

## Book Review

### *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy*

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Citation: Shannon, T., & Shannon, P. (2012). Book review “Reclaiming the rural: Essays on literacy, rhetoric, and pedagogy.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 27(2). Retrieved from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/27-2.pdf>.

In a January 3, 2012 editorial, Thomas Friedman asked the Republican candidates for the U. S. Presidency to attend to “the world in which we’re living and how we adapt to it.” At the top of his list, he wanted America to exploit the power created when information and communications technologies (ICT) meet globalization. ICT has flattened Friedman’s world, providing “faster and cheaper tools with which anyone anywhere can innovate, collaborate and create.” Globalization positions more and more empowered anybody into ecosystems – the best of which will be found in “cities and towns that combine a university, an educated populace, (and) a dynamic business community”—where they can collaborate to collect, sift, mine and analyze “Big Data” in hopes of discovering and claiming new commodities and services. Rather than extending ICT access “to the last 5 percent of the country in rural areas,” Friedman warns that America should redirect its efforts to supply ultra high-speed bandwidth to the top 5 percent of these smart cities or fall from first world status. The remaining 95 percent must either adapt to this organization of the world or suffer impoverished lives.

In *Reclaiming the Rural*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell compile 13 studies that seek to disrupt metaphors of urban dominance and centrality as exemplified by Friedman. In their introduction, the editors challenge successive representations of the “rural” as they have been articulated over time through changing political economic circumstance—first as a site for development, then, a site of development, and now under neoliberal governance, a site *in need of development* (Peet 2007).

They arrange the studies into three sections. In the first section, authors investigate the social construction of space. For example, Cori Brewster describes how the state,

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agribusiness, and NGOs discursively align to produce a corporate image of farmland and farming for the general public and school children. The second section delves more deeply into issues of diversity within those spaces. By combing through rural women’s life stories, Jane Greer articulates how the “everyday genius” of the remaining 95 percent has and can transform spaces into places of collaboration across difference. The third section explains how rural citizens use forms of literacy to interrupt and extend common rural themes and practices in order to imagine and produce sustainable livelihoods. Robert Brooke, for example, presents the “Voices of Young Citizens” project in which teachers, elementary through high school, helped their students to create rhetorical space in which to talk back to neoliberal projections of the portability of market-driven policies and practices across multiple circumstances.

The authors disabuse at least three nettlesome metaphors of the neoliberal rush toward all things urban, which position the rural remainder as needy, simple, and passive. Several chapters tackle the Enlightenment notion of the inherent goodness of development. Marcia Kmetz describes the psychological and material consequences for two groups when corporations employ and maintain large-scale agricultural systems for export in regions where water is scarce. Damian Baca troubles the colonizing nature of developmental discourses as wave after wave of modernizers “settled” the area currently known as northern New Mexico—the Spanish, the Anglo-European, and then, the Manhattan Project. Thomas Butler and Jacqueline Edmondson report how federal and state “big data” policies to improve rural schools subvert the possibilities of schools serving as community centers.

Other authors complicate the notion that rural life is simple—without diversity or innovation. Carolyn Ostrander challenges assumptions about rural gender roles, relating

how the early Grange movement invented speaking and leadership roles for women within 19th century communities. In a wonderfully theorized piece, Valerie Mulholland explores the complexities, advances and resistance in identity negotiations and construction within racialized Saskatchewan. I. Moriah McCracken inventories the funds of knowledge inscribed within the 4-H record books, including the statement “I pledge my head to clearer thinking.” With anguish and conviction, Christian Goering and his coauthors report on the rhetorical struggle over the definition and consequences of rural poverty and lived experiences uncovered through the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project. Each of the authors in this volume presents the rich diversity, the complicated layered lives, and the struggles to develop the tools and practices necessary to maintain rural communities through shifting political economic circumstances.

Across each chapter, the authors put to rest any notion of rural passivity by promoting expanded notions of text, clear ideas about public pedagogy, and recognition of the politics of it all. Reading is projected as an agentic act, where individuals identify and critically engage with neoliberal representations of rural subjectivities, enforcing a particular rationality onto their attempts to make sense of and perform their day-to-day experiences, potential life-paths, and conceptions of their multiple identities. Cynthia Ryan demonstrates this reading-wide-aware in an investigation of the strategic use of the romanticism of farming within texts pushing farmers toward large-scale agriculture. Susan Myers examines how messages of self-improvement in rural Mexican schools cloak the modernist agenda of national cohesion and capitalist development, encouraging students to leave school and migrate in order to better their lives. Sara Webb-Sunderhaus describes how first generation female college students subvert the expectations that academic literacy is for consumption in order to enforce their understandings of literacy as a source of communal power to help all succeed.

Our only concern about the book is its handling of the issues of modern “rural”/“urban” debates. We think that the contributors miss an opportunity that Friedman and other neoliberals make apparent—the rural/urban binary is no longer relevant because the people of both spaces/places are the members of the 95 percent meant only to serve the best of the ecosystems as they invent the future. Although integration and linkages are mentioned in the Introduction, too little is taken up across the chapters to demonstrate the scattered geography of modern commodity life-cycles or to unite the exclusion or “throwing-away” (Bauman, 2004) of specific populations in the city, suburbs, and countryside (Klein, 2007) in the context of, as Friedman puts it, “the world in which we’re living.” If the urban-centricity of Friedman and the like is to be challenged, then

champions of the rural must directly engage the ideology of the “world-city”-based global economic paradigm (Taylor, 2005) where the city is held up as the alpha and omega of the post-Fordist economy—rendering all else invisible, and therefore, not important. Taking this step requires, not only a “non-problematic” rural subjectivity, but a fundamental rethinking of the geography of problematization where place is approached as open, relational, and performed in order that we might better grasp how different localities (both “urban” and “rural” in nature) act within global networks (Massey, 2005).

Despite the under-theorizing of the geography of democracy, *Reclaiming the Rural* is a valuable collection that reminds us that the world and our lives have not been digitized, exchange is not our only value, and the democratic project of equality has not been abandoned by all. By letting us see the lives and hear the voices of these times and in these places, the authors show us that using the past and present, we are inventing our futures wherever we are. Those are very good lessons for all.

## References

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