Places of Composition: Writing Contexts in Appalachian Ohio

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In her 2007 Composition Studies article, “Fear, Teaching Composition, and Students’ Discursive Choices: Re-Thinking Connections between Emotions and College Student Writing,” Sally Chandler argues that when looking at students’ writing processes, we should see students’ emotions as both individually based and socially constructed. This dual focus, Chandler explains, locates the act of writing at the intersections of “home discourses students bring to their writing, the particular version of academic discourse demanded by the assignment, and the emotional discourse evoked by the context(s) for composing, to name a few” (64, emphasis added). To my thinking, Chandler does an admirable job of exploring how student writing is embedded in emotional experiences. However, I would like to dwell a bit longer on context. More specifically, I would urge us to continue to think not just about the general term context, but about the ways that geographic place and cultural location affect students’ writing. Recall Gloria Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking book Borderlands, which encouraged theoretical reconsiderations of how different writers use concepts of location and space to promote identification and differences, communal knowledge and extra-communal knowledge. Although Anzaldúa’s focus was South Texas, her concerns speak to the experiences of people in other regions who must negotiate their identities in complex ways, even regions that do not appear striking for the constraints and struggles of their inhabitants.

One such region is Appalachian Ohio, a 29-county expanse of Appalachian foothills in southeastern Ohio where roughly 1.5 million people live (Vital Statistics). The region comprises nearly a third of the state’s terrain, but differs topographically and culturally from the rest of Ohio, its citizens demonstrating lexical and phonological differences from the rest of Ohio (Flanigan 345) and receiving economic assistance from the Appalachian Regional Commission. In this region lies one doctoral-granting university, Ohio University (OU), whereas the other, more populous Midwestern two-thirds of the state have eleven doctoral-granting universities. So OU largely imports students from the other parts of the state. Metropolitan Columbus, near the center of the state, serves as the largest single provider of OU college students as well as the area in the state with the most OU alumni (Ohio University Fact Book). Its influence in populating OU is followed by Cleveland to the north and Cincinnati to the west. Appalachian Ohio, by contrast, provides fewer OU students than the rest of the state notwithstanding the region’s proximity to OU (Ohio University Fact Book). And Athens, where the main...
campus of Ohio University is located, sustains itself in part by catering to the college student population.

Given these facts, OU’s Appalachian minority occupy a complex space. They come from, and for college remain in, their home region, but their time at OU may amount to an experience in at least two other cultures: academia and non-Appalachia. In one sense, Appalachian Ohio students who find themselves in this geographic and cultural place have not left their home cultures; in another sense, they are a cultural “other.” One of the scenes where this identity issue appears vividly is where students receive their first formal exposure to the cultures of academe: in the first-year composition course.

My larger concern is not with Appalachian Ohio alone, but with the places where established composition and literacy research stop and where problems that I have witnessed with my own first-year composition students begin, a borderland between the recognized and the overlooked. We in composition have begun to interrogate ways in which place factors into our teaching and learning (Cushman, “Location,” “Sustainable”; Mauk; Reynolds, “Composition’s Imagined”) and into our social positioning (Reynolds, “Ethos as Location”). But we have done less well at accounting for the limitations of our writing pedagogies when teaching students who identify strongly with a specific locale and culture that are apart from academe. We would be ethically and intellectually remiss to tailor our pedagogies only to students who demonstrate a high comfort level with college writing. This paper reviews some of the work of rhetoric and composition scholars in discussions of place, and to enhance our awareness of how place-related factors may limit and/or bolster our pedagogies, it presents a case study of two geographically and culturally different student writers at Ohio University.

