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INTRODUCTION

Ecological Community Writing and the Power of Definitions

More than a decade ago, my undergraduate writing students and I asked what we thought was a simple question in our course on food rhetorics: “What is local food?” Answers to this seemingly straightforward question about how local food is defined in our city of Boulder, Colorado, surprised us. Responses across a variety of community members from farmers to restaurant owners to consumers illustrated widely differing ideas, ethical considerations, and visions for a definition of local food. The competing or conflicting definitions sometimes led to consumer confusion as well as difficulty in creating policy and support for local farming. This revelation about definitional inconsistencies and tensions led to questions that launched years of courses, projects, events, scholarship, and food literacy work I have coordinated with students, faculty, and project partners across Boulder County, Colorado.

Local Organic is a book at once about collaboratively building community-derived definitions for resilient local food systems and about building coalitions across academic disciplines and communities through writing. In it, I explore how higher-education faculty and students can work to ethically partner with local communities, and how Rhetoric and Writing faculty

and students specifically can support this work through community-based writing, courses, research projects, food literacy events, and coalition building—as parts of a methodology for engagement that I call *ecological community writing*. While Rhetoric and Writing Studies has a decades-long tradition of community-engaged scholarship, in *Local Organic* I offer a relational methodology for classroom and community work to drive curricular design and community-wide writing about social and environmental issues.

Ecological writing studies (M. Cooper, “The Ecology of Writing”; Weisser and Dobrin; Edbauer; Gries, *Still Life*) analyzes the complex, dynamic systems within which writing functions and the circulation and remix of texts within those systems. An *ecological community writing* methodology adds to this previous work by offering a method for how to not only study an ecology but use writing to build connections that strengthen or generate a coalitional ecology of work. The “writing,” capaciously defined as not only alphabetic but multimodal and embodied, connects writing programs, courses, and scholarly work to community conversations and social issues. This is done through multiple, distributed writing projects co-developed with community members, writing students, and faculty members across disciplines, with an eye toward social impact and emotional connection. This method, which I call *distributed definition building*, moves people toward engagement in local issues as they generate writing that helps to build understanding and awareness on personal and community-wide levels. Throughout the book, I study and theorize the ecology of work and beliefs around local food in Boulder County from different angles (language, affect, people and organizations, and other-than-humans) to show how each project, course, and partnership makes connections that help to build that ecology.

The term “local food” is not alone in generating confusion. Many contested terms and issues share this definitional problem. For this reason, Rhetoric and Writing teachers and scholars (from here on out mostly referred to as “practitioners” for brevity’s sake and to acknowledge our multiple and intertwined roles as community members, activists, organizers, and any of the many ways we may define ourselves) are well suited to intervene in community discourses around definitional conversations and conflicts. While this book deliberately does not offer a singular answer for what “local food” is or a way to easily create uniform definitions about contested terms, *ecological community writing* that uses *distributed definition*

building helps community members create personally and culturally meaningful definitions for contested or complicated terms based on local needs and considerations.

Who Holds the Power in Definition Building?

In the chapters that follow, I describe more than a decade of work with my undergraduate writing students and project partners in Boulder County to build communication, food literacy projects, and events about local food and farming. To avoid often confusing top-down definitions of “local food” created only by those in power, we moved away from a more traditional rhetorical concept of a “definition argument,” in which the objective is to argue for a single and “best” definition for a term. Instead, I developed *distributed definition building* as a method to foster community literacies around contested terms and social issues. In our case, we encouraged community members to reflect critically on what the term “local food” means to them and to move into action for just, culturally relevant, and accessible local food. In this way, this method of *distributed definition building* offers a richness and complexity of experience and connection, an intervention that is deeply rhetorical and that can be used to study the power of language to create reality in the context of power dynamics.¹

For our purposes in studying what “local food” means to people and organizations across Boulder County, the hundreds of definitions my students and I gathered suggested that local food offers a deep experience of community that cannot be matched by an industrial (i.e., large-scale, resource-intensive) food experience. It can offer an antidote to structures of injustice built into the industrial food system, which, as this book will explain, result in vast amounts of food waste, food-related disease, labor exploitation and modern-day slavery, and disconnection from one another, the earth, and animals. *Distributed definition building* draws out nuances and variants that can be lost in an imposed, top-down definition.

As I will discuss in chapter 1, the industrial food system’s attempts to claim definitional control over language are connected to exploitation on

¹ Rhetoric and Writing Studies offers studies of naming (e.g., Vanguri) and of expansion of definitions of, for example, what non-western traditions must be included in the field’s understanding of rhetoric (e.g., Ruiz; Hass; García and Baca). I am not aware of any study, however, that uses a distributed method of definition building.

many fronts. Indeed, the industrial food system is grounded in the desire to “claim” wealth, land, resources, and power (as in the early “land claims” required of homesteaders and claims to the bodies and labor of African people who were enslaved to farm). It is grounded in hoarding of resources and in uniformity. It is grounded in monoculture and confined animal production that are also rooted in settler colonial claiming of land and living creatures as property to be used for profit, a concept of ownership that is antithetical and unimaginable to many Native peoples who live with the land and other-than-humans² in kinship (Salmón, “Kincentric”). It is grounded in the forced removal and genocide of Native peoples and their food sources and the enslavement of African peoples, the introduction of cheap and unhealthy commodity foods, and the unaffordability and inaccessibility of healthy foods for certain populations and neighborhoods. And as I will discuss, industrial agriculture and industrial food are grounded in multinational food and seed companies’ battles over the language and definitions used to describe food (i.e., “cage free”; “natural”; “sustainable”; etc.).

Ecological community writing utilizes *distributed definition building*, through which individuals develop food literacy about what practices, labels, and definitions mean; about historical, social, and cultural issues connected to food; and about the systems they support when they choose certain foods over others. They generate their own definitions about these complex issues in ways that resonate most with them. Rather than try to control a term’s definition and define it for an entire community ourselves or accept top-down definitions offered by those in positions of power, through *distributed definition building* community writing practitioners can redistribute power to community members themselves. I see my role, as a scholar-teacher-organizer interested in Writing and Rhetoric, as providing spaces for alternate definitions rooted in community desires and local knowledges.

