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Watershed as Common-Place: Communicating for Conservation at the Watershed Scale

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke

This article, highlighting qualitative data collected from farmers and landowners in the Clear Creek watershed in eastern Iowa, offers a situated analysis of the relationship between rhetorical change and landscape change. After chronicling the rise of government-sponsored watershed-based agricultural conservation efforts, I adopt Kenneth Burke's framing of rhetoric as identification to argue that the watershed, as it is mobilized in contemporary conservation efforts, serves as a potent material and symbolic site for identification. Focusing on my ethnographic research in the Clear Creek watershed in eastern Iowa, I consider how farmers' and landowners' identification with the watershed has prompted changes to the landscape for the sake of soil and water conservation. I then consider the implications of this argument for extending theories of the rhetorical landscape, suggesting that rhetorical landscapes contain elements of both the symbolic and the material.

Keywords: Landscape; Place; Watershed; Conservation; Agriculture

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and state and local conservation agencies have responded to the escalating threat of nonpoint source pollution in the nation's waterways with an increased emphasis on watershed-based conservation initiatives. These initiatives, like the one I focus on here in the Clear Creek watershed in eastern Iowa, are pointed to as the current best hope for reducing sedimentation and excess nutrient runoff into America's streams and rivers, a situation that impacts drinking water, recreation, and habitat for human and non-humans alike. Federal, state, and local agencies funnel

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money into watershed-based initiatives, calling upon residents of a watershed (or drainage basin), and not simply a recognized municipality, to work together to improve the health of their shared waterways. While these entities are focused on the practical necessity of working with landowners throughout a watershed to improve the health of its threatened body of water, at their core, the success of these initiatives depends upon changing how farmers and agricultural landowners understand the places where they live and farm and their relationships to these places. Taking the Clear Creek watershed as its focus, this essay works to understand how the concept of the watershed offers agricultural landowners a particular sense of place that motivates them to make positive changes to the landscape for the sake of soil and water conservation.

Background

From 2008 to 2011, I worked as an intern with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), studying a watershed-based conservation program called the Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Project (CCWEP). CCWEP brings together private, business, and governmental stakeholders, as well as conservation staff, as part of a local watershed council. The council addresses soil and water quality concerns in Clear Creek by targeting its outreach efforts throughout the watershed, rather than only along the banks of the creek. The idea behind a watershed-based conservation program like CCWEP is that all watershed residents can and should play a significant role in improving the health of a body of water.

Clear Creek could use the help. This 40-km-long creek drains 26,000 ha of agricultural and increasingly urban land before emptying into the Iowa River just above Iowa City, Iowa. Because of ongoing nonpoint source pollution, sedimentation, nutrient enrichment, and high *Escherichia coli* levels from the intensive production of corn, soybeans, and livestock in the watershed, the Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District designated Clear Creek a priority watershed in 1998, making the watershed eligible for remediation funding and prompting the formation of CCWEP (NRCS, 2003, p. 1).

CCWEP's ongoing challenge is communicating with and attempting to change the practices of agricultural landowners throughout the watershed, and their potential success has relevance for agricultural conservation efforts throughout the state. Because 89.5% of Iowa consists of privately owned farmland (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2009a, 2009b), voluntary adoption of conservation measures by private agricultural landowners is a pressing concern for the protection of Iowa's soils and waterways. To improve the water quality in Clear Creek (and the rivers downstream), it is imperative that conservation initiatives like CCWEP better understand why watershed landowners embrace or reject conservation practices so that they can work to communicate with farmers and landowners on their terms.

While much research works to identify indicators of voluntary conservation adoption like gender, age, education, and income among farmers and agricultural landowners (see Knowler & Bradshaw, 2007; Prokopy, Floress, Klotthor-Weinkauf, &

Baumgart-Getz, 2008), my research takes a different approach. I look to the watershed itself as a motivator for conservation, investigating its use as a particular way of seeing and knowing the landscape—of understanding one's place in the world in a particular way—and considering how it shapes the reception of conservation communication and inspires action for the sake of soil and water conservation.

Offering a theoretically informed rhetorical analysis of interview data from local stakeholders, I investigate how farmers and landowners come to identify with the watershed (as a commonplace or *topos:* a word, phrase, or statement that circulates through communal beliefs, evoking the material and symbolic places where persuasive arguments occur) for the sake of soil and water conservation.[1,2] My fieldwork demonstrates that the commonplace of the watershed succeeds in its rhetorical work to prompt farmers and landowners to embrace conservation efforts based on their identification with the watershed. They consider themselves responsible members of a *common-place*: a shared material and symbolic site that mobilizes those who identify with it to make substantive changes on its behalf.