The fact that learning occurs in context-rich environments, settings with traditions, norms, values, and physical limitations, has received some noteworthy attention in literacy research. Namely, Shirley Brice Heath explored many literacy practices of two specific communities in the Carolinas’ Piedmont in her 1983 book *Ways with Words*. But Heath’s focus remained on pre-school literacy, and her findings apply more to children than to college students. Since the 1980s, ethnographies like Heath’s (e.g., Beth Daniell’s *A Communion of Friendship*) have turned our attention to the myriad of motivations and consequences that correspond to specific communities’ engagement in literacy practices. In such studies, the subjects often belong to a small and relatively remote community, and their literacy acts usually entail more factors than we might initially suspect. The subjects may be children, children and adults (Heath), college students (Reynolds, *Geographies*), or adults (Daniell). Regardless of their subjects’ demographics, one of the researchers’ goals is to raise awareness of how specific social and physical places constrain and permit how learning takes place.
This body of work has taken us a long way toward acknowledging the role of place in meaning-making practices, though fewer scholars turn to the more fickle subject of how physical and/or cultural borderlands inform learning. One is Nedra Reynolds, who studies several small-scale borderlands that affect students at the University of Leeds (UK). In Geographies of Writing, she became a participant observer who joined cultural geography students in Leeds-area fieldwork, her data showing that attitudes towards neighborhoods affect individual and collective actions, despite whether those attitudes are supported by facts. Noting that modern cities "work to keep people apart" (Geographies 148), Reynolds uses the perspectives of Leeds residents to show how city parks and streets become contested spaces, and to show that the attendant and resulting patterns of thinking may affect surrounding social, economic, and educational landscapes.

Like me, Reynolds grounds her work in borderland theory and focuses on college students. Johnathon Mauk, too, explores borderland, community colleges, which are academic spaces but which increasingly rely on commuter students who juggle multiple academic and nonacademic identities (369). However, to use Burkean concepts, the actors, agencies, and scenes connected to some institutions are perhaps even more problematic than those described by Reynolds and Mauk. What happens when the scene is at once academic (a university town) and in both a stigmatized region (Appalachia) (see Preston 399) and a non-stigmatized region (the Midwest)? What happens when the academic center of the scene is populated by students, or "actors," who come primarily from regions with wealthier and better equipped education systems than the "other" students (Vital Statistics)? What forms of agency do this scene's Appalachian minority have in their efforts to participate with their peers in the place's academic culture—a culture that requires nearly every student to learn new conventions (Bartholomae; Cushman, "Location" 358)?

In today's move toward globalization, this perspective might seem to head so far inward within national borders that it neglects the outer world's array of borderlands and rhetorics. But I would argue that, theoretically, the reverse is the case, that by seeing how place shapes writing done by students even in Ohio, the so-called "heart of it all" in the United States, American scholars and instructors can better understand cultural dimensions of writing and learning that apply regardless of national borders. Perhaps then we can account for the presence of culture in knowledge production and continue to uncover how this process works, as Karen P. Macbeth urges (181). Even familiar borderlands give us opportunities to help students engage in culturally conscious writing.

To address such oversights, this study describes some of the challenges that confront college students, variously associated with rural Appalachia, who take first-year composition among predominantly urban and suburban...
Midwestern peers. Although no two borderlands are the same, descriptive research concerning how members of one borderland negotiate their sense of place with academic writing may allow for teaching and theorizing that transcend the hills of Athens, Ohio.

Initially, I studied the writing histories and experiences of five students who were nearing the end of their first-year composition classes at Ohio University. However, I soon learned that one of the five students, whom I call Kevin, did not identify as Appalachian, though he lived in Appalachia, and he was in fact born in Illinois. I could have viewed Kevin’s information as extraneous to my concerns, and at a glance this seemed the best option. But a closer look showed me that the information he provided gave me some much-needed perspective. As a contrasting example, his comments led me to reorganize my analysis so that I could see more acutely how ties to specific cultures and places factor in to one’s writing process. Thus, I restricted my analysis to Kevin in relation to a student named Matt, who claimed to identify strongly with Appalachia and Appalachian culture.

Matt was in the first-year composition class I was teaching at the time. Kevin was not. Matt was also twenty-five; Kevin was eighteen. Like differences of gender or social class, such differences may seem to muddy this analysis, but it is important to remember that diversity of many kinds exists here as well as elsewhere. To characterize all Appalachian Ohio students as identical because they hail from the same part of the state is misleading. Also, place is of course tied to other factors, like ethnicity or class. So to focus on place automatically implies consideration of many factors.

