Book Review

Reynolds, W. M. (2017). *Forgotten Places: Critical Studies in Rural Education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Inc. International Academic Publishers.

Review by Michael Corbett
Acadia University and the University of Tasmania

Citation: Corbett, M. (2018). Book review of "Forgotten places: Critical studies in rural education." *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 33*(5), 1-4. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.18113/P8JRRE3305

It is easy to begin any writing about education in rural places with the sort of corrective language that alerts the reader the dangers of rural myths and misperceptions. I will assume for the purposes of this review, that this is no longer necessary. Still, if there has ever been any doubt about the diversity of rural America, and about rural places generally, this book will put them to rest. If there is any doubt about the ways that educators and researchers engage this rural diversity, *Forgotten Places* adds to the existing material about strong place-sensitive rural education practice in communities challenged by multiple change forces. Finally, if there is any doubt about the range of contemporary theoretical perspectives that can (and should) be used to examine rural education, this book also provides a necessary corrective. Rural education scholarship has clearly come of age in the sense that much of it now employs sophisticated theory, engaging concepts, methodologies, ethics, and political positioning that bring the local and the global into simultaneous focus by showing how rural places have increasingly permeable boundaries, yet retain their differences from metropolitan geographies.

This new collection, edited by curriculum theorist William Reynolds, will appear to rural education scholars as simultaneously familiar and novel, in my estimation. *Forgotten Places* builds upon work in curriculum theory with a southern U.S. focus initiated in the work of Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) some time ago, and which has influenced and developed similar cultural studies-inflected work on rural place and identity in Appalachia, the South, and in the American Midwest. Most of chapters in this collection will be familiar to rural education researchers in the sense that they are located in nonmetropolitan geography and the landscape of the American countryside and in the rural lifeways animate the various accounts, most of which take a narrative form. This has become standard fare in the field of rural education, for better and/or for worse.

The diverse narratives in the three latter sections (Parts 2-4) of the book draw primarily on the accounts of scholar-practitioners who describe and unpack work that they have done in rural places throughout the United States and beyond. The various pieces cover familiar ground in the sense that they illustrate the struggles of educators working to develop locally sensitive curriculum in the face of placeless policy, curriculum, and assessment mandates. The increasingly germane and not entirely unfamiliar ground of race, religion, guns, social class, and gender also appear in these accounts, marking a shift from rural education analysis that focuses on an imagined homogeneity and the supposedly close-knit character of rural "communities" (Corbett, 2014). They also tell the stories of stressed communities which have been transformed by industrial restructuring and by population movements that have "hollowed out" places (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) while at the same time reconfiguring them as tourist destinations and other forms of postproductivist landscapes that have long been discussed in the rural education and rural studies literatures (Argent et al, 2013; Pini & Mayes, 2015; Woods, 2010).

What is unusual is the way in which each of these accounts engages explicitly with some form of (mostly French) critical theory. The landscape here is broad, and it ranges from the better known rural education stalwarts like Dewey, Marx, and Freire, to living and not-so-dead theorists taken up across the social sciences and humanities such as Foucault and Lefebvre, to less well-known figures in North American like Deleuze, Kristeva and Authusser. This work is refreshing, as is the way in which most of the pieces in the collection engage problems in rural education from the perspective of critical curriculum studies. This approach should be new and engaging to many of us in the field who work in a sociological or psychological framework, or in the emerging fields of rural mathematics education or rural literacies, for example. While none of these theorists is particularly new, established scholarship in the field of rural education has only begun to engage

All correspondence should be directed to Michael Corbett, Professor, School of Education, Acadia University, Emmerson 302, Wolfville, Nova Scotia B4P 2R6 (michael.corbett@acadiau.ca).

The *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is published by the Center on Rural Education and Communities, College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802. ISSN 1551-0670

with this material, predominantly in the work of emerging researchers. These new scholars in the field particularly will find this collection stimulating and useful. Pouring the new wine of the particularities of rural education research sites and situations into the more or less old bottles of Marxist, poststructuralist, cultural studies, deconstructive, and spatial theory is indeed important work.

Still, reading the various pieces in this collection provokes me to wonder with Connell (2010) when non-indigenous North Americans will develop some homegrown theory that takes us beyond the Europeans and Deweyan pragmatism. When will rural education researchers (myself included) learn to listen to the established knowledge frameworks, practices, and methodologies that are actually indigenous to our own settler society geographies (Battiste, 2013; Corbett, 2009; Faircloth, 2009; Greenwood, 2009; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 1999; Waters, 2003)? There are a couple of pieces in this collection that seem to provide some inspiration in this direction.