The Watershed: Then and Now

Over the last two decades, local, state, and federal conservation agencies have funneled money to polluted watersheds and the watershed councils that represent them on the assumption that this approach is the most effective way of tackling water quality problems. I suggest these efforts carry with them the watershed's long history as both material and symbolic site, while benefiting from a previously unavailable persuasive opportunity at the turn of the 21st century.

The famed explorer, scientist, and Director of the United States Geological Survey John Wesley Powell proposed a watershed-based approach to conservation in the late 1800s, championing the watershed, what he referred to as a "hydrographic basin," because of its explicit ability to illuminate the physical hydrological processes and its implicit ability to recommend a form of communal social organization based on those physical processes. As Powell (1890) explained in a prominent national magazine:

> In a group of mountains a small river has its source. A dozen or a score of creeks unite to form the trunk. The creeks higher up divide into brooks. All these streams combined form the drainage system of a hydrographic basin, a unit of country well defined in nature, for it is bounded above and on each side by heights of land that rise as crests to part the waters . . . Such a district of country is a commonwealth by itself. The people who live therein are interdependent in their industries. Every man is interested in the conservation and management of the water supply, for all the waters are needed within the district. (p. 113–114)

For Powell (1890), the watershed named both material and symbolic aspects of the landscape, marking the boundaries of a hydrographic basin and representing a communitarian social order based on the physical landscape: an imagined community of interdependent people working for the sake of conservation of the water supply.

Powell (1890) transformed the scientific language of the watershed into rhetorical language, making an argument for a social order based on the physical landscape. Kenneth Burke described this shift from science to rhetoric almost 80 years later: "whereas poetic language is a kind of symbolic action, for itself and in itself, and whereas scientific action is a preparation for action, rhetorical language is inducement to action (or to attitude, attitude being an incipient act)" (1969b, p. 42). Burke employed the widespread understanding of the word science as "a 'semantic' or 'descriptive' terminology for charting the conditions of nature from an 'impersonal' point of view" (1969b, p.41) to distinguish passive "science" from active "rhetoric." In Burke's terms, Powell's description of the watershed takes the passive, descriptive terminology of the hydrographic basin and mobilizes it rhetorically to foster an attitude of communitarianism.

As Stegner (1992), historian of the American West and Powell's biographer, put it, in arguing for a watershed-based approach to land division and use, "Major Powell was proposing a revolution in the land laws and in the nature of the General Land Office surveys" (p. 227). Even more revolutionary was the extension of Powell's argument, based on Powell's experience with the Mormons in the western lands. "From them," Stegner (1992) described, "he had also got a notion of how salutary co-operation could be as a way of life, how much less wasteful than competition unlimited, how much more susceptible to planning and intelligence, how much less destructive of human and natural resources" (p. 227). For Powell (1890), the watershed could serve as both a "hydrographic basin"—a name for an aspect of the material landscape—and a "commonwealth"—a symbol for a cooperative social life that would minimize negative impacts on natural resources.

Because of his high-ranking position in the United States government, Powell's (1876/1962) formal proposal that "the division of these lands should be controlled by topographic features to give water fronts" (p. 40), not by government-imposed rectangles, amounted to heresy. To Stegner, it:

> embodied official encouragement of a social organization thoroughly revolutionary in 1878. It was so far beyond the social and economic thinking of the period that popularized the pork barrel as a national symbol and began the systematic gutting of the continent's resources and developed to its highest and most ruthless stage the competitive ruthlessness of American business, that it seems like the product of another land and another people. (Stegner, 1992, p. 228)

Given the revolutionary nature of his proposal, the prevailing social and economic climate, and the pervasive belief in the inexhaustible abundance of the continent, Powell's idea was dismissed. After much public animosity and political debate, on February 18, 1879, the United States House of Representatives gutted the measure containing Powell's proposal for watershed-based property division, eliminating Powell's proposed changes to the land laws and surveying system (Stegner, 1992, p. 239).

While the idea of the material-symbolic watershed lay largely dormant for the next century, writer and environmentalist Gary Snyder revived it in the late 20th century. Admittedly influenced by Powell, Snyder (1995) insisted, "The political boundaries of

the western states were established in haste and ignorance. Landscapes have their own shapes and structures, centers and edges, which must be respected" (p. 222). For Snyder, like Powell, the watershed is a more natural and, thus, more desirable structure of organization with profound implications for community life. Like Powell, Snyder (1995) connected the concept of the watershed to the basis of community, explaining, "The watershed is beyond the dichotomies of orderly/disorderly, for its forms are free, but somehow inevitable. The life that comes to flourish within it constitutes the first kind of community" (p. 230). Based on the scientific notion of the topography of a given area, the watershed takes on a rhetorical force; in Burke's (1969b) terms, it goes from scientific language—"shapes and structures"—to rhetorical language—an argument for a type of social organization—"the first kind of community." For both men, community is the naturalized endpoint of the watershed, achieved through the coupling of an experienced place with a common project and, subsequently, a common responsibility.

