

Proposal for Eng 494 Writing Project
Lisa Swanson Faleide

The State of Dakota
The State of a Rural Woman's Mind

I represent a status minority (a woman) of a tiny demographic minority (farm folks). Over my adult years—all of it spent in or emotionally linked to rural North Dakota—I have become increasingly aware of the tension between the advantages and oppressive nature of rural life in a rural state, particularly one in a chronic rural “crisis”, and particularly for women.

On one hand, there is the possibility of a very high quality of life: complete integration of one's life and work (a personal Nirvana) in a rich, family-nurturing, natural setting free of the unsettled masses and their attendant problems, where you know your neighbors and can depend on most of them to work with you to make a solid, safe community. On the other hand, there is the reality of living in an economically depressed community vulnerable to the cultural and social retardation that geographic isolation (among others things) brings, coupled with the political conundrums resulting from declining population and the vagaries of agricultural systems.

For rural women, these problems are compounded by latent sexism, the vocational “manure ceiling” (like the “glass ceiling” except you can't even see it from here and that stinks) and the oftentimes tyrannical social expectations from the traditional institutions—family and extended family, church and school—which have placed another burden layer on women (of a certain generation, especially) already oppressed by a culture which requires their acquiescence in vocation, living conditions, and approved social practices in order to maintain the status quo. This status quo often requires that the woman in a family totally set aside her own vocational and life goals in order to support her farmer or small businessman husband to maintain his vocational and life goals in an environment fraught with extreme challenges and sacrifices. This support is emotional, physical, psychological, and economic, and often, there is little or no reward returned to the rural “superwoman” in any of those categories.

From my personal experience, and from listening to rural women talk about their lives, it is clear to me these women are hungering for a spokesperson, someone to give them a more authentic public voice without over-dramatizing their lives or playing up a perceived victim-hood and, at the very least, affirm their existence, their strengths, their vulnerabilities, and their very beings. I approach all my writing with a consciousness of and for rural women. I am she.

The Project

For this class, my project will be to “write down the bones” that I will later (mostly after completion of the class) add muscle and flesh to in order to prepare a finished manuscript. Calling this project a “book outline” comes close, but will accomplish more than a simple outline in the following ways:

- It will have a reading component that will inform content and structure, and will provide a research element into books similar to what I intend to write. A short, written analysis

of each reading component, focusing on the ways in which each one relates to my project will be included.

- It will include an evolving list of potential chapter/essay titles and a brief synopsis of each.
- This evolving list will include experiential research—what I refer to the “discovery” portion of the project—and will focus primarily on travels, informal interviews and conversations, experiences and reading materials I encounter on as much of North Dakota’s Highway 200 as I can cover during the length of this project.
- It will include poems that I have already written as bridges between essays/chapters or as introductions to them, with suggestions on where they relate best to the evolving list.
- It will include between 3-10 free writing exercises on the most mature of the above synopses.
- 1-3 completed essays will evolve from those free writing exercises.

Objectives

- To provide a working document that demonstrates my commitment to “The State of Dakota” book project.
- To establish a routine that will facilitate the completion of a book manuscript.
- To complete 3 Individual Study Credits as part of my final 15 credits leading to a Bachelor of University Studies degree.
- To incorporate and expand on the topics I have focused on in poetry I have already written.
- To give voice, affirmation, and representation to a minority’s minority—the rural woman—through a medium which is familiar to me and accessible to the collective “her”. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, to create muscle and flesh on a “skeleton” I’ve been building in my head for years.

Methods

The reading/research*, evolving list, and “discovery” elements have already commenced and will continue in an integrated fashion as discipline, opportunity, desire and deadlines (listed in the timeline) dictate. The written analysis of the reading/research component, the synopsis of evolving list subjects (including discovery elements), and the free writes will begin upon approval of this plan and will be handed in for review as indicated in the timeline. The finished essay(s) will be turned in at the completion of the project, along with a portfolio that will include all of the written elements that have been part of the project. The portfolio will also include a summation of progress to date, an opinion on the efficacy of planning and beginning execution of a book project as part of an individual study class, and an opinion on the likelihood of the book manuscript’s completion (along with a completion target date based on the pace of the class project).