The collection opens with a set of five theoretical pieces. The title for the pieces in Part 1 uses geographies and cartographies as framing language to situate a series of chapters located in (and across) curriculum studies, cultural studies, critical theory, poststructuralism, spatial theory, and indigenous knowledge. And yet, ironically, only one chapter engages with contemporary cultural geography in the way that Green and his collaborators have done, for example (Green, 2008; Green & Letts, 2007; Green & Reid, 2014; Reid et al., 2010), and more recently, Cervone (2017). These initial contributions in Part 1 set the stage theoretically for a larger set of 16 essays (Parts 2-4) that relate projects and experiential accounts of teaching and living in rural places. Most of these latter contributions depict effective place-sensitive work undertaken within coherent communities, contradicting the chronic deficit framing of rural education within the ambit of well-known and established metrocentric, generic policy, curriculum, and assessment regimes. Twelve of these substantive chapters relate exclusively to the U.S. experience while four are international in scope. All but one has a clear grounding in the rural, and while Reynolds problematizes his own past conflation of rurality and the American south as a quintessential cultural coupling, other diverse ruralities are taken up in the collection. Given that between one-half of a percent and three percent of the American land mass is taken up by urban space (depending on the definitions of urban and rural employed), this diversity should come as no surprise. Indeed, several of the chapters address mythic constructions and conflations that come to represent the rural in American culture and consciousness.

It is difficult in the space of a short review to take up the diverse theoretical and substantive issues and perspectives offered in this collection. What is important from my perspective is the way that diverse critical theorizing can challenge the simplifications and glosses around rural America that have accompanied the rise of Donald Trump and the politics of nativism and ressentiment. Analysis of what Reynolds calls the "violent cartographies" instantiated in U.S. popular media to understand how rural places are constructed as sites of alterity, horror, deficit, and derangement serves as a powerful corrective framing for anti-rural sentiment. The lovely chapter by John and Ford analyses two theoretical techniques for transcending the rural-urban binary through Marxist-inspired spatial analysis and indigenous knowledge that both critique, in different ways, the production of space under transnational capitalism within the nation state, as well as globally through colonialism.

A thread running throughout many of the chapters is the tensions experienced by place-sensitive educators working in a metrocentric machinery that treats all places in the same way and orients the education system and its participants to see themselves as self-interested, atomized, neoliberal subjects rather than members of a coherent community. Another key thread is the work of teaching against the grain of this hegemony. The corollary blaming of rural people (and their alleged resistance to education) for the situations in which they find themselves is another thread woven through the analysis. All of this helps us understand better the many types of fuel in Trump's hateful bonfire and perhaps why so many rural citizens apparently seek some warmth around it. At the same time, there is a plethora of scholarship in place-based/sensitive education, much of it in the rural education literature, that is not taken up in any of the pieces in this book, which is an unfortunate gap in the collection.

The influence of French poststructural and deconstructive scholarship in this collection is heavy. At the same time there is a flavor of U.S. ethnocentrism about the whole collection. Across the various chapters, including the more theoretical chapters in Part 1, there is really very little engagement with established European or Oceanic rural studies and rural education literatures, or with American and/or international place-based education, indigenous land-based education, or with environmental/sustainability education or geographic literatures, all of which are rich sources of productive critical scholarship. Indeed, in his introduction to the collection Reynolds claims that in the book "rural places, their impact on lived-experience, and their absence in educational literature, particularly critical educational literature are addressed" (p. xiii). To me, this illustrates persistent gaps between the all-too-siloed fields I mention above, and the curriculum studies/theory space out of which Reynolds and many of the authors write. While there is some level of engagement in the substantive chapters with the field of rural education (in the United States for the most part, although some Australian sources are cited), the more theoretical pieces that open the book and provide its framing do not significantly engage this literature.

While there are several chapters dealing with international rural education, these appear to be written by American scholar-practitioners (all but two or three of the 30 authors in this collection appear to be American) from a more or less "touristic" perspective. Steinberg, in fact, uses the idea of the "rural tourist" in the foreword, and several of the chapter authors are fairly explicit about their limited engagements in the domestic and international rural geographies they investigate. As is often the case when academics write narrative about the rural, it is from a spatial and temporal distance, often drawing on more or less nostalgic memory work.