Ecological community writing and *distributed definition building* move beyond a traditional community engagement partnership method in which an instructor develops a relationship with a community partner, determines ways to engage a class, and develops assignments that build a project or a

2 There are many terms used to explain what Indigenous cultures understand as the personhood of all beings, from trees to birds to stones. I have seen several terms from post-human, object-oriented ontology, anthropological, and new-materialist theories such as nonhuman (e.g., Gries, *Still Life*; Bennett; Sackey), more-than-human (e.g., Abram), and other-than-human (e.g., Blanco-Wells; Lien and Pálsson). In Indigenous scholarship I’ve seen more-than-human and other-than-human (e.g., Kimmerer, *Braiding* and “Serviceberry”).

product for that partner in the span of a semester. They also expand on important established community writing theories of valuing knowledges of a community partner and the people they support (Green; Rousculp; Shah). *Ecological community writing* invites Rhetoric and Writing practitioners to intervene in community issues by building interdisciplinary, intercommunity, multise semester or multiyear coalitions to help communities write their own definitions of complex and contested social issue terms. It is a methodology based on an ecological, saturation approach that extends beyond a single moment, a single product, a single instructor, or a single discipline.

Local Organic moves between conversations in many disciplines including community-based writing and community literacies, food studies, Indigenous studies, ecological and new materialist rhetorics, ecopsychology, community engagement/service-learning, and systems thinking, offering an investigation into writing's function as an ecology-building tool within a particular place. In this sense, as many Rhetoric and Writing Studies scholars argue, writing is a part of an ecology. But it is more than that. Writing is also ecological. It is the distributed, networked, circulated, and embodied connection and co-creation between things in that ecology (Dobrin, *Ecology*; Edbauer; Ridolfo and DeVoss; Seas). And, I would add, *our work is ecological*, and viewing it as such expands community writing's potential. Based on years of teaching and project-building with students, farmers, government officials, activists, and other community members, *Local Organic* theorizes how our work to encourage distributed writing becomes an ecological thread connecting people, things, and ideas. Our intervention can be to help build the ecology itself through writing projects and events. That is *ecological community writing*.

When I use "we" and "our," I specifically write for Rhetoric and Writing Studies teachers, scholars, and graduate students who teach or research in communities, though I hope that if you are in another discipline, are staff working with community engagement, or are community organizers and activists, you will be able to adapt the ideas I offer in ways that best work for your areas of expertise and specific locales. I hope too that if you are a colleague in Rhetoric and Writing Studies who has never worked with community project partners in courses or scholarship, you will find inspiration in these pages, whether to try out a single community-engaged assignment or unit or to imagine a full course, course sequence, or research project. Parts of the methodology I offer can be used in theme-based courses and

undergraduate or graduate research courses without a community-based component or in community organizing that is not associated with a university course.

A Critically Framed, Abundant Approach to *Distributed Definition Building*

Boulder County's stories of resilience and struggle are in many ways representative of larger national conversations about consumer confusion over food labeling and production practices, and the struggles of farmers to stay in business, as well as about food access, justice, and sovereignty initiatives that ask community members to acknowledge the violent history that led to current agricultural practices and to move into action accordingly; that acknowledge the connections between climate and environmental justice and food security; that develop and are led by members of communities affected by racism, ableism, and anti-Indigenous/Native practices within the industrial food system. Because community food security and resilience are some of the most important issues of our time—issues that tie to topics such as climate change, racism, poverty, disease, colonization, cultural sovereignty, gentrification, hunger, and language—community writing practitioners are well positioned to help launch initiatives in partnership with local communities and with faculty, staff, and graduate students across disciplines to address community-centered food literacies.

These topics can be overwhelming and depressing, causing people to turn away from engagement or to be consumed with anxiety. While we must acknowledge the issues named so far and the systemic nature of food-related problems, focusing attention on an abundant, relational, regenerative local food system can deepen a person's sense of agency necessary for these difficult conversations. *Distributed definition building* allows people from different ages, backgrounds, and positionalities to collectively “write” their community's food identity through activities and events at schools, parks, libraries, museums, and other public spaces.

Distributed definition building should be framed critically, aligned with an antiracist and decolonial approach to food justice. Through a critical, justice-oriented lens, *distributed definition building* urges an alternative to industrial food rhetorics that are premised on efficiency, exploitation, uniformity, and extraction. *Distributed definition building* embraces cultural

sovereignty and foodways that have been condemned or marginalized, as well as Indigenous knowledges based in relations and kinship. It can tap into the deep yearning that so many humans feel for connection to the earth and other beings; for community; and for transparent, ethical food choices that keep us, our families, our cultures, and our communities healthy.

In projects with partners and students, I encourage an ethic in *ecological community writing* that is collaborative, imaginative, and celebratory in practice and action. With antiracist and decolonial framing, the abundance that *distributed definition building* offers does not mean promoting a culture of accumulation and hoarding of wealth and resources. It does not mean accepting an uncritical culture of toxic positivity or rejection of grief and anger about serious issues. Rather, as I will develop in later chapters, a critical approach to abundance offers an embrace of the complexity of emotions, a wholeness, a capaciousness, that allows for fear and anger about our food system to be acknowledged alongside joy, celebration, cultural reclamation, and gratitude as we move in action.³ *Distributed definition building* also makes use of the abundance of skills and knowledges inside and outside of academia while moving us toward justice, accountability, and transformation. When *distributed definition building* is embraced through a critical lens, it urges a movement away from systems of injustice bound to industrial food production and toward reconnection with land, with animals, and with community. I have found that when my partners, students, and I encourage a critical and joyful relational approach to *distributed definition building* in community work around local food, we have been more successful in helping people to at once become aware of and articulate their desire for connection and relationship and to feel agency to lean into that desire.

Local Organic as an Ecological Text

Distributed definition building in the work of *ecological community writing* makes connections to and between the vast knowledges, expertise, and skills available to us. *Local Organic* responds to a vital need in higher education writ large to break down disciplinary silos and hierarchical structures based on rank and competition, to embrace and share knowledges

3 For a beautiful description of the embrace of wholeness toward collective healing and liberation, see adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism*. brown argues that the erotic, the pleasurable, the political, and collective movement building are intertwined.

inside and outside of academia, and to encourage community-based learning and action. As a demonstration of abundant community-based knowledges, throughout the book you will find the insights of several farmers and local food activists and advocates in Boulder County from interviews I conducted with them between May 2020 and October 2021. These semistructured interviews, which lasted 60–120 minutes each and were conducted in person or over Zoom, help to map out an ecology of work happening locally to enact resilience and community food security. I had some degree of relationship with all of these people, most of whom I worked with for years, and who had been paid guest discussion leaders with my classes and partners on a variety of projects. I came to each interview with prepared topics I hoped to cover, but the conversations and questions evolved organically based on the direction the interviewee took in their responses. I recorded and transcribed each interview and shared it with the interviewee to edit or expand for use in this book. I cite them as local experts accordingly.