Snyder's (1995) insistence on the implications of the watershed for social organization led him to suggest that readers adopt what he calls a bioregionalist approach to conservation that includes the creation of local watershed councils. Snyder himself cofounded the Yuba Watershed Institute, a local, grassroots watershed council working in collaboration with government agencies in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. The Yuba Watershed Institute, in its ability to blend grassroots action with government funding and administration, is now a model for government-funded watershed-based conservation efforts like the Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Project.

So why did Snyder's argument find an ally in federal policymakers when Powell's did not? Like Powell's federal reports, Snyder's work was meant to be revolutionary: to interrupt prevailing American rhetorics of individualism, private property, self-interest, and bureaucratization in favor of a naturalized communitarianism for the sake of resolving the tension between the natural and social worlds. But if Powell's argument for the watershed did not succeed because the social, material, and economic conditions of the late 19th century did not warrant it, the climate had changed considerably by the late 20th century. The visibility of environmental crises in Snyder's time created an opening for a new paradigm, and this time, the United States government responded. But, while the federal embrace of the watershed that began in the 1980s and 1990s marked a new turn, I suggest that the watershed *topos* retained Powell's (and Snyder's) dual emphasis on both the material and symbolic. This baggage works in favor of contemporary government watershed efforts, prompting identification with symbolic and material aspects of the watershed and subsequent action for the sake of water and soil quality.

In the late 20th century, with worries about water and soil quality reaching a crescendo in the United States, the federal government responded to concerns by introducing two major watershed-based conservation initiatives: the Conservation Reserve Program, which, as part of the 1985 Farm Bill, paid farmers to take marginal cropland out of production, and the Water Quality Act of 1987, which funded a series of demonstration grants to address nonpoint source pollution like agricultural

runoff. In the wake of these federal initiatives, EPA and NRCS adopted the watershed as a primary means of implementing water and soil quality improvement efforts.

In 1991, senior managers endorsed the EPA Office of Water's *Watershed Protection Approach Framework* and built on that document in their 1996 *Watershed Approach Framework*, responding to the reality that, "as of 1994, nearly 40 percent of surveyed waters in the US remain too polluted for fishing, swimming and other uses" (United States Environmental Protection Agency [USEPA], 2008b, para. 1). As EPA (2008b) explained:

> Many public and private organizations are joining forces and creating multi-disciplinary and multijurisdictional partnerships to focus on these problems, community by community and watershed by watershed. These *watershed approaches* are likely to result in significant restoration, maintenance and protection of water resources in the United States. Supporting them is a high priority for EPA's national water program. (para. 2)

In EPA's estimation, "Through such active and broad involvement, the watershed approach can build a sense of community, reduce conflicts, increase commitment to the actions necessary to meet societal goals and, ultimately, improve the likelihood of sustaining long-term environmental improvements" (2008a, para. 3). Like Powell and Snyder, EPA collapsed the topographical boundaries of the watershed with the symbolic notion of the watershed community, relying upon material and symbolic appeals to the watershed to make conservation happen. As they fund a variety of watershed-based improvement projects through Section 319 of the Clean Water Act, including CCWEP, EPA bets on the ability of the watershed to shift from Burke's scientific to rhetorical language in order to transform the watershed from a commonplace into a common-place.

The federal government is not alone in their emphasis on watershed-based conservation efforts. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (Iowa DNR), collaborating with partners like IDALS, NRCS, and local soil and water conservation districts and funded by EPA's Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program, now features a Watershed Improvement Program because, as they insisted, "We all live in watershed, an area of land that drains to a lake or stream. What we do on that land—whether a backyard, farm or factory site—affects the health of our lakes, streams and rivers" (p. 3). Iowa DNR tells readers we are all in this together; we all play a role in contributing to the health of the watershed.

