Book Review


Review by Rachelle Kuehl
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As a critical scholar interested in describing the influence of whiteness1 on U.S. education, my research concerns context, or the ways in which students’ experiences in school are differently affected by the ideology of whiteness in different places. My explorations have taken place in K–12 schools, where I have sought ways to provide equitable learning experiences for talented rural learners (Kuehl et al., 2022; Kuehl & Snyder, 2023) and examined rural teachers’ use of literature to launch discussions of issues surrounding race (Kuehl, 2023). Because much of my work is aimed at situating young rural learners to be equitably-positioned to achieve success in future postsecondary endeavors, I was very interested in reading Race and Rurality, especially because studies have shown that rural Students of Color have even fewer opportunities for advanced learning than their white rural peers (Floyd et al., 2011; Hemmler et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). I had hoped this book would provide insight into what happens when the talented rural students for whom I have advocated as elementary and middle school students attend college, and it did not disappoint.

A strength of this book is the way in which each author describes their own positionality in relation to race and rurality. In that spirit, I want to share that, like a few of the authors, I did not grow up, and have not lived, in rural places, and, as a white person, I do not have the personal experience that would allow me to fully relate to the ways in which the intersectional identities of rural Students of Color complicate their college trajectories. Many of the chapters emphasize that intersectionality has a multiplicative effect (Atewologun et al., 2016) on students’ experiences. An example shared by Cain and colleagues (Chapter 20) is the way rural Students of Color can feel exceptional pressure to succeed in college because they can be seen to represent

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1 In this review, I chose not to capitalize “white” and “whiteness” to mirror the editors’ chosen usage for the book (see Hallmark et al., pp. 10–11).
both their race/ethnicity and their rural communities. Having
been, perhaps, one of the relatively few students and/or
Students of Color in their home communities to “make it”
to college, they do not want to be seen as a disappointment,
a sentiment expressed by rural teen characters in a set of
young adult novels analyzed by Parton and Kuehl (2023)
and reflected in research focused on rural students’ decisions
about staying in or leaving their hometowns (e.g., Carr &
Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Farmer et al., 2006; Sherman
& Sage, 2011). Additionally, as Puente discusses in Chapter
7, rural Students of Color from immigrant backgrounds (in
this case, those whose families are migrant farm laborers)
might feel especially motivated to attend and succeed in
college after having witnessed the sacrifices their parents
made to ensure these opportunities were possible for them.
In this way, Puente takes care to frame rural agricultural
communities in the Southwest not as “education deserts”
but as “places of desire” where rural multilingual Students
of Color can and do dream and thrive.

Authors of the longer research chapters employed
various methodologies. In Chapter 2, Sowl and colleagues
reported on an extensive literature review of published
articles relating to college access for rural Students of Color,
which they noted had increased substantially since the racial
reckoning of 2020. Chapters 3 and 22 present studies that
used quantitative methods to explore differences in college
access and completion between rural Students of Color
and Students of Color from urban/suburban communities
(Jenks, Chapter 3) and differences in sense of belonging
among rural Students of Color who did and did not report
receiving mentoring support in college (Soria & White,
Chapter 22). Chapter 9 is a critical policy analysis by
Collins and Rockey that investigated the extent to which
postsecondary educational equity policy initiatives in three
Illinois communities address the needs of rural Students of
Color. They found that statewide efforts aimed at advancing
equity for Students of Color were not employed outside the
Chicago metro area, garnering invisible (and underserved)
the state’s many rural Students of Color. In Chapter 17,
Vanesse and John-Shields introduce a model for rural
Alaskan schools to use in assessing their approaches to
preparing Native Alaskan students for college, which the
authors assert should center on framing cultural identity
as an advantage, maintaining high academic expectations
accompanied by strong supports, and encouraging families
to participate in navigating the college application process
in ways that reflect the interdependence valued in Native
communities.

Qualitative studies that relied on participant interviews
were especially common and primarily involved researchers
asking rural Students of Color to describe their experiences
leading up to, and while attending, college (Chapters 6,
7, 14, 15, 16, 20, and 23). One study (Cain et al., Chapter
20) also asked students to identify mentors who were
then interviewed about their perceptions of students’
experiences. Two additional studies (Vaughn & Renbarger,
Chapter 8; Eddy et al., Chapter 21) interviewed directors
of federal TRIO programs at RSIs and rural community
college administrators, respectively; the study presented in
Chapter 8 also included a survey.