The two students volunteered to participate in this study and each met with me once, separately, during the fall 2007 academic quarter for a session involving an interview and two surveys. This session occurred during week eight of a ten-week class, giving the students the chance to reflect on the majority of their time in their first-year composition classes. In each session, I had each student complete an oral survey, an oral quasi-structured interview, and a written survey. I made an audio tape-recording of the interview, and I kept a paper trail of the surveys. The first survey consisted of a question asking the student to select from several geographic categories (e.g., Appalachian, Midwestern, suburban, Northern) how they identify themselves. They could choose more than one answer and then rank their answers; also, they could use any unlisted regional descriptor they wanted. The next item asked each student to list three cultural elements that were particular to the student’s home region/culture, providing example categories such as food, behavior, and beliefs. Then I had the students describe in 2-3 sentences what the term home meant to them. My goal was to see how the students thought of themselves culturally and to see how or whether they related their cultural self-awareness to a place. In the interviews I asked the students open-ended questions pertaining to three areas of their lives: past
writing experiences, current writing experiences in their college-level composition classes, and anticipated future writing experiences. The questions pertained to cognition, emotions, and context, a three-pronged approach to the writing process popularized by Mike Rose's *When a Writer Can't Write*. So the questions ranged from those pertaining to how each student was taught to write academic papers to those about each student's comfort level in a college composition class, to those pertaining to each student's hopes for future writing projects. The subsequent written survey focused on basic demographic information.

I examined the interviews (one per student) and surveys (two per student) in conjunction with one another to see if themes emerged concerning the students' past and present writing challenges and contexts. Because my survey and interview questions were shaped by Rose's cognitive/affective/social-contextual framework for writing ("Complexity, Rigor"), I looked for evidence of cognitive, affective, and social/contextual factors in the students' answers and identified this evidence as the first variable in my analysis. Also, I examined the students' answers to four interview questions that I structured with a Likert scale, again to look for themes. Finally, my analysis yielded three additional but related variables: the students' identification of literacy sponsors (see Brandt), the students' identification with home and/or school, and the problems or struggles that the students reported as affecting their writing at present. Because the variables commonly overlapped, I described differences in how they surfaced for each student rather than counting the frequency with which each variable appeared.

The students in this study incorporated parts of Mike Rose's three-part writing process model when they approached, fulfilled, and reflected on their writing. They made use of cognitive features: factors concerning how we locate connections among people, things, and ideas. However, affective and social/contextual factors appeared more immediately relevant for Matt, who identified strongly with home-based, place-specific nonacademic cultures. The affective, entailing anxiety, joy, and relief, concerns how our feelings or emotions are involved in our interaction with external phenomena or with internal states. The social/contextual concerns how context(s) or situation(s) affect us. It includes time, means, institutional constraints, and cultural constraints.

Influencing the two students' adherence to one or more of the above categories in Rose's model was the presence of literacy sponsors in the students' home and/or academic lives. According to Deborah Brandt, literacy sponsors are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). Although Brandt links the concept of literacy directly to reading and writing, I extend the concept so that it constitutes the successful use of symbolic meaning-making practices in a
culture. In my study, the presence and influence of actively engaged literacy sponsors provided the students with some strategies for dealing with the demands of the first-year composition class.

Literacy sponsors may be numerous, however, entailing anyone from publishing company executives to stay-at-home parents. So to reveal trends in how students negotiated their writing and their cultural backgrounds, I discerned two types of influences: influences from home and those from academe, with the possibility of overlap. I define identification with one's home culture as defining oneself or one's goals, values, outlook, and/or behavior by turning to one's upbringing, or home environment. I define identification with one's academic culture as defining oneself or one's goals, values, outlook, and/or behavior by turning to one's exposure to school-related environments, issues, or figures. As I use them, the two categories may involve actual literacy sponsors and students' task- or issue-based identification. Kevin, who demonstrated strong past and present identification with academic culture, appeared to be the more confident academic writer.

