Toward a Geography of Rural Education in Canada

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Abstract

The field of rural education has not been significantly developed in Canada and the marginal status of the rural itself has contributed to this peripheral status. The emergence of geography and spatial thinking generally in social theory and in educational thought represents an opportunity to re-evaluate the importance of space and place in educational theory and policy discourse. Rather than a space formal education leaves behind, or as the location of impoverishment, isolation, and deficit, I argue that rural communities occupy an important place on the Canadian educational landscape. Given the economic, political, and cultural challenges they face, I suggest rural schools may produce higher quality educational outcomes than are generally attributed to them.

Keywords: rural education, policy, geography, assessment

Résumé

Le champ de l'éducation rurale n'a pas été développé de manière significative au Canada et le statut marginal de la ruralité elle-même a contribué à son statut périphérique. L'émergence de la géographie et de la réflexion spatiale au sens large dans la théorie sociale et la pensée éducative représente une opportunité de réévaluer l'importance de l'espace et

du lieu dans la théorie éducative ainsi que dans le discours politique. Plutôt qu'un espace délaissé par l'éducation formelle ou que le lieu de l'appauvrissement, de l'isolation et du déficit, mon argument est que les communautés rurales occupent une place importante dans le paysage éducatif canadien. Étant donné les défis économiques, politiques et culturels qu'elles rencontrent, je suggère que les écoles rurales produisent peut-être des résultats éducatifs de qualité supérieure à ce qu'on leur attribue généralement.

Mots-clés : éducation rurale, politique, géographie, évaluation

Introduction

Not so long ago I met a new colleague who asked me about my research. I told him I am a sociologist working in the area of rural education. "Oh, you do international work," he replied. This perception of rurality in education is not uncommon. The implication is that rurality exists in "developing" societies, not in advanced, "modern" places like North America. Furthermore, in the context of modern capitalist states, rurality is either a peripheral, relatively unimportant and "empty" geography or a historical artefact. Indeed, there is a teleological argument that perhaps sits at the heart of theoretical traditions across social science disciplines. This is the notion that rurality is the condition out of which societies are thought to develop and become capitalist, democratic, and urban. In this metanarrative, education is inevitably associated with the urbane, the modern, and with development, while rurality is associated with isolation, alterity, untamed nature, uncultured rusticity, resistance, and underdevelopment. In this account of progress, rurality is a part of the insular, tradition-bound, "idiotic" conditions of historical oppression (Marx & Engels, 1998; Adorno, 1971).

Apart from problematizing this metrocentric developmental narrative, this article has two central purposes. The first is to raise issues arising from an analysis of contemporary rural geography, particularly Henri Lefebvre's (1992) idea of the production of space, and relate these concerns to questions of rural education. This analysis takes up rurality as a theoretical and policy-relevant construction in the context of modernity and globalization. The second purpose is to question the idea (and the foundational assumptions that support it) that rural schools can be close-knit, cosy arrangements for children and their families, although they tend to underperform academically. I proceed from an analysis of modern conceptions of rurality and some key tensions in thinking about rurality today, to an analysis of rurality in contemporary educational discourse. Rather than accept the common deficit discourse, I look at international standardized assessment data for select Canadian provinces to raise questions about rural education performance. I conclude by making suggestions about the appropriate ends for rural education and why we need to continue to challenge rural deficit discourse and develop more complex and rich spatial analysis of Canadian educational phenomena.

Rurality and Modernity

Rurality and the rural are emotionally generative ideas that tend to get mired in the utopian/dystopian cross-fire between those who live on the geographic margins of the metropolis on one hand, and policy makers and demographers on the other, who use constructions of rurality in the formation of policy. Today, one of the most important lingering questions in rural studies is: What is rural? Apart from the view that rurality is no longer a useful concept in advanced capitalist societies, this is a debate which includes fundamental questions about the way that the division between urban and its rural other have been constructed and mobilized in policy debates. It is very easy to skirt this debate and simply accept the ostensibly neutral statistical definitions that map population categories and places on the basis of density and proximity to the metropole. It is equally easy to retreat into the micropolitics of a school consolidation, or a post-office closure, as important as those struggles are to the people living through them. Both of these approaches miss the complexity of social space as a real and imagined nexus of the production of contemporary capitalism that is every bit as dynamic as historical and social change (Lefebvre, 1992; Soja, 1996).