One of the primary challenges expressed across the
book in various interview studies with rural Students of
Color was that students felt less prepared for the academic
rigor of college as compared with their urban and suburban
peers. To be sure, the limited access to advanced high school
courses in rural schools is a pervasive inequality that rural
scholars have long decried (e.g., Byun et al., 2015; Gagnon
& Mattingly, 2015). Additionally, while some rural Students
of Color (those from predominantly white rural areas)
expressed a sense of relief and excitement at being part
of a more racially diverse population than they were used
to, they often felt out of place among urban and suburban
Students of Color because of their rural backgrounds
(e.g., Black rural students were concerned about sounding
“country”; Flowers, Chapter 15). I found Chapter 14 by
Stone and Serrata especially compelling because of its
exploration of the ways in which the mixed feelings many
rural students have about their home communities are
complicated and exacerbated by race. In it, rural Latina
students in Texas described having to reckon with the
bigotry they now realized (after leaving) was present in
their conservative-minded rural hometowns, where some
people accepted them only as “exceptions” to their racist
perceptions of immigrants. The students interviewed felt a
sense of “survivor’s pride,” a term attributed to coauthor
Serrata and used to describe having avoided outcomes
such as substance use disorders and teen pregnancy that
were all too common among their peers. Still, having been
raised in primarily ideologically conservative places, these
young women “perceive[d] their peers’ choices as outcomes
of individual decisions and not outcomes of socially
constructed expectations based on class, gender and race”
(Liou et al., 2021, as cited in Stone & Serrata, 2023, p.
166). Conversely, students from predominantly Black rural
areas battled feeling out of place at the predominantly white
University of Mississippi, especially considering its notably
racist past (Pfrenger et al., Chapter 16). This sentiment
mirrors those described by rural African American students
from another Southeastern state (Means et al., 2016) who
did not consider applying to the state’s flagship university
or its highly selective land grant university because they had
visited both and deemed them uncomfortable given the few
Black people they encountered on campus.

In their introduction, the editors describe an exhortation
from Carrillo and colleagues (2021), who found a vast
underrepresentation of Communities of Color in their
One structural note about the book is that while I enjoyed the Notes from the Field and found them to be valuable in providing glimpses at critical hope, which foreword writer Joy Gaston Gayles defines as “the ability and capacity to hold struggle and possibility together while taking action toward liberation from oppressive systems and structures” (p. xv), they were often difficult to spot while reading. That is, there is no designation in the Table of Contents or in the chapter headings to alert the reader to the fact that what they are reading is one of the Notes rather than a longer research chapter, so sometimes I found myself reading along and being surprised to see the chapter end so quickly. Readers can refer to Table 1 to see the breakdown of chapter types and note that the Notes from the Field are the last two to four chapters of each of the four sections. Within the

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Standard Chapters</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Considered all major racial/ethnic groups</td>
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<td>Alaska Native</td>
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Notes, some of the programs described that were specific to certain racial/ethnic groups and places included the Pasifika Scholars Institute at the University of Utah (Vaughn, Chapter 18), designed to frontload, and then maintain, mentoring support for rural Pacific Islander students as they transitioned to college; the Freedom Project Network in Mississippi (Creps & Harris, Chapter 11), a statewide network grounded in Civil Rights history providing year-round programming to rural African American students from middle school through college; and the Rural Student Project in New Mexico (Bott-Lyons & Levin, Chapter 12), where rural Latinx and Indigenous college students work with community members on agricultural projects and learn about important cultural and political figures like Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez.

By and large, the authors’ recommendations for improving the experiences of rural Students of Color in higher education center around providing layered supports (Pfrenger et al., Chapter 16) that attend to the needs of rural Students of Color in multiple, overlapping ways. These supports include intentional mentoring from professors, university staff, community members, local professionals, and peers; providing spaces on campus for rural Students of Color to engage with others who share their rural identities and those who share their racial/ethnic identities (and spaces where they can express both identities at the same time; Flowers, Chapter 15); and opportunities for rural Students of Color to learn more about, and celebrate, their own cultural identities. They also recommend increasing recruiting efforts in rural communities as well as establishing opportunities for rural Students of Color to return to their home communities to support younger students through the college application process. They urge higher education professionals to think deeply about the unique challenges faced by rural Students of Color and to be more intentional about mitigating those challenges. All these suggestions and recommendations align with McDonough and colleagues’ (2011) argument that “higher education needs to take responsibility for serving rural communities without expecting them to conform or assimilate to dominant cultural practices” (p. 192).