The incorporation of their perspectives embodies my understanding that I am only one small part of an expansive and dynamic ecology of people doing extraordinary work. It is our collaboration, relationships, and partnerships, more than any singular work, that matter. The incorporation of local experts' perspectives embodies the book's premise of knowledge co-creation and sharing, meaning making, and food literacy: that abundant knowledges, skills, and expertise are housed throughout our communities, not only in books, peer-reviewed articles, and universities. Some of my partners did not know one another or of each other's work until I began to see my role as a connector, *my work as ecological*, and that when we could collaboratively construct and share work and ideas across the local food ecology, our work would be more impactful. *Distributed definition building* allows for knowledge co-construction, connection, and celebration. *Ecological community writing* is justice based and active. It includes threads that lead back historically; it can cut certain threads of power and harm and generate new ones of accountability and repair; it can illuminate and account for gaps in who has and has not been included in the ecology. I imagine it as an always evolving, changing, dynamic system as we make connections between language, affect, things, and people, many of whom have been excluded from limited scholarly conceptions of knowledge sources.

In addition to the peer-reviewed scholarship, government and nonprofit documents, journalistic sources, and community expert interviews I draw

from throughout the book, I also share information and analyses that I developed in situ to inform my engagement work. This set of data does not come from a single, cohesive study but rather grew in different ways at different times and for different purposes and audiences. For example, I coded by thematic area and analyze hundreds of interviews, community discourse analyses, and canvassing responses that my students gathered over several semesters, deepening my understanding of discourses about local food and developing methods for intervention as I went. This book incorporates this research and is based on years of experiential meaning-making with students and community members through undergraduate writing research, action-based research, and public projects. In the chapters that follow, I share artifacts, writing projects, and stories from my partnership work to illustrate *ecological community writing* and *distributed definition building* in action.

The *ecological community writing* methodology involves figuring out current conditions and who/what are involved. Readers wanting to use this methodology can create scaffolded course assignments (that may span semesters or years), mentor students as they conduct public research, and facilitate connections across an ecology of actors who may or may not yet know one another. In my own case of food studies, this occurred through a series of projects that are all parts of the *ecological community writing* methodology: research about the issue at a national level, followed by my students' interviews with restaurateurs, discourse analyses of local media, canvassing at the farmers market, connections to faculty and staff across campus to create coalitions, interviews with farmers and stakeholders, mapping of organizations and people in the county, and creation of events as spaces for *distributed definition building*.

Through the lens of my work over more than a decade with farmers, activists, and other local food leaders in Boulder County to understand what "local food" means and how to activate community engagement around that question, I look into types of ethical practice that depend upon reciprocal collaboration. Drawing on foundational theorists in community engagement, Rhetoric and Writing Studies, and food studies, as well as on the insights of community members, writing students, government organizations, and activists, my relational methodology centers community voices in a process of distributed writing, affirming that knowledge construction can be experiential, participatory, and asset based. This concept of

distribution shapes my work developing writing opportunities and events across communities to incorporate knowledges from inside and outside of academia and across fields of study.

This ecological approach that incorporates many different genres of sources also expands narrow academic conceptions of what counts as expertise. It moves beyond the siloed, hierarchical, and exclusionary traditions of knowledge production and valuation so prevalent in colleges and universities. The book's structure is aligned with this philosophy of breaking down barriers through *distributed definition building* as I weave multiple disciplinary conversations, student and classroom work, community work, and my own reflections on the work into every chapter. Through an ecology of voices and ideas that I am helping to connect, *Local Organic* embraces the wisdom and intelligences that surround us. *Ecological community writing* offers Rhetoric and Writing practitioners working not only in food literacies but with a wide variety of emotionally and rhetorically complex social and environmental issues a methodology to guide engagement and literate action in our classrooms and communities by offering ways to publicly investigate and generate ideas and then help them to circulate.

How I Came to This Work

For thirteen years, I served first as associate faculty director for service-learning and outreach and then as faculty coordinator of community-engaged writing in the writing program at the University of Colorado Boulder until I left the university in 2021 for a position at University of Denver. As founder of CU's Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement (WISE) in 2008, I developed the first community-engaged writing courses for first-year students at the university and helped coordinate the writing program's transformation into one of the first writing programs in the United States to integrate community-engaged pedagogies throughout its lower and upper-division curriculum.

During that time, I offered professional development and pedagogical consultation to faculty and graduate students teaching first-year composition, topics in writing, science writing, business writing, and technical communication. Participation was optional, as not all courses are conducive to community-engaged work, and not all faculty or graduate students want to teach community-engaged courses. Facilitating faculty retreats, workshops, and individual conversations for those who were interested,

every year I worked with about thirty writing faculty and graduate students to design WISE courses that enrolled over 1,200 students who in turn contributed over 15,000 hours of community-based writing work.

Soon my colleagues also led workshops on community-engaged writing, presented that work at conferences, and developed exciting community-engaged courses that influenced my own. We relied on, shared with, and celebrated one another. Liaising with several dozen community partners, I facilitated community-based writing workshops and collaborative discussions with them and our writing faculty over lunches and coffees as we determined how to engage in community projects and conversations through curricular intervention (House, “Community”). My colleagues and I wanted to help our students understand how people work on and discuss public issues within our communities and how Rhetoric and Writing impact and intersect with that work.

In my own writing courses, students balance theory and research with analysis of public discourses about food, analyze correlations between rhetorical concepts and community experiences, and learn to understand the complexity of arguments and the affordances of different genres for a range of academic and public audiences. My students, project partners, and I learn together, delving into complex, rhetorically informed conversations through inquiry and analysis and developing creative ways for people to become involved through writing. Community project partners make suggestions for readings and assignments to include in my syllabus and visit my classes as paid guest discussion leaders, students visit their farms and organizations, and my students and I have presented our work to government agencies, nonprofit boards, and other food-focused classes across campus.

Several years ago, inspired by ecological writing studies and systems thinking around “wicked” problems, I moved beyond the design of my own courses and my work with writing faculty on their individual courses, to help develop local food studies across the writing curriculum and across the university. Through a generous \$24,000 grant from CU’s Office of Outreach and Engagement and collaboration with faculty and graduate students in Communication and Environmental Studies, I launched the Dig In! project to facilitate interdisciplinary and community-based work. In collaboration with our community partners, we created undergraduate courses and graduate research projects around local food literacies, food systems, and food justice. I hope that this programmatic and interdisciplinary work that I discuss in detail in this book will inspire others interested in building

faculty/staff/student cohorts or interdisciplinary and multicommunity coalitions through *ecological community writing*.