Here we encounter one of the central ironies of rural education writing generally in the sense that university scholars typically produce it from urban locations. Perhaps the field still awaits its Wendell Berry, although scholar-farmers Paul Theobald, Craig and Aimee Howley may be said to have provided a more embedded perspective. Some of the authors in this collection identify spatially as "born and bred" southerners, rural folk, and in the case of one author, as a member of an indigenous nation whose sense of place is deeply embedded and spiritual. Others just as explicitly describe "going out" to rural places both within the United States and beyond, which remains a common teacher's experience around the world. Some contributors are insider-outsiders who have left a rural place of origin and who write back into rural space, while some have developed affinities and connections through longstanding engagement in rural communities. Still others treat rural space in a more abstract fashion, sometimes while simultaneously acknowledging how the very idea of rural itself is real and imagined following Lefebvre and Soja. What is interesting here is the diverse ways of relating in and to rural space and also deciding, in the act of writing, the extent to which it is important to spatially locate as an author, for instance, within the substance of the chapter itself or in the biographical notes at the end of the book.

This critique notwithstanding, *Forgotten Places* was for me a wonderful read. It does a great deal to recognize both the diversity of rural educational problems/contexts, and the corollary diversity theoretical tools that can be used to make sense of them. The collection also foregrounds the experience of living and working as an educator in unique and particular rural situations and communities which are all too often bulldozed under the blade of the spatial production and reproduction of contemporary capitalism operating in coordination centralized policy designed for cities. These authors seem to get this persistent dynamic, and they give important witness to its effects. This is a group of critical curriculum scholars who have much to offer the field of rural education.

Unfortunately, rural education has not yet developed the critical trans/multidisciplinary synergy and profile of our urban education counterpart. Indeed, this very rural-urban binary remains problematic in the sense that it continues to influence the relative importance of fields within education. This collection shows how diverse rural scholars, many of whom may not explicitly have not explicitly identified the rural within their work, have similar interests, experience and much to learn from one another. Reynolds' stimulating collection signals for me that it is high time those of us working in different branches of educational research such as environmental education, the geography of education, the sociology of education, curriculum studies, urban education, and so forth started to communicate better. This collection has certainly encouraged me to explore further.

References

Argent, N., Tonts, M., Jones, R., & Holmes, J. (2013). A creativity-led rural renaissance? Amenity-led migration, the creative turn and the uneven development of rural Australia. *Applied Geography, 44*, 88-98.

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich.

Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. J. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Cervone, J. A. (2017). *Corporatizing rural education: Neoliberal globalization and reaction in the United States*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Corbett, M. (2009). Assimilation, resistance, rapprochement, and loss: Response to Woodrum, Faircloth, Greenwood, and Kelly. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *24*(12). Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-12.pdf

Corbett, M. (2014). The ambivalence of community: A critical analysis of rural education's oldest trope. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *89*, 603-618. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2014.956532

Faircloth, S. C. (2009). Re-visioning the future of education for Native youth in rural schools and communities. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *24*(9). Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-9.pdf

Green, B. (2008). *Spaces and places: The NSW Rural Teacher Education Project*. Wagga Wagga, NSW: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University.

Green, B., & Letts, W. (2007). Space, equity, and rural education: A "trialectical" account. In K. N. Gulson & C. Symes (Eds.), *Spatial theories of education: Policy and geography matters* (pp. 57-76). New York, NY: Routledge.

Green, B., & Reid, J. A. (2014). Social cartography and rural education: Researching space(s) and place(s). In S. White & M. Corbett (Eds.), *Doing educational research in rural settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions* (pp. 26-40). New York, NY: Routledge.

Greenwood, D. A. (2009). Place, survivance, and white remembrance: A decolonizing challenge to rural education in mobile modernity. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *24*(10). Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-10.pdf

Kincheloe, J. L., & Pinar, W. F. (Eds.). (1991). *Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: The significance of place*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Pini, B., & Mayes, R. (2015). Australian rural education research: A geographical perspective. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *25*(3), 26-35.

Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, *36*(S1), 7-14. doi:10.1017/S1326011100004646

Reid, J.-A., Green, B., Cooper, M., Hastings, W., Lock, G., & White, S. (2010). Regenerating rural social space? Teacher education for rural-regional sustainability. *Australian Journal of Education*, *54*, 262-276. doi:10.1177/000494411005400304

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London, UK: ZED Books.

Waters, A. (Ed.). (2003). *American Indian thought: Philosophical essays* (1st ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Woods, M. (2010). *Rural*. New York, NY: Routledge.