The former Director of Iowa DNR himself, Richard Leopold, regularly emphasized this point, directing attention to the power of the watershed approach for aiding local, community-based problem solving. As he described, "Coming together with their neighbors, [Iowans]' reforming local groups devoted to locating problem areas and finding solutions . . . Because river, stream and lake basins—or watersheds—don't follow fences, Iowans are coming together across farm fields and county lines to make a difference" (Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 2008, p. 5). Leopold's language seems ripped from the pages of Powell's reports, as he persuades his reader to think beyond the fence posts that mark the forced boundaries of the rectangular survey system in favor of the topographical boundaries of the natural landscape. Refocusing his reader

on the naturalized material landscape, Leopold offered up the symbolic image of the watershed: of a community of people working together "to make a difference."

Iowa DNR and EPA are direct financial supporters of watershed-based conservation in Clear Creek, and CCWEP has adopted this dual emphasis on material and symbolic aspects of the watershed, leveraging the watershed as a mechanism for promoting conservation improvements and collaboration. Robert and Bruce, conservation staff involved at various stages with the Clear Creek Project, talked explicitly about the potential of the watershed to serve as a unifying force, recognizing the pragmatic and conceptual advantages of working at the watershed scale. A case in point: the Clear Creek watershed is comprised of two counties—one primarily rural and one increasingly urban—with a history of cool relations due to their distinct personalities and priorities. The watershed, according to Robert and Bruce, offers the possibility of easing this tension by bridging these two constituencies. As Robert explained:

> We wanted to have each county involved, since the watershed crosses the political divide and there's always kinda been a feeling of, you know, urban and rural and some friction there.

This friction is a key obstacle to conservation practice, but, as Robert sees it, the bi-county watershed project may help to address it.

Like Robert, Bruce feels this obstacle is one that the watershed approach is uniquely poised to address. For Bruce, urban-rural coalition building is of central importance for the health of the Clear Creek watershed and watersheds throughout Iowa. As Bruce described from his current position as a state conservationist:

> Most of our landmass in most of our watersheds is agricultural but most of our people are down here in an urban setting. So how do we get these people to somehow bond with those farmers out there? How do we get those urban people to support and invest in conservation out there? [. . .] That's a challenge.

In the face of this challenge, the watershed offers a unique hope. As he explained:

> It's probably the only hope is to the get people to feel like they're a member of a community – a watershed as a community. So that the city limit isn't the end of their community. That watershed boundary is their community. [. . .] I do think it's the only hope. [. . .] That watershed as a community, that is an advantage of approaching or working on the watershed scale: the opportunity to create that sense of community as a stakeholder and resident of this watershed. I really think it's the only hope.

The watershed, for Bruce and Robert (like EPA and Iowa DNR), offers the chance for people to see past jurisdictional boundaries. Relying on the persuasive appeal of its naturalness and inevitability, these conservation practitioners recognize that the watershed has the potential to trump political boundaries and the tensions they create, allowing conservation staff and the farmers and landowners with whom they work to create the sense of community to which Bruce and EPA refer.

What seems implicit in these arguments is that this emergent sense of community will serve as a motivator for farm operators and landowners, what Burke referred to as "an inducement to action" (1969b, p. 42). Once watershed residents begin to see

themselves as part of a common community, they will be prompted to act. They will come to see themselves as collectively responsible for conservation of the watershed's resources. But, how will this happen? When I pressed Robert on the subject, he described the process this way:

> Well, naturally, I think people identify to their neighborhood, their township, uh, whatever, kind of smaller geography. That people have their mental map, and I think that kind of allows us to take the creek [. . .] and, um, gives a little bit of a sense of ownership in the concern that we have for that creek. And I think out of that produces a lot of memories that people might have about the creek. Family-type connections. Uh, a whole bunch of things kinda develop out of focusing on a smaller area. [. . .] Yeah, [you] can produce a critical mass. But I think that's just the biggest thing is the manageability and the identification of the local people to that small water body.

For Robert, it seems obvious the "small water body" of the creek will prompt "identification" among the farmers and landowners he hopes to reach. They will connect the creek to their "mental maps" and will imbue these "mental maps" with positive associations: "memories" and "family-type connections." Through a process of accretion, these mental maps—these memories and emotions—will layer onto individuals' geographic, physical maps of the watershed. In Robert's estimation, if CCWEP hopes to have an impact on the physical landscape of Clear Creek, it needs to position Clear Creek's farmers and landowners to undergo this cognitive process: to collapse the physical and mental watershed. This process holds the key to prompting a "sense of ownership" for the watershed that will, in turn, prompt action for conservation.

The watershed's persuasiveness emerges from the fact that this conceptual work grafts onto the physical, material landscape. So, while CCWEP has adopted the strategy of attempting to prompt identification with the watershed for the last decade, their measureable successes have primarily come within the last few years, aided in no uncertain terms by changing material conditions in the watershed. In the late 2000s, extensive flooding offered an opportunity for the watershed *topos* to have a significant impact on Clear Creek's farmers and landowners.