Writing programs, faculty, students, and staff, of course, function not only within institutions of higher education but within the town, county, state, and region they inhabit. Distinctions between town/gown and community/university are often arbitrary and can reify false hierarchies of knowledge production. Recognizing, respecting, documenting, citing, and connecting nonacademic knowledges are critical to ethical community-engaged writing work and are central to *ecological community writing*. Writing curricula and community writing projects will better serve students and communities if they organically evolve with that local, abundant ecology in mind.

Community Writing as Evolving, Relational Work

While the term “community writing” was sometimes used in scholarship and practice before I and my colleagues Alexander Fobes, Gary Hink, Catherine Kunce, Christine Macdonald, and Seth Myers launched the biennial Conference on Community Writing⁴ in Boulder, in 2015, the term is now more commonly used in scholarship, course titles, and job ads. It is not always clear, however, what “community writing” means (House et al.). Variations on and elements of the concept gained traction in the mid-1990s as “composition’s extracurriculum” (Gere), “community literacy” (Peck et al.), “literacy across communities” (Moss, *Literacy across Communities*), and later in that decade as service-learning, community service writing, and community engagement (e.g., Adler-Kassner; Bacon; Cushman, “Rhetorician”; Deans, “English Studies” and *Writing Partnerships*). Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the scholarship and practice have developed significantly with key concepts such as “writing beyond the curriculum” (Parks and Goldblatt); writing about, with, and for communities (Deans, “English Studies” and *Writing Partnerships*); literacy, archival research, and historical work (e.g., Epps-Robertson; Royster, *Traces of a Stream*; Carter; Pauszek);

4 I want to thank Seth Myers, Alexander Fobes, Catherine Kunce, Christine Macdonald, and Gary Hink for their tremendous work in helping me to imagine and host the Conference on Community Writing in 2015 and 2017. I also want to clarify that while not in wide circulation, the term “community writing” had been used by scholars before we launched our conference. The difference as I understand it is that the conference’s term “community writing” serves as a broader and continuously evolving term that pulls together various strands of the field (see House et al.).

intercultural inquiry (Flower); community publishing and writing by and as the community (e.g., Kinloch; Mathieu; Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp; Monberg); ethnographic research (e.g., Cushman, *Cherokee*; R. Jackson and DeLaune; Moss, *Community Text*; Roossien and Riley Mukavetz); community engagement in writing program administration (e.g., House, “Community” and “Keep Writing”; Rose and Weiser); community literacies (e.g., Baker-Bell; Feigenbaum, *Collaborative*; Flower; Goldblatt; Grabill, *Writing*; Long; Parks; Pritchard; E. Richardson, “She Ugly”); public rhetorics (e.g., Flower; Gries, *Still Life*; Long; Ryder; Rice); the public turn (Farmer; Mathieu); the political turn and Writing Democracy (Carter and Mutnick); decolonial and antiracist pedagogy and research involving communities inside and outside of academic spaces (e.g., Alvarez, *Brokering* and “Taco Literacies”; Baker-Bell; Cushman, *Cherokee*; R. Jackson and DeLaune; L. King et al.; Kynard, “All I Need,” “Oh No,” “Teaching,” and *Vernacular*; Maraj; A. Martinez; Ore, *Lynching*; E. Richardson, “She Ugly” and “Coming From the Heart”; Ruiz); and the development of related journals such as *Reflections* (2000), *Community Literacy Journal* (2006), *Literacy in Composition Studies* (2013), *Spark* (2017), *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* (2017), *constellations* (2018), *Latinx Writing and Rhetoric Studies* (2020), and *Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture* (2021). I understand “community writing” to embrace and continually evolve with these diverse areas (House et al.).

It is not that “community writing” is so broad a concept that it means everything and nothing all at once. Rather, I believe that sometimes the naming of subfields and fields of study can be designed either to reenforce an us/them binary that is exclusionary or to claim intellectual territory and “own it.” Academia, Rhetoric and Writing Studies included, is premised on the claiming of ideas, on branding that idea in order to get ahead professionally. The academic drive to claim knowledge and to invent “new” ideas can sometimes make for a toxic culture of competition and scarcity. Historically and continually, it also has ignored ideas and scholarship from BIPOC scholars. I’d rather be part of a collaborative group of people who work to build one another up rather than tear one another down; to share, enhance, and challenge one another’s ideas with generosity; and to acknowledge, celebrate, and be accountable to the intellectual and cultural lineages that are meaningful to us.

This of course doesn’t mean that scholars should stop writing about theoretical ideas, and it doesn’t mean that everyone should teach community

writing courses or engage in public scholarship. But it does mean that we value and prioritize community-based scholarship and writing as an essential component of disciplinary work. Specifically, I'm referring to scholarship about community-engaged work and our own public writing products that are frequently misunderstood as less intellectual and rigorous than pure theory or as service rather than scholarship (House, "Re-Framing"); I am also referring to collaboratively written work (often with students or community project partners) that is sometimes counted in promotion and tenure cases as less significant than single-authored work—reinforcing ideologies of individualism and isolationism—when community-engaged work's cornerstone is reciprocity and collaboration. As in agricultural polycultures, where different plants and animals have different but essential roles and work together for the health of the whole, I strive to participate in a knowledge-sharing and knowledge-generating polyculture (S. Wade) based on antiracism, access, humility, mutual mentorship, and generosity to build success for the whole ecology.⁵

Many of the foundational texts in community writing foreground ethical considerations of the university's or college's engagement with the broader community and the need for reciprocal partnerships in which faculty, community members, and students each gain from and give to the relationship. Paula Mathieu was one of the earlier engagement scholars in Rhetoric and Writing Studies to express important concerns about the ethics of service-learning, which, she noted, seemed to be trending toward "long-term, top-down, institutionalized service-learning programs" that can "burn" community partners, who "don't live or think in terms of semesters or quarters or final exams or spring break" (96, 99). adrienne maree brown reminds organizers, in a play on Stephen Covey's concept, to "move at the speed of trust" (*Emergent* 42). In this vein, Eli Goldblatt's view of writing program administrative work is premised on relationships coming first: "[W]hat if we start from the activist's ground in this instance, learning before we act, developing relationships and commitments before we organize classes and set up research projects?" (130). Respect and relationships are a foundation of community-engaged work (e.g., Arellano et al.; Blackburn and Cushman; Rousculp; Goldblatt; Hsu; M. Powell; Shah). Relationship-focused projects require faculty and students to decenter

5 The Coalition for Community Writing offers a "Promotion and Tenure Resources."

themselves and to understand that the reciprocity, rather than any grade or scholarly outcome, is primary.