Overall, I felt this book was a meaningful, educative collection that gave a broad view of race and rurality in higher education as well as specific examples that helped personalize both the challenges rural Students of Color experience as well as the assets they reach for when meeting and overcoming those challenges. Yet, considering the dominant narrative of rural spaces in the United States as being overwhelmingly white, I would have liked to see contributors take up more substantially the issue of whiteness as an ideology and its pervasive impact on rural Students of Color. As such, a suggestion I might make for researchers is to engage more with critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness scholarship. While some chapters did mention CRT (e.g., Chapter 16) and the work of noted whiteness scholars like Cheryl Matias (Chapter 2), Zeus Leonardo (Chapter 20), and Nolan Cabrera (Chapters 16 and 26) in some of their initial framing, I felt they could have delved more deeply into these theories to help readers understand how and why the systems in place—systems that are rooted in white supremacy—have led to the circumstances that currently disadvantage rural Students of Color in higher education, and to consider the necessity of dismantling these systems. I believe deeper examination of this field of scholarship would help contextualize and provide further insight into the ways in which race, racism, and rurality converge to shape rural students’ experiences in academia; Cabrera’s work focuses on whiteness in higher education and would be especially useful in this regard (see Cabrera, 2024). Additionally, while this book did an excellent job of unpacking the influence of the intersections of two primary identity markers (racial/ethnic and geospatial), with some attention paid to gender (e.g., Stone & Serrata, Chapter 14), it is important to note that many rural Students of Color experience further multiplicative effects from challenges related to additional identity markers such as queerness and disability that should also be explored.

I mentioned earlier that the authors of Chapter 2 had noted an increase in race-related scholarship in rural education journals following George Floyd’s murder at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in 2020. Like many people and organizations across the globe, rural education scholars were affected deeply by being made more aware of the blatant racism that led to Mr. Floyd’s death—racism that many had not previously understood was systemic in nature, not merely individual attitudes towards people of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds. As part of this worldwide racial reckoning, the Rural Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association created a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee that then hosted a widely attended webinar series featuring panel discussions highlighting work being done with rural Communities of Color (Azano & Means, 2022). The *Journal of Research in Rural Education* published a special issue exploring the Black Lives Matter movement in relation to rural education (Joubert & Lensmire, 2021), as did *Theory and Practice in Rural Education* (Gallagher et al., 2021), who called theirs a “Special Issue on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity in Rural Schools and Communities.” In 2022, *The Rural Educator* also published a special issue about race and rurality in education (The Editors, 2022), meaning that all three major rural education journals recognized, and acted upon, the urgency to increase the attention paid to People and Communities of Color in rural education research. Further, the National Rural Education Association highlighted both “Spatial and Educational Equity” and
“College and Career Trajectory” as foci in its 2022–2027 Research Agenda (Hartman et al., 2022). Under Spatial and Educational Equity, the committee issuing the agenda highlighted “research from intersectional perspectives” and “dynamics of white supremacy/identity” as two lines of inquiry; under College and Career Trajectory, “identifying deficit ideology imposed by adults in college and career processes (e.g., racism/classism)” is highlighted. Finally, the 2023 Why Rural Matters report (Showalter et al., 2023) emphasized rural diversity, or the likelihood that two students from the same school district selected at random would identify differently in terms of race, as one of the key gauges for determining which states are considered “highest-priority”—those “where a convergence of factors impacting the schooling process result in extreme challenges to rural schooling, and therefore have the most comprehensive needs for policymakers’ attention” (p. 19).

All in all, this volume, Race and Rurality: Considerations for Advancing Higher Education Equity (Hallmark et al., 2023), is an informative text that takes up these calls from the field by addressing concerns related to race and rurality that have received far too little attention in previous scholarship, and I highly recommend it for rural scholars, higher education scholars, and scholars of race and ethnicity in education. In Chapter 6, Colvin and colleagues quote Pini and Bhopal (2017, p. 192), in reminding us that “one of the outcomes of the imagined whiteness of the rural is that it has licensed a view that race is not a concern for rural areas” (p. 65). This skillfully edited volume goes a long way in disabusing that notion and moving the field forward towards equity and social justice for and within rural communities.

References


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