In June 2008, rapid snowmelt and heavy rains combined to cause 500-year flooding in the Des Moines, Cedar, and Iowa River Valleys, submerging the cities of Des Moines, Cedar Falls, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City and smaller towns and farming communities throughout the floodplains. Beyond highly publicized urban devastation, the flooding had short- and long-term impacts on farms throughout the state. Spring planting was interrupted by the flooding, and in some areas, the entire planting season was abandoned.

The flooding also had a wider landscape effect as slowly developing erosion problems on privately owned farmland became, in the course of a single week of intense flooding, major crises demanding attention. As Clear Creek Watershed Coordinator, James Martin (personal communication, June 17, 2009), explained:

> Often the farmers are cautious to have too much "unnecessary" work done in fear of having rents raised. Then the storms and floods of 2007 and 2008 happened. Two

> hard years that made the need for conservation work evident to everyone. It was July of 2008 when the phone started ringing. People would bring in maps and mailings that I sent them years before and absentee landowners suddenly decided they better take a walk on the farm they hadn't seen for years, and sons were talking conservation with their moms at the nursing homes.

In short, as bad as the 2008 flood was, it was good for CCWEP's business; the flooding forced many farmers to attend to conservation practices on their farms. In addition, these material conditions created a window of opportunity for a revival of the watershed *topos*; the shifting material landscape allowed for a change in the conceptual landscape.

Identifying With the Watershed: Symbolicity and Materiality in Theory and Practice

Just as shifting material conditions allow for the introduction and adoption of new rhetorics, new rhetorics like the watershed can prompt shifts in the material landscape, including the new terraces, grassed waterways, and buffer strips funded by CCWEP. CCWEP's main instrument in their crusade against sedimentation and contamination is the appeal of the watershed itself. The group spearheads a public relations campaign to garner attention for soil and water quality efforts in the watershed. Members of CCWEP regularly attend county fairs, post watershed awareness signage, and distribute magnets featuring their watershed logo (an anthropomorphized droplet of water) all in an effort to persuade people to identify with the watershed. They offer the watershed—both its physical instantiation and the community they feel it represents, a community that hearkens back to Powell's and Snyder's visions—as a material and symbolic site for identification. In so doing, they hope that the watershed *topos* will shift from rhetorical to scientific language insomuch as it will prompt an identification with the watershed that will serve as what Burke (1969b) called an "inducement to action" (p. 42). In making this argument, CCWEP calls upon a potent linguistic commonplace and sites that commonplace in a particular, material common-place, imbuing that commonplace with the symbolic meaning of a community. The slipperiness presented by the watershed—its ambiguity as symbol and material—marks it as a significant point of analysis.

I am interested in the watershed—a word that, in its various instantiations, oscillates between a geographic space, a method of community organizing, a community itself, and a hydrological basin—precisely because, as Burke (1969a) explained, "what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity*, but *terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*" (p. xviii). I suggest that this collapse of the symbolic and the material are precisely such a strategic spot. As Burke continued:

> Instead of considering it our task to "dispose of" any ambiguity, we rather consider it our task to study and clarify the *resources* of ambiguity. For in the course of this work, we shall deal with many kinds of *transformation* – and it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformation takes place; in fact, without such areas, transformation would be impossible. (1969a, p. xix)

For Burke, ambiguity is connected to transformation, a transformation of the individual and collective self and, I suggest, a transformation of the material landscape.

The watershed offers one such point of transformation. As an ambiguous symbolic and material site for identification, the watershed offers the possibility for the individual and collective transformation of the farmers who come to identify with their individual watershed and with the rhetorics of watershed (of "community" and "downstream-ness") presented by government agencies. This transformation of the self's identification offers the possibility for the transformation of the material landscape through the conservation practices championed by watershed groups like CCWEP. As I suggest here, the watershed's slipperiness (its ability to slip between abstract community and particular place) marks it with the capacity to change rhetorics, selves, and, ultimately, landscapes.