Carefully built and maintained relationships require significant time beyond the time spent on classroom-based course planning and, as Mathieu says, cannot necessarily be bound by semesters and academic calendars. Jo Hsu has encouraged critical questions about this issue:

Academic Time™ refuses to account for human bodyminds and community relations—and . . . discourses of scarcity and precarity are used to enforce exclusionary timelines. One of the major challenges of working in cultural rhetorics is trying to hold our relationships in balance: How do I prioritize the relationships and the actions I find meaningful while also keeping my job (which, practically, enables me to make those relationships and take those actions)? (in Arellano et al.)

Pressures on faculty and graduate students to publish quickly and often are at odds with relationship-focused timelines. All too often institutional mission statements that affirm commitment to community do not align with realities of support or with institutional policies around review, tenure, promotion, and hiring priorities for community-engaged graduate students and faculty. While individual faculty and graduate students may be committed to the intensive work and time involved in community-engaged teaching, public writing, and scholarship, people in the position to help make change and offer support can work toward structural programmatic and institutional change. The answer should not be to warn graduate students and junior faculty to wait to do community-engaged work until postgraduate school or post-tenure, as is too often the case. Rather, it is essential to change the systems and mindsets that make such meaningful and important work so difficult (Taczak, House, and Carter-Tod).

Practitioners have responded to important logistical and professional concerns in the form of methods and practices to work toward reciprocity and collaboration so that the community project partners are not unnecessarily burdened and instead gain benefit, while well-designed community-engaged projects can enhance our students' learning and enrich our own professional lives.⁶ Scholarship from the last decade takes up the challenges

6 The Coalition for Community Writing, which I founded with a national cohort of scholars in 2018 and for which I serve as executive director, is an organization committed to systemic changes in institutions, programs, and policies, and offers conferences, workshops,

set forth by community writing's earlier scholarship to articulate the ethical and logistical as well as antiracist, anti-ableist, anticolonial necessities for reciprocal community-based work and writing *as* community (Baker-Bell; Hubrig; Cedillo; Hsu; Monberg) that is asset-based rather than deficit-based (e.g., Anderson; Bernardo and Monberg; Del Hierro et al.; Opel and Sackey; Parks; Roossien and Riley Mukavetz; Shah). As Keisha Green explains that as an antiracist approach, "asset-based theory means focusing on what already exists, what is already happening in the context, builds on what already exists, acknowledges what is present" (155). Elaine Richardson's work with Black girls' and Black women's literacies (e.g., "She Ugly"), Beverly Moss's ethnographic research on churches and church sermons (*Community Text*), and Ada Hubrig and Christina Cedillo's work on disability justice (e.g., "Access as Community") offer examples of scholars embedded in their communities doing research with and as members of the community themselves.

It can pose an ethical problem when a practitioner who is not yet known or trusted by a community tries to enter with a project in mind. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyag emphasizes that an essential role of community-based scholars who work as members of their home communities is to restrict access to that community from scholars who may exploit it for personal gain. These "boundary spanners, . . . individuals who occupy both academic spaces and marginalized community spaces and who are called on to act as mediators between the two," Itchuaqiyag explains, can help ensure that research and project ideas "related to Indigenous land and peoples must come from these communities themselves (97, 98). As scholars, we need to respect community sovereignty and be humble enough to take the time to build local relationships and listen to local needs and wants and pivot our existing research and restructure new research questions to help fulfill those needs" (97, 98). Respect and humility are essential in forming relationships. A mantra from disability justice that has been adopted by many marginalized groups is "Nothing About Us Without Us" (Hubrig). Careful work and humility require our understanding of when to decenter ourselves, when engagement is not wanted, or when to commit to the public writing that is needed even if it will have little to no professional "value" in the academy (L. Smith).

resources on its website, and mentorship for making individual and infrastructural arguments for community-engaged teaching and scholarship.

Relational work requires deep, contemplative personal work as we interrogate our own and our ancestors' relationships to systems of oppression and legacies of violence (House and Briggs). This personal work and accountability become part of the ways in which we relate to and define our ecology, whether that be a family, neighborhood, region, department, or discipline. It can help us understand how we can (or should not) interact with various parts of our communities or, especially, with communities of which we are not members. For this reason, I share a relevant part of my ancestral connections and ideological legacies in "On Lineage and Purpose" and other places throughout the book. When working toward a just local food system and a just, locally focused curriculum, relationships—past, present, and future—and the lineages (be they familial, cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, or connected to foodways) they foreground or suppress are essential to consider in our course, research, and partnership design.

When community-engaged Rhetoric and Writing Studies practitioners discuss relationships and reciprocity, the literature has typically referred to a human triad of community partners, faculty, and students. Many Indigenous activists and scholars across disciplines remind us, however, that knowledge emerges from the land on which it is created and from the plants and animals who share that land with us (e.g., Kimmerer, *Braiding* and "Serviceberry"; LaDuke, *All Our Relations*; Roossien and Riley Mukavetz; Ríos; Simpson). The local food work happening in Boulder County is deeply interwoven with the history of the land and conflicting ideas of ownership and kinship. Andrea Riley Mukavetz writes about the primacy and complexity of relationships, including with land, in her ethnographic coauthored book: "the kind of relationships one has with family, with community, across generations with trauma and recovery, with ancestral land, with writing and research, and so on" (Roossien and Riley Mukavetz 11). In a time where food insecurity, dispossession, culture loss, and separation from our other-than-human collaborators appear to be perennial and life threatening, ecologies of local food, and definition building about local food in those ecologies, must include history, ancestors, land, plants, animals, water, and others, opening ourselves to their rhetorical agency and knowledge (House and Zepelin). These Indigenous concepts have profoundly guided my work to reconceive the traditional community writing partnership model into an *ecological community writing* methodology that includes other-than-human partners, as I discuss in the final chapter of this book.

Local Organic offers a methodology that decenters students, faculty, and universities and colleges themselves, to function as parts of a vast ecology of relationships. The concept of a university or college as part of a place or network or web is not novel. When Goldblatt asks, “Is there something about the demography, geography, or social psychology of a region that should affect the instruction and investigation pursued inside a given campus?” (11), the answer of any community-engaged scholar is, surely, “yes.” Like Goldblatt, Stephen Parks gets at the concept of a writing program as part of a dynamic web: “[T]he possibility had to be created for participants to come to see the ways in which their personal viewpoints were simultaneously part of a web of existing or emerging progressive community-based institutions” (33). My approach grows from this previous scholarship to propose an expansive way to conceive of our place and work in an ecology.

