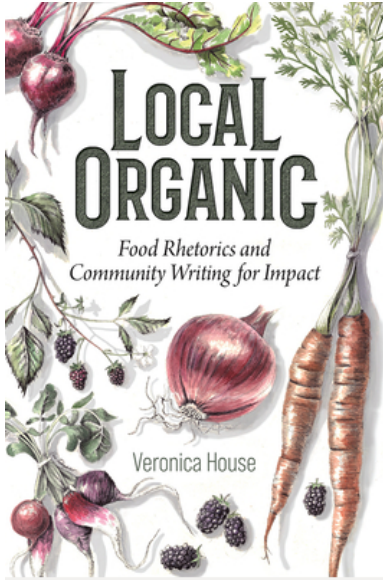


Book Reviews: Environmental Communication



Local Organic: Food Rhetorics and Community Writing for Impact

Veronica House.

Logan, UT and Denver, CO: Utah State University Press, an imprint of University Press of Colorado. 2025.
306 pages.

Index Terms — community writing, food security, local food, rhetoric, sustainability

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Language presents one of the most familiar challenges in sustainability projects. From food to fracking, renewables to resilience, it's incredibly challenging to build consensus and drive change without a shared language. How individuals define terms frames the discussion. This shared language challenge underpins what Veronica House examines in her book, *Local Organic: Food Rhetorics and Community Writing for Impact*. In this book, she explores the role of rhetoric in comprehension and influence within the local food movement in Boulder County, Colorado, based on her time as a community-engaged writing professor.

What does the term “local food” mean to the residents of Boulder County? The answers vary widely. For some, it’s a terminology that invokes a literal distance. For others, it’s the quality of the food and growing conditions — the antithesis of the industrial farming of big agriculture (big ag). Still others look at it through

a lens of indigenous knowledge. These definitions vary based on time and place. Which, then, is correct?

The answer is that it depends. And these vagaries of terminology and meaning can lead to a sense of confusion, and even a sense of betrayal, when definitions don't align. Local food is both a physical thing and a rhetorical idea. Does "local" include the industrial chicken farm that's just a 10-minute drive away, or does it include small producers with more sustainable practices that need to transport their food by truck for six hours or more?

Big ag is, by nature, fostering agricultural illiteracy. Most people give little thought to the origins of their food. Whether it's meat, produce, or packaged goods, we simply know that the shelves are stocked when we arrive at the supermarket. But this appearance of abundance is only possible due to overproduction and waste inherent to the system. We're also confronted with conflicting and confusing terminology: what is free range, and is it superior to cage free, organic, or naturally raised? Even at the farmer's market, it's difficult to parse which certifications and methodologies lead to sustainable food systems.

In most contexts, we currently think of local food as the domain of specialty restaurants and farmer's markets. We tell people to "vote with your fork" to support better agricultural practices. Yet House and her students found that this rhetoric of individual responsibility leans heavily on populations with the financial means to participate in the dialogue when it should be available to all. We can begin to rebuild connections with our food by developing a shared language to understand and align with concepts.

In her courses, House used processes of distributed definition building and ecological community writing. Distributed definition building allowed room for collaboration, adaptation, and accountability within the community. It brought together a variety of disparate voices to build a shared language from which to develop programs and processes that benefitted the whole community. Ecological community writing leans heavily on the Greek origins of the word "ecology" meaning "study of the home." In this case, the home is our local community, and how we use the terminology defined within our distributed definition building to effectively communicate about pressing issues in food. It is a system that relies heavily on collaboration, relationships, and partnerships, and encourages students to engage deeply with the off-campus community.

Of course, my home is not yours. House makes connections to the concept of "terroir" from winemaking: the idea that locality influences the output. The terroir of the Boulder food movement will not have the same considerations of seasons, population, and availability as that of Birmingham or The Bronx.

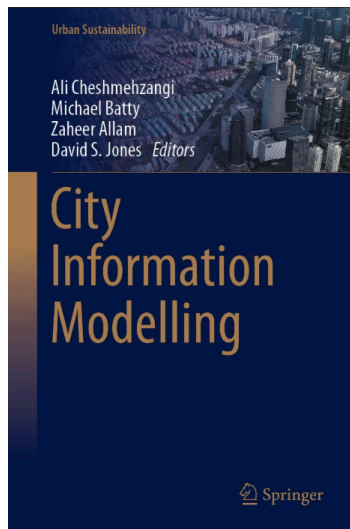
This is a timely book. Food security is one of the greatest challenges of our time. As we saw with the supply chain disruptions in the early days of the 2020 pandemic, local food is crucial to community resilience in times of crisis. But the foundations for these resilient systems need to be built now, before the next crisis occurs.

House also points out a central challenge of the sustainability movement as a whole: fear- or data-based communications are not effective motivators. We can't focus on the poor treatment of animals in industrial meat farming, or the issues with monoculture in our crops. Successful, sustainable change requires a story-

based narrative that frames the need for change in a way that emphasizes opportunity over fear and doom. For example, purchasing locally grown, pesticide-free tomatoes not only supports sustainable agricultural practices of small-scale farming, but also delivers food that is picked at the peak of freshness for better flavor and enjoyability.

The language that we choose to use when referring to our food gives power to the systems that provide it. By creating a shared language, we can educate people about their food, shifting our role from that of passive consumer to active participant in the food systems. It is only by understanding a shared language through distributed definition building and ecological community writing that will lead to improved understanding and community engagement.

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City Information Modelling (Urban Sustainability)

Ali Cheshmehzangi, Michael Batty, Zaheer Allam, and David S. Jones, eds.

Singapore: Springer Nature. 2024. 262 pages.

Index Terms: city information modelling, participatory urban planning, smart city governance, urban sustainability

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