Rose's writing process model, Brandt's literacy sponsors, and my categorization of home versus academic culture provide ways of seeing how students equip themselves to deal with the first-year composition class. But in this study, Matt reported sundry kinds and degrees of challenges regarding his current writing contexts, from commonplace worries about grammar to feelings of cultural alienation and intellectual inferiority that seem rooted in particular place-based self-conceptions. Matt came from a background that was more estranged from academic culture, and his cultural positioning appeared to give him particular writing challenges. But from the example of both Matt and Kevin, it seemed that context-related challenges could be overcome if the students developed ways to marry academics and their home culture, strategies by which to retain their cultural identity as they played the college-level writing game.

Matt: "I would sit outside [the classroom] and like have to mentally prepare myself to go sit down in class."

The differences between Matt's and Kevin's survey and interview answers were vast. Whereas Matt identified with value systems and behavioral norms that he associated with Appalachia, Kevin did not easily identify with a geographic place, only linking his identity to a specific culture and place after considerable thought and follow-up exchanges. For instance, after an initial inability to answer the oral survey question about three characteristics of his culture, Kevin wondered aloud whether he could talk about his ancestry. When I approved, he said he was Scottish and shared some cultural traits of this nationality (for instance, playing the bagpipes). Moreover, when I asked each student to pick regional descriptors that they
identify with, Matt did so readily, choosing [1] Appalachian, [2] Southern, and [3] Midwestern, in that order. Not only could he describe himself in terms that were both geographic and cultural, but he could rank multiple such terms as more or less accurate. Conversely, in the opening survey Kevin claimed not to identify with any region, and in the closing survey he wrote “N/A” to the question, “What town, city, or area do you now consider home?” Another of Kevin’s answers on the closing survey showed that he was born in Illinois rather than Appalachian Ohio. For Matt, geography and culture seemed intertwined and significant; for Kevin they seemed nearly absent. Another immediate difference between Matt and Kevin was their perspective on the concept of home. For Matt, home was a stress-free place filled with family and friends. He said that you know it “when you walk through the door” and explained that he feels this because many of his family members live on the same road. For Kevin, home was a mental activity, not a physical place: “Home is something you want, not necessarily a place unless you make it that.”

In the following sections, I offer more detailed information from my interview with Matt, and I then contrast his background and experiences with information gleaned from Kevin.

Interview with Matt

Although Matt had meaningful connections to academic culture and his home life was not disparate from academe, home culture and home-based literacy sponsors profoundly shaped his views on writing and learning and his view of himself as a writer. In other words, geographic and cultural context (the third part of Rose’s model) figured significantly into Matt’s perception and allowed him to overlay his writing experiences with particular emotions (the second part of Rose’s model). One prominent way that context influenced Matt was through literacy sponsors from his home region.

While Matt had literacy sponsors who were affiliated with academe, figures such as his mother, who was a college graduate, and his high school English teacher, he emphasized their connectedness to values and issues from home (read: non-school) life. Regarding his high school English teacher, Matt commented that she helped not just his writing but also with “how [he] approach[es] things.” Furthermore, this teacher helped him with “people in general.” He explained,

She was one of those people who were born and bred in that area [Matt’s hometown in Appalachian Ohio]. Her values were very similar to mine. And she was a very successful teacher and a very successful business person in the community. I knew right off the bat there was going to be a lot I could learn from her. . . . So it was just me picking her brain because, you know, I was just really interested in the things she had to tell me. Her
Matt explained that by “settle,” the teacher meant that too many people from their town accepted jobs that require little training simply because the people were reluctant to go elsewhere and experience new things. When I asked Matt whether this teacher was unusual in advising her students to experience new places and things, he replied, “Probably.”

This literacy sponsor helped Matt in and outside the classroom, enhancing his interpersonal repertoire and awareness. She was, for him, simultaneously a teacher and a model of a learned, involved citizen, whose notions of individual and communal excellence may well have affected Matt then and now. Although coming from Matt’s community and identifying with students like Matt—“her values were very similar to mine,” Matt said—the teacher also pushed for change within the community, if simply by encouraging students to experience things outside their hometown. Later in the interview Matt refrained from attributing his actions to this teacher’s influence, yet certain of his comments echoed the philosophy that this teacher had instilled in him, comments referencing his interest in reading “anything [he] could get [his] hands on” at his school library, from the *Columbus Dispatch* to the *New York Times*. He said that although he did not do any writing outside of school, he did extensive reading at his local library, and he remarked that this reading was, as he put it, “just so different from what I was used to. It was just so different. Even the *Columbus Dispatch* was just this culture shock to see the kind of news they were reporting on. Where we were from, it was just like so and so has your prize-winning pumpkin today. That was like your front-page story.” Similarly, concerning his current college-level composition class, he admitted that while he has difficulty, one must be “open minded” and must “accept new things.”