Why an Ecological Approach to Community Writing Is Useful

If building reciprocity and care in relationships is key, then listening to communities across different perspectives, needs, and cultural paradigms proves critical as well, in terms of developing those relationships and ensuring broad consideration for who is at the table in community discussions about definition building. Jeff Grabill encourages a “listening stance” (*Writing* 124), which provides people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives “the rhetorical ability to participate effectively and the structured requirement to listen to what others say” (124). Romeo García reminds us that “community listening encourages listening for humanity in stories and memories in between cultures, times, and spaces” (7). Like many scholars have argued, Paul Feigenbaum (*Collaborative Imagination*) reminds, “[i]t is especially important that people silenced by traditional institutional structures participate robustly in the inventive processes” (66). Rachael W. Shah’s *Rewriting Partnerships* argues for the inclusion of perspectives on the benefits and outcomes of community-engaged work, not only of nonprofit staff but of community residents themselves, in our scholarship. Shah maintains that inclusion of these “scholars off the printed page” (13) is essential in any ethical assessment of the efficacy of partnerships and products of those partnerships. We have to make sure that their inclusion is what they want, that it serves them well, and that

it is not exploitative. Itchuaqiyag writes, “[Accountability] means caring more about the needs and safety of my community more than my own professional needs” (99). It’s not just a matter of getting people to the table—it is the collaborative invention once they are there that leads to action. Reciprocity means that we are accountable to one another.

Distributed definition building is a method for how to enact these theories in on-the-ground community writing that encourages communities to become involved in definition building around critical terms, definitions that can impact the writers’ lives and the lives of others in their community based on who has the power to control those terms. Beyond those in positions of organizational power, this method also challenges us to consider who in the community is showing up and asking to be heard. And then it is also a matter of how we listen. In their theorization of community listening, Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg explain, “[C]ommunity listening is about being immersed in the experience of understanding and non-understanding, trying and trying again with empathy. The listener is in a position of generous openness. From this stance, it becomes possible to pay ongoing, unflinching attention where it is needed most” (3). In that spirit of unflinching attention, we can also listen for the gaps. Given that there are inevitably groups missing from community conversations, how might rhetoricians or writing faculty and students develop possibilities “to hold all accountable and to carry on in the name of justice” (García 12)?

The community that I am both studying and a part of—the people involved in building the local food movement in Boulder County—is one I have helped to organize around ideas, and of course so many in this community have helped to organize my work around their ideas as well. As adrienne maree brown writes, “[s]ome of us are trying to imagine where we’re going as we fly. That is radical imagination” (*Emergent* 21). Because the community actors and conversations are always in flux, and because my own understanding continuously grows, my work is always evolving, focused on developing food literacy through community-based courses and projects involving students, faculty, community leaders, and other members of the public in order to inquire into the definitional nature of “local food,” to collaboratively problem solve, and to build together something meaningful and more focused toward access and justice.

While I offer a usable method and examples in this book, part of the relational methodology of *ecological community writing* is in recognizing

its iterative and locally specific nature. For this reason, I've deliberately written this book to blur lines between theory and practice. When I offer my work, I discuss how the ideas evolve continually, how students' projects help shape the ideas, how shifting partners shape the ideas, and how place itself shapes the ideas. I've woven theory, pedagogy, narrative, and community-based work through every chapter with a belief that they are so intertwined that I cannot separate them. I hope that you will be able to adapt and continue to develop the methodology and method based on your own community's conversations and priorities in ways I'd never have thought of. We're imagining as we fly.

In a Zoom interview for this book that I had with a former writing student, Madeline Nall, who went on to work as communications manager for five years at a farm they first visited during our class trip many years ago, they explain the importance of *ecological community writing* in our class in contrast to what can often happen when students do not engage in community conversations: "I think universities often feel alienated from the communities in which they exist because there are so many transplants, like myself, who don't have existing ties and spend most of their college careers trying to integrate with the college culture rather than invest in the community." They continue, "[O]ften when these students graduate, they take their degrees and move elsewhere, after having likely participated in the gentrification of the city that made that degree possible." When colleges and universities "incorporate and center community voices and connections, like we did in your class," Madeline says, "then students would feel more invested in supporting existing community work or contributing new perspectives to further that work."

I ask Madeline what kind of a shift this ecological approach to engagement may cause in students' feelings of agency and connection or in their research trajectory. They do not hesitate in their answer: "I think this would help drive a paradigm shift in terms of where and how systematic change is best leveraged, further empowering students to be change-makers, as they can learn from leaders directly and witness the power of strong community ties." Madeline signals to the shift that they felt when our class moved from reading and researching about food issues to visiting farms and dairies in Boulder, and they get at the importance of *ecological community writing* that is central to this book. Madeline explains, "There are so many cool movements happening, and it's also exposing this great divide with people

like academics who know the code and know the language and have studied these things and know theory yet are so removed from the communities at stake. Community leaders hold just as much value and knowledge as experts in academia, and universities should prioritize building those partnerships.” Indeed, community leaders are essential in the distributed definitional writing of what “local food” can mean, how people understand the systems they support through their purchases and practices, and what is possible to produce in Boulder County.

While students create individual and group writing projects in my classes, I emphasize the collaborative, ongoing, and circulatory nature of writing; its embeddedness in community; and the ecology of people, organizations, and things that continuously shape our writing and write with us. As Madeline describes the importance of this distributed writing method for undergraduate students, I would suggest that it is equally important for faculty and graduate instructors. Our community-engaged curriculum may indeed change our community, and our specific communities and places themselves can also change our curriculum, as Boulder County has changed mine. The places where we live are both a physical place and a rhetorical idea, as “local food” is both physical thing and rhetorical idea. As I will describe in detail throughout this book, this understanding has changed my teaching and scholarship as I adapt accordingly.

In contrast to the problematic power of certain institutions and companies to define what “local food” is or should be in Boulder County and elsewhere, the projects I help to coordinate with students and partners offer distributed power to communities to define the term for themselves based on their values. I do not anticipate that a single definition for local food will (or should) emerge but rather that the writing projects and events will spur inquiry, food literacies, and emotional connection in individuals, who may then use their new knowledge in their eating decisions, and that these activities may, in the long run, prove to impact others’ actions and even local policy. The purpose of my community work is not to reach consensus about what local food’s definition should be or to universalize desire for it. It is to put lots of ideas on the table, so to speak, in the spirit of inquiry, and to listen for what emerges. But I don’t believe that our work should stop with the facilitation of inquiry. “In short,” as Linda Flower notes, “the meaning of a local public lies in what it *does*” (42, emphasis original). When my partners, students, and I promote critical food literacies, I consider what actions

these literacies enable and encourage people to do and how our work might lead people toward visions of collective power and justice.