Though I am not suggesting that these conservation agencies had Burke in mind when they chose to adopt the framework of the watershed as their *modus operandi* for water quality efforts, I argue that the process of identification and subsequent inducement to action described by Burke (1969b) aptly reflects the sort of transformation that EPA, Iowa DNR, and CCWEP hope watershed efforts will occasion. Recall that EPA insisted, "the watershed approach can build a sense of community, reduce conflicts, increase commitment to the actions necessary to meet societal goals and, ultimately, improve the likelihood of sustaining long-term environmental improvements" (2008a, para. 3). For EPA, a change in attitude—in what they labeled "sense" and "commitment" —will help to secure future, material benefits—what they called a "commitment to the actions necessary," if not securing the actions themselves. It is as though EPA understands that, as Burke (1969b) described, "Insofar as a choice of *action* is restricted, rhetoric seeks to have a formative effect upon *attitude*" (p. 50). As watershed-based conservation projects offer the watershed as a material and symbolic site for identification, they hope to induce a change in attitude among watershed farmers and landowners that will prompt a change in behavior for the sake of conservation.

For Burke (1969b), "Rhetorical language is inducement to action (or to attitude, attitude being an incipient act)" (p. 42), and the watershed has become an example of rhetorical language, language that government agencies hope will serve as an inducement to attitude and action. But does it succeed? After talking with the watershed's farmers, landowners, and conservation staff, I argue that the watershed does accomplish some of the identificatory work that it sets out to do precisely because it appeals to the watershed's material and symbolic aspects.

Many of my interviewees, farmers and landowners participating in the Clear Creek conservation effort by making changes to their farming practices and their property for the sake of soil and water quality, spoke thoughtfully about their specific concerns for the material landscape on their farms and throughout the watershed, while also expressing a concern for symbolic aspects of the watershed like the sense of community that it represented for Powell and Snyder. They were motivated to join the conservation effort in Clear Creek because of the material erosion and

sedimentation problems they witnessed on their farms, as well as by their desire to be good community members: to share the responsibility for preventing the effects of agricultural runoff on their neighbors downstream.

Gene, for instance, a 65-year-old farmer and lifelong resident of the watershed, explained that he approached conservation staff about becoming involved in the Clear Creek watershed project because of:

> Wet spots that would get too wet to farm. And erosion.

These immediate, material issues concerned Gene because of his larger desire to protect his land. As Gene explained:

> I wanna see the land preserved as much as possible. So we don't farm it to death or farm it in a way that it washes away or whatever.

In light of these concerns, Gene installed grassed waterways to filter the runoff on his property. He installed terraces in his fields and practices contour farming (planting his crops across rather than up and down a slope) and no till farming (as an alternative to clean plowing) in order to prevent erosion.

But while these practical issues played a crucial role in Gene's decision to join the watershed effort in Clear Creek, his concerns link the material with the symbolic. Gene thinks about the watershed as a whole and the community it represents. He identifies with the watershed insomuch as he feels a sense of communal responsibility to protect the creek for other watershed residents:

> You know, I see where people that are along the creek're putting everything in grass there and so forth so the basin's there to catch things. And, I think that's good and needs to be done. And, like I said, people like me that are in the upper part of it, even though the creek isn't going to affect me, I feel a responsibility to do what I can to not put excess chemicals or pollutants or dirt or whatever into the creek.

Gene feels a general sense of responsibility toward the watershed; he demonstrates the change in sense and commitment called for by EPA. Gene wants to count himself among the number of farmers and landowners making a difference in the watershed:

> Like most everybody in this neighborhood now, we're in this Clear Creek watershed [project], and most of 'em are doing something.

The Clear Creek watershed is Gene's neighborhood, and he is making decisions on his property to benefit the larger community. Gene identifies with both the material watershed—its physical boundaries, its hills, its creeks, and its soil—and the symbolic watershed—the community of concrete and abstract neighbors that it represents—and he joined the conservation effort in Clear Creek on both accounts. The watershed *topos*, for Gene, has become rhetorical language, serving as an inducement to act for the sake of soil and water conservation in his common-place.

Like Gene, Mary, a 70-year-old retired farmer and current landowner in Clear Creek, identifies with both material and symbolic aspects of the watershed. For Mary, her adoption of specific conservation practices on her property (like no till farming,

grassed waterways, and stream buffers) is a means to act as a responsible citizen of the watershed. As Mary described:

> A lot of the reasons that we've done the conservation projects that we've done is to avoid washing all our soil into Clear Creek.

Mary continued, reflecting on a watershed approach to conservation:

> And, uh, the more regionally you can work with it the better because each individual farmer by himself isn't going to do a whole lot of good, but if you can get many farmers cooperating then—and a lot of times you cross from one farmer's property onto another onto another before it gets to the creek and so all those need to cooperate. So I think working regionally is much more wiser than, you know, on just a countywide basis.

