



# Writing

## Our Communities

Local Learning and  
Public Culture



Edited by Dave Winter and Sarah Robbins

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# Thematic Strands for Studying Community

KCAC Project Teachers and Amy Meadows

We and our students have studied ways in which American communities are formed in various times and places by drawing on a cluster of themes. These themes originally guided the inquiry of teacher participants at summer institutes and in academic-year inquiry teams. Later, we adapted the themes for teaching in a wide range of settings and disciplines. The following list identifies the basic content of each theme, the first two of which focus on community-oriented action and the next three of which emphasize the power of place:

- Reclaiming Displaced Heritages—recovering aspects of history and local culture that could be undervalued or misunderstood by future generations
- Educating for Citizenship—developing learning approaches that prepare community members for active engagement in American democracy
- Cultivating Homelands—shaping the natural environment and drawing on it for support while honoring traditions of rural life
- Building Cities—analyzing urban spaces that represent and promote community values in particular historical periods
- Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples—reconfiguring contemporary suburban landscapes and social practices to balance a region's local heritage with newcomers' cultural contributions

Because we have found these themes to be so productive for student learning, one of the organizational plans for this book (as seen in the table of contents on the inside front cover) highlights their role as organizing tools for teaching. With that in mind, following is an overview of ways we have used each theme.

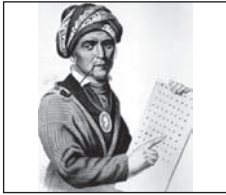
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Drawn from the program Web site (<http://kcac.kennesaw.edu>).

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## Reclaiming Displaced Heritages

Typically, when studying community through this thematic lens, teachers and students identify a particular occasion when members of a community have been disenfranchised in ways that may have suppressed or obscured records of their cultural heritage. Students read literature associated with such groups' communal stories, visit public history sites, study changes in the local landscape, and gather additional records of cultural experience (such as oral histories, photographs, public documents).



Reclaiming Displaced Heritages

In Georgia, for example, our initial application of this theme involved reexamining the Cherokee Removal, including studying the causes leading up to the historical event, its effects on the land and social practices in northwest Georgia, and its

impact on members of the Cherokee Nation, from the 1800s until today. Participants read texts such as Diane Glancy's *Pushing the Bear* and Robert Conley's *Mountain Windsong* alongside primary historical documents from the era of the Removal. They visited sites such as New Echota (the former capital of the Cherokee Nation), and they contributed to the writing of a play about events in Georgia leading up to the Removal.

Given this initial focus for our work with this theme, on our Web site and in this book we have used an image of Sequoyah to designate this body of our work. Sequoyah, who was born to the daughter of a Cherokee chief and a Virginia fur trader in the village of Tuskegee in 1776, developed the Cherokee writing system in 1809 after moving to Georgia to flee the encroachment of white settlers. In 1821 the Cherokee Nation officially adopted the system, which helped lead to the publication of the first Native American newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*.

## Educating for Citizenship

This theme considers how various groups have tried to use education as a way of claiming a place in American culture. At the same time, it invites teachers to educate today's students for informed, proactive citizenship.

For example, while using this theme, teachers in our project group studied the early history of Spelman College as an example of collaboration between blacks and whites to create an empowering educational institution for African Americans in the decades after the Civil War. Team members collected oral histories and archival materials, including turn-of-the-century copies of *The Spelman Messenger*, a bulletin about

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college students and graduates. Along the way, team members considered how students' awareness of educational opportunities often taken for granted today could shape their involvement in citizenship issues in the future.

As a logo to mark this theme, we chose an image of the Georgia State Capitol Building, dedicated on July 4, 1889. The capitol building is the center of the State Capitol Complex in Atlanta.



Educating for Citizenship

### Cultivating Homelands

This theme delves into rural communities, seeking ways to honor their traditions and complexities. Teachers and students research records of rural life, such as landmarks (cemeteries, barns, churches, historic homes), documents (land grant deeds, archival photographs, family Bibles), and social practices such as regional festivals. While preservationist energies drive much of the work around this theme, participants also question why some aspects of their communities' past have received more attention than others, and what familiar narratives of local life need to be expanded or revised—and how.



Cultivating Homelands

Our first application of this theme explored the heritage of farm communities in Georgia, especially in the early twentieth century. Reading Raymond Andrews's *The Last Radio Baby* and former president Jimmy Carter's *An Hour before Daylight*, the group traced similarities and differences in these vivid narratives about rural experiences. Our inquiry into the histories of local places often promoted grassroots collaborations with citizens' groups, sometimes leading to the renovation of neglected sites. These efforts taught us that chronicling parts of a rural community's history can help develop communities of critical thinkers and informed preservationists.