Critical Food Literacies and *Local Organic*

As facets of the interdisciplinary field of food studies, critical food literacies and food rhetorics are increasingly visible educative endeavors among Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication scholars. This is evidenced in panels, workshops, and institutes at major conferences such as Conference on College Composition and Communication, Rhetoric Society of America, and Conference on Community Writing; academic books and journal articles too numerous to be inclusive here (e.g., Alvarez, “Taco Literacies”; Boerboom; Brewster; Broad; Conley and Eckstein; Donehower et al.; Dubisar; Frye and Bruner; Goldthwaite; House, “Keep Writing” and “Re-Framing”; Martinez; Schell et al.; S. Wade); journal special issues dedicated to food studies theory and literacy (*College English*, vol. 70, no. 4 [2008]; *Pre/Text*, vol. 21, no. 1–4 [2013]; and *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1 [2015] and vol. 14, no. 1 [2019]); and undergraduate readers from Bedford, *Food Matters* (Bauer), and Fountainhead, *Food* (Rollins and Bauknight). Critical food literacies incorporate issues of racial justice, anti-ableism, and cultural sovereignty as well as reclamation of culturally specific practices and a decolonization of our diets (e.g., Alkon and Agyeman; Alvarez, “Taco Literacies”; Garth and Reese; Simpson; Kimmerer, *Braiding*; Martinez; Mihe-suah and Hoover; Penniman, *Farming*; Salmón, *Eating*; R. White). Critical food literacies teach people to interrogate the relationships between themselves, language, food, land, corporate capitalism, and white supremacist culture—living legacies of land theft and forced labor that built white cultural wealth and the current food system in the United States. *Ecological community writing* enacted through *distributed definition building* and the excerpts of interviews with community partners that I include in this book focus on these relationships, making connections between local discourses and the larger systems of which they are a part.

Ecological theories of writing necessarily shift what happens inside of a classroom and in our various communities. As I’ve developed the methods described in *Local Organic*, I’ve woven much contemporary Rhetoric and Writing scholarship into my praxis as a community writing scholar, teacher, and community member in order to develop my own version of

an ecological methodology specifically for community writing. My hope is that *ecological community writing* will help you to catalyze writing for impact in your own communities while following the key tenets of reciprocity and asset-based, ethical engagement that are so critical to community-based practice and to Indigenous conceptions of ecological kinship (Shah; Cushman, *Cherokee*; Kimmerer, *Braiding*; Peña).

Local Organic demonstrates my ongoing learning with how community writing can build from a weaving together of theories, practices, and priorities—and how our own theories, pedagogies, and activism shift in response. Laurie Gries argues that rhetoric is not “still” but has life: “Once unleashed in whatever form it takes,” she explains, “rhetoric transforms and transcends across genres, media, and forms as it circulates and interacts with other human and non-human entities” (*Still Life* 7). Rhetoric is more “like an event—a distributed, material process of becomings in which divergent consequences are actualized with time and space” (7). If we can enable distributed writing around the social, environmental, or cultural issues we’re working with, then we’re functioning not just at the level of individual writers anymore but also at the level of ecology. When we help to move private or marginalized voices into public dialogue, the words and ideas become part of systems of circulation that can sometimes have impact, whether on personal decision making, community decisions, or policy.

The theoretical strands named in the preceding text influence my study of “local food’s” rhetorical life across genres and audiences in Boulder County. While I draw on national rhetorics of food literacy, I use Boulder County’s food localization efforts as a localized example of engagement in which Rhetoric and Writing practitioners working with a wide variety of emotionally and rhetorically complex issues are well positioned to encourage literate action in classrooms and communities through a public process of investigation and action. This book offers a point of entry into current discussions in Rhetoric and Writing scholarship about critical food literacy and, more broadly, argues for the exigence for public writing students, scholars, and teachers to help build ecologically informed community writing coalitions. The distributed definitions of “local food” that I study in this book come from community writing at events I have helped facilitate, interviews with community leaders, community surveys, promotional materials, websites, policy documents, journalistic work, student writing assignments, peer-reviewed scholarship, and from the land itself.

How This Book Is Organized

Before moving into the chapters, I locate my own positionality in this project as a researcher and teacher working toward accountability and action in the section “On Lineage and Purpose: A Place to Begin.”

In chapter 1, “Food Rhetorics and a Crisis of Definitions,” I discuss a first stage of the *ecological community writing* methodology—research about the issue at a national (or global) level. In food studies, this means understanding the broad, systemic issues on a national scale and the connections between language and control of definitions, corporate versus community-based power, and some of the most serious issues associated with our industrial food system as they relate to language. I make the case that these issues are directly connected to the fight over definitions associated with industrial, organic, and local food production, distribution, and consumption, as well as food access, food justice, and food sovereignty. Control over definitions matters. Despite the high costs associated with cheap food, relatively few people living in the United States know about food production practices and their implications, the environmental and human health costs, or the contents of the food we eat. This illiteracy is a deliberate condition that multinational seed and food companies work tirelessly to ensure, often through confusing advertising that uses definitions for food choices that the companies have created in order to sell products rather than to inform consumers. Even fewer people understand how legacies of land theft, exploitation, and slavery are still present in our food system. As an alternative to models of behavior rooted in competition, obfuscation, and extraction, local food justice work—the work of access, equity, and asset-based models of community engagement—exposes and disrupts corporate and top-down definitions through local organizing.

Chapter 2, “What’s ‘Local’ About Local Food? Rehinging Words to Meaning,” moves from the national battles over definitions discussed in the previous chapter to the competing discourses about “local food” in Boulder County to model how definitional tensions around the term can lead to consumer confusion, misleading marketing, and, sometimes, stalled action. In this chapter, I explain how my long-term research project began as a community writing collaboration with one class that then organically spawned years of investigation and projects, ultimately leading me to develop the *ecological community writing* methodology and *distributed*

definition building model that I offer in the book. Through rhetorical analysis of several hundred texts including interviews with Boulder County farmers and restaurateurs, stories in local media, and canvassed responses from farmers market patrons—all gathered by my undergraduate students through class projects—I reveal local contradictions and confusion over the assumed meaning of “local food” on the part of community members versus the realities of practice.

In the county there is active work across various sectors toward localization of the food system, but there are many different, conflicting, and sometimes deeply problematic definitions circulating for what “local food” means. I investigate the dissonance between the material and imagined realities behind Boulder County’s local food rhetoric and delve into food and language as they intersect with consumer awareness and agency as well as farm viability. This study of the contested term “local food” highlights the need for *distributed definition building* that offers community-written, bottom-up definitions. The national and local research that I discuss in these first two chapters demonstrate the need for (and offer methods such as interviews, surveys, and discourse analysis that practitioners can use to toward) collaborative, interdisciplinary, intercommunity *ecological community writing*.

