

Book Review

Rethinking Rural Literacies: Transnational Perspectives

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Rethinking Rural Literacies: Transnational Perspectives co-edited by Bill Green and Michael Corbett, brings together international scholars from two distinctive fields—rural education and literacy studies—to provide scholarly insights into the role and significance of literacy practice and education in and for rural social development. Collectively the chapters seek to explore and contribute to a deeper understanding of how such notions as “literacies,” “education,” “social justice,” “rurality” and “place-consciousness” together might better serve our world. What emerges from the chapters in this book is that there is indeed “no essential rural” (p. 8) and yet across and between the chapters a greater sense of rurality is intimately evoked.

The book deliberately returns to, and builds from, the term *rural literacies* first coined by Donehower, Hogg and Schnell (2007) in the book of the same name. In the original text the term *rural literacies* is defined as “literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas” (p. 4). In this new book the term is redefined within the broader transnational perspectives such as mobility, globalisation and place and space. Authors from multiple international perspectives including Australia, Canada, the United States and Finland all come together to examine and “explore the intersection of contemporary research in literacy/literacies education from the perspective of rurality that globalisation opens up” (p. 2). In so doing the book seeks to renew and extend a socio-critical interest in the understanding of the term from a wider global perspective. As such, the book explores *rural literacies* as “multiple, mutable and mobile and ever relational, they inevitably float in a global sea” (p. 12).

The book’s overall theoretical orientation draws upon three strands of thinking; the idea of place-conscious

education as it applies to literacy education; the view of literacy as a social practice, and; the notion of “eco-social justice” (Gruenewald, 2003). The significant contributions of this book include the ways it examines these three inter-related strands, how it encourages the reader to rethink the relations between the non-human and human world, and particularly the way it extends the notion of eco-social justice. Rautio and Lanas (Chapter 11) do this particularly well. While caveats and caution are attached to the shared definition of rurality, “as the eco-social world beyond the Metropolis” (p. 2), it is a definition that many of the authors take up and explore. As Kerkham and Comber (p. 197) in their chapter highlight “there is now wider recognition that ‘social justice’ may need rethinking to foreground the nonhuman world and the relation between people and politics of places, people and environments in terms of eco-social justice.”

The text is organized thematically into four sections: Conceptualizing Rural Literacies; Literacy/Pedagogies; Place and Sustainability, and; Mobilities and Futures. Depending on ones’ own research or scholarly interests the reader may choose to connect with an idea, author, focus, place or methodological stance. All chapters consider the three theoretical orientations. In the first section, the authors here open the “literacies” and “rural education” discourse(s) and examine and foreground for other chapters the different but complimentary ways in which these two scholarships dialogue together. Howley’s chapter brings mathematical education into the conversation, further expanding the notion of “rural literacies.” The three following sections are relatively compact but all continue to encourage us to rethink “place and pedagogy, text and reading practices and place and space” (p. 11). The introduction chapter itself serves to navigate the reader to the conceptual framing of the text and shares insights into the collective thinking and individual contributions of the authors. The section entitled *brief tour of the book* (p. 7) is an excellent summary of the chapters and a great place to begin for those uncertain about how to navigate this text.

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As to be expected in a book that examines and extends the understanding of “literacies” and “rurality,” throughout one finds examples of poetry, photographs and images, biographical recounts, transcripts and more, each that could be read separately but in the whole are so deeply linked and intertwined together as to become what Kelly (p. 55) describes as an “entanglement of texts, places, histories and identities.” This entanglement takes the form of a rich textual landscape where readers can travel to many different (un)known rural places and spaces, equally real, virtual and imagined and are introduced to a multitude of people, times, places, spaces and storylines. The deep connection of the self as reader and the travelling through these places and spaces in the book—both those we may know physically, depending on our orientation to these places and to those imagined and virtual, connects the places to each other and to us and our own research.

The image on the cover: a dirt road winding into green rolling hills, with a soft sunset backdrop, is an interesting and beautiful example of “aesthetic literacy” (See chapter 11.) which is offered to be read and interpreted just as much as the chapters within this book. The cover perhaps is a contradiction of what the work represents if we take seriously that the rural “should not be seen in opposition to urban but as part of a complex global economic and social network” (Donehower, Hogg & Schnell, 2007, p. xi). The cover poses an interesting conundrum of how this text may be taken up by those similarly wrestling with the question of how we work beyond “preservationist nostalgia and promotes forward-looking transformational thinking” (p. 2).

It is important to acknowledge that this book is a product of funding support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) because such funds provide the opportunity for international collaborations. The funds supported this particular collaboration and has resulted in this significant contribution to a global examination of ways to better serve those “beyond the metropolis” and we as readers of this work, should demonstrate the impact of such work in our everyday lives. A goal of this book is to keep rurality on the agenda. This book review hopefully furthers this goal and will help connect both experienced and novice researchers to this broader research landscape.

References

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- Gruenewald, D. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40, 619-654.