Another influence who straddled the line between home and academic cultures was Matt’s mother, who read voraciously and created a home culture that emphasized reading for pleasure. She read suspense and true crime novels in particular, such as the works of James Patterson. Matt added, “My mom turned me on to that.” Additionally, his mother overcame negative cultural and geographic stereotypes through academic pursuits. When Matt discussed stereotypes he faces in his current composition class, he shared, “My mom for instance is a college graduate, very intelligent lady, worked very hard in making sure that she doesn’t sound too—or how people will perceive her as southern or unintelligent. But I think it’s probably—I don’t think people from that area [where he is from] are stupid ’cause I know they’re not.” She was thus a literacy sponsor from Matt’s home culture whose example gave Matt a way to resist some feelings of insecurity that might otherwise have plagued him in the composition class.
Matt did have some strategies by which to address the challenges of his current academic writing context, primarily by keeping these figures’ teachings in mind. But his past circumstances living in a context where writing and academe played relatively minor roles also gave him substantial challenges that he had not overcome. The skills and lessons he learned from home were valuable to his home culture, but he recognized that they were not easily transferable to academe. Such skills and lessons came from his grandfather especially and constituted intelligences that differed from those valued in class. He explained,

I think the kind of intelligence that [people from his hometown] have, maybe, is different from what someone coming from obviously academia would have. You know, my grandfather only had a fourth grade education, but he’s one of the most intelligent men I ever knew in my life. But could you put him in a classroom and have him do something like this? Well, probably not. But his intelligence was in things that applied to him, you know, gardening or farming or something like that. That was where it applied to him. It wasn’t, you know—he didn’t know about Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf or things like that. It didn’t appeal to him. It wasn’t useful in his world.

Comments like this follow Rose’s argument in *The Mind at Work* (2005), in which Rose frames intelligence as culturally and contextually based, a product of what completes the task at hand. But the extent to which Matt channeled his grandfather, whose experiences differed from those that are often valued in school, suggests that Matt had a largely non-academic base from which to approach writing and school. During the interview Matt brought up his grandfather repeatedly, noting that his grandfather “never quit anything in his life,” a principle that Matt applies to his own life.

When talking about his discomfort in his current composition class, Matt brought up other aspects of his home culture, observing that he could more easily engage in class activities and writing if he could explore familiar subjects. He mentioned fishing and hunting as examples, but also his job as a counselor for drug users in his hometown. Concerning his counseling work, he shared, “That’s where I learned the most” because it was “what I saw on a daily basis.” And he attributed his success in this work to “how [he] was raised,” citing instances when his grandfather reached out to people and made them feel liked.

An exact link between Matt’s home culture and his current academic outlook cannot be ascertained in this study, but we can at least note the coexistence of Matt’s connection to his home culture and his anxiety about academe. Academe, as represented by college, was extremely alienating to him. He remarked that at first he went to a community college rather than his current university because he thought the community college
experience would be “kind of easy.” He then commented on his transition to the university:

It was—this whole like different experience for me coming here now because I walked on campus and thought, “I don’t want to do this. I really don’t want to do this,” you know. And like the first couple of classes I would sit outside and like have to mentally prepare myself to go sit down in class because—like my biggest fear—and I told my parents this—was like, “I’m going to walk into that English class. I’m going to be older than everyone. And the professor’s going to walk in. He’s either going to be the same age as me or a little bit younger or older.” I said, “That’s going to be my fear.” And sure enough . . . [laughter]

Matt was right about the ages of himself and his writing instructor, myself, and frequently I had seen him sitting in the hall before my 8:00 a.m. class, despite the fact that he commuted from an hour away. The affective component of the first-year composition class involved fear and self-doubt in his case, arguably to a degree that surpasses that which other college students feel. In Matt’s case, it included time spent meditating prior to class and structuring his nights and mornings to allow for this preparation period.