In my study of responses to local food movements and how activists and advocates can effectively communicate about the issues at stake, I have been influenced by several psychology studies that analyze the effects of different kinds of messaging about traumatic issues on behavior. In chapter 3, “Crisis and Abundance Rhetorics in Moving People Toward Collaborative Engagement,” I focus on affect as an element of or an actor in an ecology. To do so, I study other elements necessary in *ecological community writing*—knowledge drawn from other disciplines—climate communication, ecopsychology, and trauma-informed research. Learning from these fields about the reasons humans reject certain messages even in the face of overwhelming factual evidence, I develop a lens through which to implement my method that may help shift people’s responses. I explain the influence these findings have had in the development of *distributed definition building* as well as how they can aid in communicating about any number of issues to our students and to the public. In this chapter, I encourage practitioners to adopt the lens that I call *critical rhetorics of abundance*. In food literacy work, this may mean countering some of the common deficit and

fear-based rhetorics around industrial food and food crises by creating positive messaging and embodied options that encourage involvement at the personal, community, and policy levels.

In the next two chapters, I delve into communication strategies, ecological writing theories, and systems theory to argue for how public rhetoricians can help communicate messages effectively as well as create opportunities for community members from different positionalities—ages, races, ethnicities, financial means, and backgrounds—to collectively “write” their own community’s definition for “local food” that aligns with their values. Chapter 4, “Writing Abundant Ecologies: From Theory to Collaborative Local Research,” offers an overview of ecological, systems, contagion, and circulation theories that have shaped my praxis as I consider further parts of an ecology—the human and other-than-human actors that contribute to the possibilities for local food’s production, consumption, and appreciation in Boulder County, as well as to the rhetorical life of the idea of “local food.” In this chapter, I offer strategies for visualizing the relevant work, people, organizations, and places in your own ecology and for building coalitions across campuses and communities.

Concrete examples of the *ecological community writing* methodology in use as well as how *distributed definition building* is generated in my courses, outreach to scholars and groups with similar interests, and community-building work are woven throughout chapter 5, “Ecological Community Writing in an Abundant Foodshed.” In the definitional confusion around what “local food” means comes an opportunity for *ecological community writing* that offers ways for people to write about their relationships with local food and to experience its abundant nature. It is a way for community members to have a stake in shaping public discourse or policy discussions that often seem so out of reach for ordinary people. In this chapter, I weave theory with several examples of public writing events my students, project partners, and I have organized to demonstrate how Writing and Rhetoric scholars and teachers can apply ecological and systems thinking in their classes and community-based work to help identify and connect actors working toward a desired outcome.

These chapters offer specific examples of my food literacy work through the interdisciplinary and intercommunity “Dig In!” project I founded, which catalyzes public food research projects, writing courses, and public events at museums, libraries, parks, farms, and schools involving students,

faculty cohorts, community leaders, and members of the public. These partners and participants collectively inquire into the complexities of the local food movement and collaboratively work toward a resilient local food system. Through all of this work, I theorize how writing is an ecological thread connecting people, things, and ideas.

In chapter 6, “Abundant Partnership: A Local, Organic Approach to Rhetoric and Writing Studies,” I center Indigenous scholarship on reciprocity and animacy, as I consider how concepts of partnership, *ecological community writing*, and definition building deepen when we consider how other-than-humans partner with us in writing. I offer a theory of community partnership and suggest that an ecological perspective that includes other-than-humans as collaborators in definition building can shift our work.

In the following chapters, I demonstrate the chronological development of the two main concepts I offer in this book: the *distributed definition building* method in community projects and class assignments that led to the relational methodology of *ecological community writing*. I believe that transparency in this iterative development over many semesters and years is important, but any use of the examples of assignments and events that I offer does not need to be applied linearly. Especially in community-engaged work, relationships deepen or change, community conversations and new policies shift practices, students learn lessons that alter the trajectory of projects, nonprofit staff leave or join organizations, our awareness expands and transforms. That messiness is real and essential and can be generative. As I weave together the works, theories, and authors that have meant so much to my own development with direct dialogue, collaborative writing, development of events and projects with others in our community (e.g., in real time and asynchronously), and indirect study (e.g., through creation and analysis of different kinds of texts and publications), I theorize our understanding of ourselves as embedded in larger human and other-than-human systems as we also help to generate connections in those systems.

The projects I present are not only chronologic but sometimes happening simultaneously. The distributed and simultaneous nature of ecology-building work is hard to write about because it is *not* linear. I ask for some playfulness on your part in trying to visualize the work and theories I describe. There are multiple ways I’ve considered demonstrating a visualization, none of which is adequate. One way could be to imagine a constantly growing and connecting 3D model of an ecology with the contested

term such as “local food” at the center, and emanating from that term are dozens of connections to language, histories, affect, humans, organizations, theories, projects, other-than-humans, and then dozens or hundreds of connections emanating from those terms to other things, and on and on. Each chapter in the book offers connections between “local food” and various parts of an always-in-flux ecology. Another idea could be to imagine each chapter as a transparent overlay that draws out different ecological parts, and whereby, as you overlay each sheet, the ecology becomes more connected and detailed. I don’t know that there is a best way to imagine *ecological community writing*, so I encourage your creativity in visualizing.

I invite you to make connections with *ecological community writing* in your own teaching, research, and activism or organizing work. An anonymous reviewer, for example, suggested a connection that deserves further investigation between ecological community writing and undergraduate research in writing studies, particularly course-based undergraduate research experiences. Another colleague who read a draft of the book saw usefulness in the distributed definition-building method for her work with students to define “civic education.” I welcome these and other connections to and extensions of the work I offer. There are myriad ways to use *ecological community writing*—in course development, faculty retreats, staff trainings, graduate courses, Writing Across the Curriculum workshops, and more. As the book’s title, *Local Organic*, suggests, I hope that you will adapt and play with methods that can be used for *ecological community writing* in ways that develop organically through your experiences with them and that are most useful in your own locale. Some of the projects and research I describe can be done through writing courses without any funding. Other projects required internal grants from the writing program and the campus’s engagement office but could be modified based on available resources. As I discuss how my methods and methodology developed, beginning with a brief introduction to myself and my positionality before the first chapter, I offer ways for how to listen to our community’s unique conversations as we attune to community building and justice-oriented definitional work from the ground up.