*Not all the included texts will be read in their entirety. Several are included which I have already read and will refamiliarize myself with, but will not read or re-read completely during the allotted time. Those that I have previously read have been chosen because they have already informed my topic and continue to do so by their mere presence in my life and memory.

Timeline

Work already completed or commenced is included in this timeline. The date of this proposal is June 27, 2002.

Date	Topics
Week 1 <i>May 13</i>	Met with instructor to review possible project ideas. Investigated materials/topic per our discussion.
Week 2 <i>May 20</i>	Began to explore new project idea based on a skeleton/outline for “The State of Dakota” collection of essays/writing. Began collecting possible readings/research toward that end. Began reading some of most interesting material, i.e. “Hope’s Edge”.
Week 3-4 <i>May 27-June 10</i>	More reading. Began to record essay/chapter topics list. Purchased and began reading “Wifework.” Continued reading in my dog-eared copies of Wendell Berry’s “Home Economics” and “The Gift of Good Land.”
Week 5 <i>June 10</i>	Project scope and possibilities begin to take shape. Reading continues. More essay topics are recorded.
Week 6 <i>June 17</i>	E-mail instructor with a heads-up on my “progress”, or lack thereof. Receive e-mail back needing clarification and warnings on time constraints, etc. Still reading and list-making. Made Hwy. 200 “discovery” trip.
Week 7 <i>June 24</i>	Clarify my intentions to instructor and draft project proposal. Select chapters from “Telling to Live” to include in reading list. Start reading (mostly re-reading selectively) “Beyond the Writer’s Workshop”, “Dakota: A Spiritual Geography” and “The Contrary Farmer” and begin reading “Woksape.”
Week 8 <i>July 1</i>	Begin sending essay topic list with synopses to instructor (this process will continue throughout July). Finish “Hope’s Edge” and “Wifework”. Begin writing analysis of reading/research materials. Send any that are complete. Choose up to six poems and see where they fit best. Send any written conclusions. Begin free writing anytime.
Week 9-10 <i>July 8-20</i>	Finish and send analyses of reading list. Send any further topics/synopses listed. Send any final poems/slots/conclusions. Select at least one freewrite to polish as a completed essay.
Week 11 <i>July 21</i>	Work on chosen free write(s), turning it/them into essays. Send rough draft(s) for review and critique.
Week 12 <i>July 29</i>	Begin assembling portfolio. Continue polishing essay(s). Write conclusions on efficacy of the project and predictions of successful completion of collection.
Week 13 <i>August 5</i>	Finish and deliver completed portfolio.

Evaluation Criteria

Completing a portfolio which contains the following should merit an A:

- Essay topic list with accompanying synopses for at least 10 topics.
- Short, written analysis on how each text listed under “Sources” informs and/or relates to the project.
- At least three free writing exercises on topics from the evolving list.

- At least one finished essay for critique.
- Up to six previously written poems that relate to topics from the evolving list, each accompanied by an explanation of its relevance.
- A short summary (perhaps in the same form as the evolving list) of Hwy. 200 “discovery” experiences
- Addition of the summation referred to under “Methods.”

The totals are 750 pages of reading and 30 pages of writing, as well as a redraft of the free writing and summary of Hwy 200 “discovery” experiences into a short collection of illustrated essays or poems

Benefits

This project will help me establish a reading/research/writing routine that will be essential (with any necessary tweaking) to completion of a book-length “The State of Dakota” manuscript. Additionally, I will have at least one redraft of 3 free writes I can use as jumping off points and incentive for continued progress.

Sources

For Reference:

Berry, Wendell. *The Gift of Good Land*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981.

Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987.

Logsdon, Gene. *The Contrary Farmer*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1995.

Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota A Spiritual Geography*. New York: Ticknor & Field, 1993.

Texts:

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Jenkinson, Clay Straus. *Woksape: Wonder, Weltschmerz, and The West. Jefferson's Vision of and the Visit of Lewis to the American West*. Bismarck, North Dakota: North Dakota Humanities Council, Inc., 1991.

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