In her insistence that watershed-based conservation allows individual farmers and landowners to "cooperate" and "work regionally" for the sake of the watershed, Mary echoed Powell's cooperative vision: what Stegner (1992) described as "a notion of how salutary co-operation could be as a way of life, how much less wasteful than competition unlimited, how much more susceptible to planning and intelligence, how much less destructive of human and natural resources" (p. 227). One farmer, Mary insisted, can only do so much, but by joining a watershed-wide cooperative effort, real change can occur.

Likewise, Russell, a 45-year-old farmer in the watershed and lifelong watershed resident, links specific material concerns and improvements on his farm with symbolic aspects of the watershed community. Russell's sense of the watershed has to do with both the symbolic and the material. The watershed, for Russell, consists of "the neighbors for the next about five or ten miles either way" (the community represented by the watershed), as well as the river basin itself. The headwaters of Clear Creek emerge on a piece of property that Russell's uncle once farmed, so the material and the symbolic exist in close quarters for Russell. His knowledge of the hydrology of the creek is wrapped up in his memories of his uncle and his neighbors, and his participation in the Clear Creek conservation effort is a means for him to act as what he called "a good neighbor." The conservation effort, as Russell explained:

> Is starting here, and it's kind of workin' its way down. And I think most of [my neighbors] are tryin' to do a good job. We gotta show that we care about [the land].

Russell feels a connection to Clear Creek given his family history in the watershed, his status in the community, his concern with water quality, and his desire to demonstrate that farmers care about their land. For Russell, as in the cases of Gene and Mary, the Clear Creek watershed is both a material place—a topographical boundary that demarcates specific soils and drainage basins—and a symbolic space—an agricultural community coming together for the sake of positive environmental change.

Gene, Mary, and Russell were not the only Clear Creek farmers and landowners to connect the specific conservation practices on their land with potential impacts on neighbors downstream. Barbara, a landowner in her mid-50s, described being drawn to CCWEP because of an interest in:

> Rotating the crops . . . taking care of erosion . . . contours
> and being proud of:
> the rich soil
> on her land.

She is concerned with preserving that soil and stays in close contact with her renter about her expectations. In fact, she works with this renter in large part because of his orientation toward conservation. As she explained:

> We're on the same page when it comes to farming. [. . .] I knew what approach he was taking. I knew he would . . . you know, he was very conservative, taking good care of the soil and the land. So I really haven't worried. [. . .] But we do feel very strongly – especially my son and I – that [the land] be protected, as much as possible, and that's why, when this conservation program came up, we thought definitely, no question about it.

As she sees it, her participation in CCWEP allows her to protect her own farmland, to preserve what she knows to be a finite resource for future generations of her family. She also has a sense of the ways that her actions have an impact on her neighbors near and far. Barbara understood that:

> [The watershed] starts with Amana and I know that we are on the lower southeast corner of it, right on the tip I believe. And it feeds into Iowa City and it's just part of a whole connected area that goes through down through Iowa City and down to the Mississippi so in that way it's all connected.

Because of this connection, Barbara hoped that more people get involved in conservation programs like CCWEP:

> I hope you come across more people, most people, who really, really care about the land.

Barbara hopes that other people in the watershed see that the choices they make have a significant impact on their own farmland and on their neighbors downstream. She was attracted to the cost-share funding available for conservation improvements to her own property, but she also sees how these financial incentives allow her to contribute to a larger endeavor: a widespread community of people who "really, really care about the land." Indeed, many do. As Anne, a small-scale farmer and landowner in the watershed, put it:

> I think [the watershed] encompasses everybody. Everybody has something they could do conservation-wise to make a difference in the landscape. [. . .] [Watershed-based conservation] really gives everybody some responsibility for the outcome.

Barbara and Anne, like many of their neighbors, want to take responsibility for this shared outcome.

Bruce, Robert, Gene, Mary, Russell, Barbara, and Anne all draw connections between the materiality of the watershed (in the form of the creek, the basin, the river, and the landowner's property) and the symbolicity of watershed thinking as described by EPA and Iowa DNR (in terms of a sense of community, connection, responsibility, and communal problem solving). This collapse of the material and the

symbolic have, in turn, served as an "inducement to action," prompting these watershed landowners to make changes to the physical landscape in the form of terraces, stream buffers, and waterways based on their sense of identification with the watershed.

This point about symbolic and material aspects of the watershed is crucial for the practice of agricultural conservation outreach and for the development of a theory of the rhetorical landscape, a topic most thoroughly covered by Gregory Clark (2004) in *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*. Clark (2004) demonstrated how the shared experience of national tourist destinations offered a means for Americans to identify with the growing nation; he located the rhetorical power of those landscapes in the experience of the symbolic.