Other comments during the interview further stressed Matt’s sense of otherness in the composition classroom. When given a Likert scale to determine his comfort level in his current composition class, Matt gave himself a “five or six” out of ten regarding his comfort with his assignments but merely a three regarding his comfort with his peers in the class. His explanation highlighted a number of factors, some as straightforward as his seven-year age difference from most of his peers. But his explanation also leads us to wonder how much of his current context springs from home culture:

I think the age difference is huge. It’s hard to relate. Not that I’m old, but, you know, there’s a seven-year age difference there. I mean, they’re living in dorms. I own a house. The different levels are on there. And I think probably just our cultures. The majority of [the other students in the class] are, I think, from maybe northern Ohio or metropolitan areas—Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus—and I think the things that we’re—the things that I focus on and the things that they focus on are much different. It’s not my objective to go out every night and, you know, party or whatever. It’s—I’m not saying that theirs is, but they probably do it a heck of a lot more than I do. And I think that—I talk to some of them, and they talk about [subjects like their parents’ credit cards].

Then, referring to an assignment that I had given in class that required the students to pretend they were writing three letters to three different audiences in order to get money for spring break, Matt said, matter-of-factly, “I would never do that. I would never be able to do that.” He called this an
age difference, saying, “I've supported myself for a long time now.” However, there is room to wonder how much culture plays into his self-reliance and into his attitude toward finances and parental involvement. If nothing else, his remarks reveal an us-and-them mentality, separating himself from urban and suburban Ohio students.

When I asked Matt to clarify what he meant by “cultures” in his current writing context, he responded indirectly, noting “kind of an uncomfortable feeling” he had during group work and class discussions because when he reads a poem, he does not “delve that deep into” the piece, as he has seen some of his classmates do. So, he says, “It’s really a nerve-wracking experience for me to speak up [in class] ‘cause I don’t know how it’s going to be perceived.” Apparently, despite what he learned from his high school teacher, mother, and grandfather, Matt found in the transition to first-year composition, even to a first-year composition class at a university in his home region, reason to doubt himself—he reported feeling “total self-doubt” when writing papers—and reason to feel othered in a class of students who, from his perspective, were more suited to academic culture.

To summarize the challenges that Matt faced in academic culture, consider his response to the question, “What is the main purpose/point of a composition class?” He replied that writing is “a big part of [one’s] job” and that “you don’t want to look like a complete idiot.” When I asked him to elaborate he answered, “Grammar,” and then:

Probably some of the phrases and words that I would use, just say that come from the area maybe I came from would—I think it reflects me sometimes when I write and I’m not really paying attention to what I’m writing. I’m just kind of going. And I really have to be careful sometimes with how I try to articulate what I’m trying to say. If I came in class and said some of the stuff that was going through my head, you’d look at me [imitating me]—“I’m sorry. What?” You know, it’s just phrases, I think. Words. How I say them, maybe. I think accent probably plays a good part in it, too. [I asked him to explain.] My accent’s probably a lot worse than I let on. I do—it’s not that I’m embarrassed of where I come from or who I am. It’s just that people perceive you differently if you’ve got this, you know, southern drawl thing going on. So, it’s trying to conceal that sometimes ‘cause you don’t get taken seriously, and I’ve experienced it before. People just don’t, you know—they’re not into what you’re saying. [I asked him whether this pertains to in-class speaking or to writing.] In my speaking and writing.

