told and through Rose’s insights into those stories, Possible Lives emerges as an encyclopedia of source material for anyone seeking descriptors of good teachers or good teaching. “The teachers... foster growth and learning by pressing against the limits of the possible. They share a dissatisfaction with the status quo, share a desire to challenge the ways our schools tend to define ability and achievement, establish the curriculum, and respond to the social order. (12) “Central to Ed’s success, and to Larry Stone’s, is the fact that they have fostered a culture of achievement... Driving it all is a demand for quality and originality (2). But the heart of Rick’s influence, I think, was his belief in each student’s moral agency... [H]e conveyed admiration for his students’ ability to make decisions, to come to reasoned judgment, to take a stand (51).

At the heart of the book, first and finally, are the words and actions of teachers. One classroom vignette seems especially germane to Rose’s accomplishment with Possible Lives. Returning to the lower level classroom in the Modern Languages Building on the University of Arizona Campus, Michelle Taigue’s summer program for Tuba City high schoolers has come to an end. In her concluding remarks, she asks the students, “Thinking back over the past four-and-a-half weeks... what are some of the themes... the ideas... the powerful words we’ve been working with?” As Rose notes, the questions quickly stimulated consequences:

After filling the board with theme words, Michelle asked the students where they’d place the material they had read, the places they visited, the people who visited them. At some point in the free-flowing but methodical development of this array of key words and works, Michelle started to draw lines connecting themes and books and people. This continued until the board was filled with ideas, books, poems, visitors, places—a thick conceptual map of the four-and-a-half weeks together. Finally, holding out a piece of chalk, she said...
“Place yourself in this web.” One by one the students went to the board, situating themselves in this conceptual web. (402-3)

Like Michelle Taigue’s chalkboard, Mike Rose’s book overflows with themes and ideas and powerful words that could be placed on a conceptual map of good teaching. On that map is a place for anyone touched by American public education. For those outside the profession, it is an education in the status quo, a primer on educational issues (e.g., bilingual education, inclusion of special education students, the standards movement, testing, school finance), and a blueprint for responsible and fruitful discussion of public education in a democracy. For educators, it is, additionally, inspiration and a catalog of instructive examples of sound practice. For students, it is possibility.

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Reclaiming Rhetorica has clearly shown us that our perspectives are skewed. We have tended to canonize the history of rhetoric in a way that has not been representative, and that is not good for any historians. So just in orientation, this work shows that we have to shift our axis.

—Richard Leo Enos (Interview with Author, 18 September 1995)

Reclaiming [Dame] Rhetorica was seeded in Annette Kolodny’s two-semester 1988 graduate seminar, “Women Rhetoricians,” at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Many of its participants became the “doughty band of fifteen writers” who contributed to this book their research on the history of women in rhetoric. Andrea A. Lunsford, well-known for exploring women’s rhetoric and revitalizing the art of collaboration, was asked to organize the project later on. As editor, she brings to this collaboration a methodology explained in “Rhetoric in a New Key: Woman and Collaboration,” written with long-time collaborator Lisa Ede (Rhetoric Review 8, Spring 1990, 234-