Clark makes a significant contribution to theorizing the rhetorical landscape, but this ethnographic fieldwork in Clear Creek offers reason for expanding both Clark's emphasis on the symbolic as the sole territory of the rhetorical and his argument that the landscape is strictly symbolic terrain. For Clark (2004):

> *Landscape* is not the same as *land*. *Land* is material, a particular object, while *landscape* is conceptual. When people act as tourists, they leave the *land* where they make their home to encounter *landscapes*. *Land* becomes *landscape* when it is assigned the role of symbol, and as symbol it functions rhetorically. (p. 9)

In Clark's reading, the rhetoricity of a given landscape exists only in its symbolic content; the material land drops away once that land is imbued with symbolic meaning.

In the case of the persuasiveness of the Clear Creek watershed, symbolic meaning does not suffice. Retaining a focus on the material aspects of the landscape—its creeks, rivers, and soils—along with its symbolic content—its existence as a concept—is critical to understanding its function as an inducement to action. The watershed *topos* is persuasive because it collapses the material and the symbolic: because it is both land and landscape. As such, it transforms from scientific to rhetorical language and induces Clear Creek's farmers and landowners to act on its behalf.

Conclusion

This essay traced the history of the watershed *topos* through historical sources and then explored its persuasive appeal in a contemporary watershed-based conservation effort in the Clear Creek watershed. I have argued that watershed-based conservation succeeds insomuch as it prompts identification with symbolic and material aspects of the watershed, which include physical features of the landscape and the promise of a cooperative community. In so doing, I have offered a situated analysis of the relationship between rhetorical change and landscape change. The material and the symbolic, as I have demonstrated here, collapse in the words, attitudes, and actions of Clear Creek's farmers and landowners, allowing the watershed, in the terminology of Kenneth Burke, to shift from scientific to rhetorical language, thereby prompting a change in attitude that becomes an inducement to action. I argue that the watershed succeeds in shifting

from a rhetorical commonplace to a common-place, a shared material and symbolic site that mobilizes farmers and landowners to make substantive changes on its behalf, and that this shift offers a means for us to consider both symbolic and material aspects of the rhetorical landscape.

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Notes

[1] I use the terms *topos* and commonplace interchangeably in this text, employing them to mark a word, phrase, or statement that circulates through communal beliefs, evoking the places—both material and symbolic—where persuasive arguments occur. This framing of a *topos* as a commonplace collapses the work of Crowley and Hawhee (2004) and Cintron (2009), all of whom break from Aristotle's (1991) framing of the special topics (*eide*), those belonging to a specific field, and the common topics (*koina*), literally "common places," those useful for any argument at all (p. 46, I ii 21). Unlike Aristotle, Crowley and Hawhee (2004) used the term commonplace to refer to the special topics (not common topics), defining commonplaces as "statements that circulate within ideologies" (p. 96), where "ideologies are bodies of beliefs, doctrines, familiar ways of thinking that are characteristic of a group or a culture" (p. 106). Cintron (2009) also broke from Aristotle, preferring the term *topoi* to commonplaces by Crowley and Hawhee for the special topics. In recent work, he offered his own definition of *topoi* as "storehouses of social energy" (2009, p. 28), highlighting the social force, or *energeia*, inherent in every *topos*. I use both *topos* and commonplace to highlight the inventive and persuasive aspects of the watershed.

[2] A note on methodology: this work offers rhetorical analyses of historical texts, public documents, and ethnographic interviews, adopting a critical approach to the ways language and landscapes offer points of identification for American farmers. This fusion of ethnographic method with rhetorical analysis, commonly referred to as rhetorical ethnography, builds from the work of Cintron (1998), Carrithers (2005), Rai (2008), and Herndl et al. (2011), among others. Rhetorical ethnography provides a self-conscious window onto both the ordinariness of daily lives and landscapes and the wide-reaching economic and environmental policies within which farmers, landowners, and conservationists make decisions about agricultural land.

From 2008 to 2011, while serving as watershed intern with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), I completed ~500 h of field observations throughout the watershed, attended monthly meetings of the Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Project Board of Directors, hosted a women landowners meeting, created and maintained a watershed mailing list of ~1000 watershed landowners and operators, and distributed a watershed-wide survey to all agricultural landowners.

That work informed my 30- to 240-min semistructured interviews with 18 agricultural landowners, operators, conservation staff members, and board members identified by the

Watershed Coordinator. Interviews were audio recorded with informed consent, and I subsequently transcribed them. My rhetorical analysis of the transcripts, framed by rhetorical analyses of public and historical documents, attended to common phrases, themes, arguments, and ideas.

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