Undoubtedly, mastering grammar conventions is a challenge Matt faces. Here he maintained, “It’s just phrases . . . words,” and eventually he gave the example of his use of ain’t. But if this challenge is combined with his perception of himself as a writer and a participant in in-class activities, his perception of his classmates, and his academic outlook, it looks far more complex.
Interview with Kevin

If Matt's story was one of self-doubt and of anxiety about writing, Kevin's was one of self-confidence about himself as a writer and as a member of an academic community. The two were in many ways opposites. Whereas Matt expressed reluctance to rate his comfort level as high in his first-year composition class, Kevin gave himself a nine out of ten on this question and an “eight or nine” out of ten on the question of how he rated his writing in relation to that of his in-class peers—because he said that after doing two peer reviews in his composition class, he was not impressed by his classmates' arguments, organization, and grammar, in that order. (Note that Matt, by contrast, primarily spoke of writing in terms of grammar.) Furthermore, Kevin gave himself “at least an eight” out of ten regarding his comfort level with his writing generally because he claimed he had the ideas he needs to write a paper. He gave himself a nine out of ten for how prepared he felt for college-level writing. In his explanation he mentioned the rigor of his past academic experiences: during the summer before his senior-year English class, he had had to read eight books and write six 4-5 page papers.

But perhaps more telling is the extent to which academic culture remained central to Kevin's past experiences at school as well as home, the extent to which his literacy sponsors identified with academic culture, and the extent to which he minimized context in his past exposure to writing and learning. Like Matt, Kevin reported that he came from a home environment where at least one parent made books prominent. But whereas Matt was primarily exposed to true crime novels, Kevin's reading exposure revolved around canonized authors; Kevin mentioned books by J. R. R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert, and John Steinbeck, for instance. Also, while Matt and Kevin both revealed that they had had influential high school English teachers, Matt spoke of his teacher's value system and life lessons, elements that seemed to emerge from or because of her cultural environment. Kevin, by contrast, emphasized his favorite teacher's adherence to theory, which allowed Kevin to write papers about single works (e.g., Beowulf) from multiple theoretical lenses. Two lenses in particular that Kevin said he had used were queer theory and “existential theory.” Rarely did Kevin discuss the geographical or cultural location where this learning occurred; rarely did he embed his comments about academe in factors of access or of cultural value systems, feelings of estrangement from his home culture or feelings of trepidation concerning college or college-level writing.

An example of Kevin's devotion to theory, and of the apparent marriage between his home culture and academic culture, emerged when he related that some of his high school classmates had called the high school English teacher that he so admired a “neo-feminist.” Kevin said that he thought this was grossly unfair and a sign of his classmates' ignorance. He then explained that he had a good understanding of feminism because he “was raised by
two feminists," one of whom read one book per day. Hence, tied to academi-
cally sanctioned theories at home and at school, Kevin's background seemed
continuously connected to the very systems of thought that college would
later emphasize. Given the texts used in many first-year composition classes
at his university, such as the theoretically rich reader *Writing as Reflective
Action*, edited by Duncan Carter and Sherrie Gradin, it was likely that he
would work with the same theories in his first college writing class.

Finally, the writing that Kevin did outside of school and the writing that
he wanted to do after completing school reveal a marked difference from
Matt's writing background. Whereas Matt claimed not to have done out-of-
class writing, Kevin said that he (Kevin) wrote creatively and had published
his writing on fanfiction.net and had written eighteen chapters for a story.
He also expected to continue writing fan fiction and to continue exploring
the theme of good and evil in his writing, a theme that had emerged from
his writing for a high school English class. One difference between Matt and
Kevin in this regard is the sheer volume of Kevin's out-of-class writing, but
another is the fact that the writing that Kevin expected to do and the writing
that he hoped to do in the future were the same. Not so for Matt, who had
expected to do more writing that pertained to his counseling job in his home
community and who hoped to "at least enjoy writing" in the future.

**Possibilities for Theorizing and Teaching**

The data gathered from these two students offers a tentative basis on
which to deal with difference more responsibly. I use the term *responsibly*
very deliberately, for recognition of place-based cultures in the student writ-
ners from whom we build our pedagogies is an ethical as well as intellectual
issue. We have long acknowledged difference in our classrooms insofar as
gender, class, and ethnicity are concerned, but our own familiarity with these
particular compartments puts us at risk of neglecting other salient differences
in our students—differences of places and cultural locations.