To delineate this theme on our Web site and in this book, we have used a photograph from Jimmy Carter's memoir, *An Hour before Daylight*. A young Carter poses with his mother and sister in rural Plains, Georgia, circa 1933. The son of a farmer who owned land, Carter grew up among tenant sharecroppers, often working alongside them to harvest the cash crops of peanuts and cotton for his family. His book, like research done through this theme by students and teachers, honors the continuing influence of rural heritage on American culture.

## Building Cities

To study community through this thematic lens, teachers and students focus on a particular period when the identity of a city in their region was being constructed to reflect a vision of that community as distinctively American. Learners using this theme typically visit urban buildings and neighborhoods, interview longtime residents, retrace key developments in architecture and urban planning, and identify ways in which political, social, and economic forces converged to affect a city's way of life.

The Georgia team initially explored this theme by reimagining Atlanta as a cultural, corporate center, with emphasis on ways that 1970s–1990s civic leaders tried to move the city from being a regional center to having a national and international presence. Teachers read Frederick Allen's *Atlanta Rising: The Invention of an International City, 1946–1996*, took an architectural walking tour of downtown, visited urban museums, and began to gather family stories about life in the city of Atlanta. Studying Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place* and Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* helped teachers consider how they and their students might contribute to the culture of the city through writing and new kinds of landmark making.

As a logo for this theme, we selected images of several Atlanta landmarks that would resonate outside our own region. Pictured clockwise from the top in the logo are John Portman's Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel, at one time the tallest hotel in the western hemisphere and home to the three-story revolving Sun Dial Restaurant; the former Winecoff Hotel, site of a 1946 fire that killed a record 119 people, spurring hotel fire safety measures nationwide; and the Carnegie Building, completed in 1925 as the Wynne-Claughton Building and hailed then for its landmark exterior design.



Building Cities

## Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples

The Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples theme explores how the rapidly changing landscapes of contemporary suburbia can be reconfigured to achieve a productive balance between the native and the newcomers' cultural contributions. Teachers and students actively interpret changing social spaces, such as restaurants, public buildings, and shopping centers; cultural events, such as fairs, homecomings, and ethnic celebrations; public policies, including planning and zoning or-

dinances; and oral histories that both keep the old way of life and help create the new.

To begin their study of suburbia, the Georgia KCAC team studied Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* and listened to the National Public Radio oral memoirs of Carmen Agra Deedy on *Growing Up Cuban in Decatur, Georgia*. They also became avid readers of their local newspapers, tracking recurring stories about immigrants' experiences, innovations in suburban lifestyle, and issues associated with sprawl (e.g., traffic, endangered natural resources). They took walking tours of Atlanta suburbs. Students interviewed contractors about how subdivisions are designed and built, used digital cameras to record the rapid changes in the suburban landscape, and talked with both longtime residents and newcomers about their views on life in the outskirts of Atlanta.

The logo for this theme records a scene familiar to suburban life all over the United States today. Two soccer players reflect the growing diversity in suburban public schools like Wheeler High in Cobb County, Georgia, where this photo was taken.



Shifting Landscapes,  
Converging Peoples



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# I Introductory Activities

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# 1 Sharing Stories to Build Community

Linda Hadley Stewart

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia

## Overview

Seeking a warm-up activity that reflected the KCAC emphasis on storytelling as a way of understanding and composing history, I asked my students to write about a memorable tree-climbing experience (or related activity, such as building a tree house or creating a backyard “club”). Brannen’s paper is the result of a writing activity I assigned the first day of our English composition class to be read aloud to the entire class at the following meeting. This type of writing activity would, I hoped, reveal and validate the different ways we tell stories, begin to create community through describing a shared experience, and prepare the students for reading Raymond Andrews’s memoir *The Last Radio Baby*, a KCAC Summer Institute selection.

This brief assignment was a trial balloon that yielded some significant results. Brannen’s paper is a paradigm for the many papers that emerged from this assignment. I chose his paper to include because his essay uncannily evoked several KCAC themes. When he speaks of white flight, he touches on our theme of Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples. His description of the removal of the landmark jet evokes the Building Cities thematic content. I realized that

The English composition course is the second in a sequence of required general education courses at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. Once a small, rural community, Kennesaw is now considered a suburb of metro Atlanta. The university is primarily a commuter campus serving nearly 18,000 students. This course, limited to 25 students, focuses on writing and research. Many of the students are from rural and suburban northwest Georgia; a significant number, however, are international students from countries such as Nigeria, Guatemala, Bulgaria, or Brazil. Student ages range widely because many are returning to Kennesaw to complete or begin their college careers as adults.



Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples

the assignment had elicited concepts and ideas that KCAC recognizes and explicitly names. These principles, fused with teaching practices (e.g., valuing storytelling), have galvanized my students' writing and thinking.

Brannen's paper meanders through the suburban streets on Brannen's return home from military duty as he describes the streets both past and present. His paper is laden with historical observations and personal memories. In so many ways, Brannen's writing evokes the work and the value of community-based inquiry. His narrative artfully fuses home and place, memory and history, the personal and the public. His paper begs the question, "What was there before?" His former address, "Six-One-Nine Camelia Circle," becomes present as he describes the rotting remains of the tree his father removed "to make room for his old Volvo."

His writing, like that of many of his classmates who shared their brief memoirs, reveals the twine of personal memory with cultural history, much as Raymond Andrews's memoir reveals the history of rural Georgia in the early 1900s. This initial writing assignment was a wedge into our later exploration of and writing about the communities around us. Through this initial assignment, students began to validate storytelling, recognizing how culture and history are at work in their personal lives.

## Instructional Sequence

For this course-opening activity, students arrive in class ready to read their journal entries to the class. The assignment is given as homework the previous class, and students are aware that they will be reading their writing aloud to the entire class. The writing prompt invites them to tell a story about the first time they climbed a tree or to adapt the topic to a similar outdoor experience. When asked to volunteer, students have shown a willingness to read, which is surprising since this must be a somewhat high-anxiety task so early in the semester.

I ask everyone to have journals out and note details, passages, ways of telling stories, subject matter, or other observations. They are encouraged to listen carefully and write down their observations because they will be posting them in response to a prompt on an electronic discussion board.

At the end of class, after listening to their comments and insights, I summarize particular rhetorical strategies, note different motivations

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for tree climbing, underscore the cultural aspects of their personal stories, and emphasize much of what the students have already shared.

To extend this brief assignment, I have students post online observations about the class discussion. We brainstorm possible research or writing activities that could emerge from the various narratives and then compile a class list of these activities. Most important, we have built a sound foundation for the semester by sharing and validating many ways of telling stories.

## **Student Artifact**

### **Journal Entry—Tree Climbing**

I make the left turn from Green Street onto Pleasant Hill Road after a night of delayed and finally diminished anticipation. I had hoped my first night back home would culminate elsewhere, but the only guest that accompanies me is the slight fragrance of alcohol and cigarette smoke. I follow Pleasant Hill about three quarters of a mile, making a sharp right turn past Sewell Circle Park. A static model of an old Air Force jet once decorated the edge of the park, but the “powers that be” dismantled and relocated it to a different side of town. This is the “old neighborhood.”

When I was younger most of the inhabitants of this area were white. As I aged, they changed and the neighborhood darkened. I witnessed “white flight” before I ever knew there was a term to describe it. Families began moving southward to the country, where newer homes, schools, and less diversity existed. About the same time that whites in the neighborhood began flying south, the jet at Sewell Circle Park took off and landed in another park. The jet was a tribute to Robbins Air Force Base, which supplies 20,000 civilian jobs to central Georgia. My father was one of those employees. Apparently, the new inhabitants of our old neighborhood were unworthy of having the jet in their neighborhood. I passed the park and made a left onto Camelia Circle. I drove past the home of my old friend Charles Ranger.

When we were five, Charlie’s mom heard me call Charlie a few select names during a fight the two of us were having. Charlie and I were no longer allowed to play together. She didn’t know I learned the words from her son. I was disappointed about losing my friend, but the incident only supported my belief that his mom was crazy. She looked like a homely, red-haired Cher. Charlie once told me his mom and dad showered together to save water. It was 1983, Reagan was president; the only thing America cared about conserving was nuclear weaponry. To hell with water!

Four or five houses down from Charlie’s house is Six-One-Nine Camelia Circle. The first address I ever learned. It is my old

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house. We moved in 1985, but my father still owns it. It no longer looks like it did when I lived there. The red brick was replaced with some type of plastic or poly-whatever-you-have-it siding years ago. A large evergreen once flanked the right side. It bombarded the front yard with blue-green meteors. In the hands of my older sisters they became flying projectiles, bullets, or missiles, just a euphemism for one more item to throw at Brannen and make his life miserable.

But if the tree created a source of misery, it also provided a means of escape. The trunk opened up like a stairwell so that a small child, like myself, could easily climb the branches. These trees tend to grow out rather than up, so my fear of heights was never able to take advantage of my fear of sisters. It was easy to find a place to lie for hours, surrounded by the tree's fruit. Carpenter ants tickled the little white hairs on my arms. They were the "good" ants because they never bit. It is difficult to remember the texture of the limbs or the trunk. I mostly remember the berries.