This data may give us some cause to resist the normalizing tendencies
that we in rhetoric and composition know so well (Macbeth 181): the main
problem that students, a lump sum, have is A; students enter our classes
with attitude B. It can give us a reason to wonder whether our notions of
writing and of writers come from cultures with ties to places, from countries,
regions, states, counties, cities, or neighborhoods as well as from cultures
whose place(s) cannot be found on a modern political map. What com-
 municative norms are place-based? Which places and/or cultures shape
writing standards and assessment? What does a place-based ownership of
writing studies mean for students in locations that are not near academic
strongholds? If, for example, the first-year composition class is being tailored
to fit the needs of students like Kevin, what does this mean for the Matts
of the composition class?—or for the Matts of the composition class where students like him are numerous?

A more responsible pedagogy would need to value the society or societies that students come from. In my study, Matt demonstrated confidence in his communication abilities if he was describing or analyzing information from the world he knew well, about fishing or reading animal tracks, for example. Valuing these home cultures in the composition class might entail making room for expressivist writing assignments that hearken back to these cultures. However, it might also or instead warrant a turn to local concerns via other writing genres: persuasive writing, critiques, research essays, rebuttal arguments.

Service learning, as Ellen Cushman ("Sustainable") and others have explained it, has done much to embed writing in places and thus make its applicability evident to students and, for accountability purposes, to the public. I would like to extend Cushman's concern with writing that springs from local concerns to writing that incorporates, explores, and perhaps resolves concerns from students' home cultures despite the extent to which these home cultures already make room for academe. Students approach many writing assignments, particularly persuasive writing and research essays, with doubts about their authority to speak on valuable issues, from gun control to equal rights to media effects. But often such issues do not disappear when they reach students' home cultures. Discerning connections between the Burkean parlor and first-year composition students' home cultures means making writing and rhetorical concerns part of our students' lived experiences, experiences in which our students have a basis from which to write, speak, and act with authority. A "real world" connection via students' particular home cultures would ground and inform students' writing and discussions. While simply having students write about their home cultures may indeed be facile (Mauk 379), we might have students investigate aspects of their home cultures to see how rhetorical issues matter on multiple scales.

Another starting point from which to envision such a pedagogy is to see what the Kevins of such a class gain from writing that extends to students' home cultures. Such a pedagogy would foreground for students the ways that language and ideology have consequences for particular communities, how systems of thought which may have long and illustrious traditions affect not just the lives of "people" in the abstract but the lives of people that students have seen and known. What if students read works already common to the first-year composition class—again, Anzaldúa's Borderlands, say—in order to investigate an issue that the work brings up in the context of the students' home cultures? My paper here is an enactment of such appropriation, an attempt to situate borderland theory in a marginalized region. If students use a similar approach, they may feel better prepared to apply rhetoric to the "real" world that they know. The point is not for students to sprinkle more
"I" references into otherwise distanced and formal writing, but for students to explore language and issues with an eye toward the situatedness of these subjects in the cultures that the students come from. Denying this situatedness could mean that students probe complex intellectual and political ideas without considering how the bigger issues affect people that they know and care about. It could mean engaging in ideas without regard to responsibility and effects (see Robert Scott and Barry Brummett on ethics).

Further research could give us a more solid foundation on which to build such a pedagogy. Currently I cannot say which of Matt's comments reflects where he comes from versus which of his comments reflects another identity marker; the factors are linked. Similarly, I cannot say that Kevin fails to situate his identity and his writing in any place, and I certainly cannot say that Kevin downplays place because he was born elsewhere. But tentative results regarding general cultural characteristics as they manifest themselves for two student writers move us far beyond where many of us were before.

My concern overlaps that of many scholars and teachers invested in feminist theory, critical race theory, or queer theory. We all, in our different ways, call for revisions to meta-narratives regarding how people function and learn. I contend that students who share many established identity categories, whether race or age or sexuality, may differ significantly based on the factor of place, and that far from quaint or trivial, this difference may affect how easily they enter academic cultures and appropriate the descriptor of writer. This difference merits our attention especially as we confront the challenges of an increasingly global economy and society, for as we more regularly discuss how cultural factors affect what counts as knowledge and learning (Fox xiii), we should remember that for some of our nearby students, such consideration is long overdue.

Works Cited