The tree no longer stands by the right side of my old home. My father felled it before we moved. He needed to make room for his old Volvo. The tree blocked a potential parking spot on the side of the house. It became a victim of its own random, stubborn nature. It grew in the wrong place, and would be moved only by force. The only remains are rotting if they haven't already. Gone like childhood, unearthed only by returning children who are curious about their memories.

—Brannen

## Teacher Reflection

Let me offer some background about why I chose this particular assignment. It was the result of a class conversation the previous semester when one of my students mentioned climbing a magnolia tree and her classmates showed great interest in her story. Realizing this was an activity they all shared, I asked them to tell me their tree stories, and I left the class mulling over the various kinds of trees they so clearly described and the different motivations for climbing trees—for sanctuary, for competition, for solace, for companionship, for a better view, and simply because "everyone else was climbing it." The following semester I decided to start with this activity, explaining to my class why I had chosen it: because their predecessors had shown me that it was a shared activity, one that a student called "a national pastime."

My students' tree stories surprise me with their range and unsolicited vivid description. Students describe mango trees and magnolia trees; reveal their competitive and ambitious response to a challenge;

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discover a fear of heights; narrate a formula plot; call on metaphor; remember family relationships; celebrate imagination; and delve into their personal histories. Students repeatedly express surprise at how a similar, shared experience can produce such an array of writing styles and subject matter. And they begin to connect their personal histories with cultural practices, examining their stories in a fuller context within their new classroom community.

Trees are deeply personal, but they are political, environmental, cultural, poetic, literary, and historical as well. Think clear-cutting, the Survivor Tree at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, trees as signposts for Cherokee along the Trail of Tears, to name a few. This brief tree-climbing warm-up assignment is a good springboard for writing and research activities such as reading newspaper articles; connecting to poetry; completing a scientific observation; interviewing a tree farmer or a land developer; or visiting trees that function as icons. This assignment works as an introductory or journal response to any novel or literary work with a tree as a central or minor trope (e.g., *A Separate Peace*, *Beloved*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Or, to encourage us to think as citizens, as a prelude to planting a tree for conservation or memorialization. I've learned much from listening to my students' tree stories, and they provide our classroom community with rich material to begin a semester of writing and research.

### Community ✚ Crossings

*Suggestions on how you might adapt this lesson for a different classroom setting*

- This activity could be used with any shared cultural experience, such as public transportation stories in an urban setting, vacation stories, bicycle stories, etc. Using a common writing prompt reveals the different ways stories are told even as it creates community within the class. This activity could be extended by having students identify similar stories in the media (e.g., cartoons, films, television shows, news) and analyze the various ways of sharing these stories.
- Younger students could illustrate their stories and then tell them to the class. Another option would be for students to create an illustrated storyboard of their narratives, either independently or collaboratively. Such storyboards could include captions.
- Another way to build community early in the course is to have students construct a "life map." Students choose five to seven defining moments or life stories to represent graphically, such as a poster, a computer-generated representation, or other format. Each student presents his or

her life map to the class, explaining the significance of each event. Sharing these life maps helps students recognize how much they have in common with others who might, on the surface, seem very different. The activity also helps to foster a safe and supportive learning environment for classrooms of all levels. For other variations of this lesson, see Deborah Mitchell and Traci Blanchard's "Critical Reading, Imaginative Writing and the Me Montage" in the Extended Lesson Treatments section of Classroom Resources on the KCAC Web site (<http://kcac.kennesaw.edu/>).

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Emphasizing writing and student inquiry, this rich collection offers teachers ready-to-use classroom resources with a sound basis in best practice. Student engagement with community becomes the centerpiece of the book, an engagement that takes place across disciplines through projects involving history, environment, culture, and much more. Editors Dave Winter and Sarah Robbins present teachers and students at all grade levels with lively, classroom-tested lessons that can be easily adapted to different teaching levels and a variety of settings. The book also effectively addresses curricular guidelines specific to local, regional, or state settings, as well as to national standards.

*Writing Our Communities: Local Learning and Public Culture* grew out of Keeping and Creating American Communities, a multiyear curriculum development project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Writing Project. Educators from multiple disciplines and diverse institutional settings drew on their personal learning experiences to research and write about the communities around them and to revitalize curriculum in their classrooms.

The result—this collection of the favorite lessons developed by an inquiry team of teachers and students, for application beyond their individual experiences. Whether you're searching for brief exercises to introduce community studies in the classroom or for extended units, this book is a rich resource for your classroom, helping your students write about their communities while exploring, re-creating, discovering or rediscovering, reclaiming, preserving, and building these communities.



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