Contemporary understandings of rurality are now built on a more complex understanding of geography as a produced space and not a neutral container (Cloke, 1997; Cloke, Marsden, & Mooney, 2006; Woods, 2011). Rurality is also a cultural phenomenon; it is a set of ideas and distinctions that have particular lived meanings. Rurality is fundamentally a spatial notion, but as Keith Halfacree (2006) points out, the spatial must be thought about in terms of its materiality, the imaginaries it generates and represents, the "ideational" relationships and binaries it requires to make sense, and, the practices carried on in rural places. Seen in this way rurality is a social category that can be particularly helpful for thinking about the complexities of space and place in educational thought, as Bill Green suggests with his concept of rural social space (Green & Letts, 2007; Reid, Green, Cooper, Hastings, Lock, & White, 2010; Green & Corbett, 2013).

Indeed, the rural-urban binary is central to the geographic imaginaries of many advanced capitalist states. Raymond Williams pointed to this classical distinction in the *Country and the City* (1973) and in works of fiction such as *Border Country* (1960/2006) and *Second Generation* (1978). The discursive divides between the rural and the urban are caught up with cultural distinctions between allegedly divergent ways of life. While

these distinctions are difficult to draw clearly, the massive emotional connection between the countryside and the "real" Britain, Canada, or Australia remains prominent. Derrida's (1978) concept of difference is useful here because it helps us understand that linguistic categories only make sense in terms of the field of relationships in which they are embedded and employed. The linguistic field around the term "rural" tends to place it in opposition to terms like "urban," "modern," "developed," "diverse," "culture," "cosmopolitan," "multicultural," and "literacy," as the emerging field of rural literacies demonstrates (Donehower, Schell, & Hogg, 2007; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2011; Green & Corbett, 2013). If the urban is understood to be coterminous with modernity, rural is typically positioned as modernity's other. Rurality can also be seen as education's other (Corbett, 2006; Ching & Creed, 1997; Donehower et al., 2007; Theobald, 1997).

On the other hand, it is possible to simply dismiss rurality as a defunct distinction and argue that contemporary rural communities have become effectively similar to metropolitan spaces in the sense that they are transformed by the same networked change forces that have revolutionized transportation and communication, and which have effectively "compressed" space and time on a newly flattened earth (Friedman, 2005). Foucault's (2010) biopolitical argument, on the other hand, suggests that one of the key mechanisms of power in contemporary societies is the way that individuals are grouped into bounded populations in what Richard Florida (2005) has described as a "spiky" landscape of social difference and inequality. Institutional education is unquestionably one of the key fields in which divergent populations of ability and disability, social position, inclination, and psychological difference are discovered, framed, and formed. The work of biopower and population formation and reformation is by now a massively complicated undertaking. Like gender, race, and social class, rurality is a long-established social science population classification and one of the key independent variables used to explain differences in economic advantage and educational achievement. The invention, use, and maintenance of rurality as a population-formation device has specific effects both at the level of redistribution of state transfers and at the psychological and cultural level, as people subject to the definition create their own meanings of rurality.

The result of this complex demographic and cultural rural space is the foundation for a number of highly charged dynamics, tensions, and what Woods (2006, 2007) calls "the politics of the rural." Here I pay particular attention to my own immediate context, the province of Nova Scotia, which is both statistically/demographically and culturally

more "rural" than most parts of the country. A recent government report on the state and future of the Nova Scotian economy commented that in the 1950s the Nova Scotian population was about 50% rural (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014). Today the percentage is not substantially different, with around 45% of Nova Scotians living in rural places. The work of Canadian historian Ian McKay (McKay, 1994; McKay & Bates, 2009) illustrates how the deliberate construction of a land-based, rustic, communal, ethnically exclusive sense of the "real" Nova Scotia is taken up by elites to mask economic exploitation and racism. Perhaps more importantly though, this same rural folk mythology is also taken up by many ordinary Nova Scotians in activities as diverse as multiple traditional self-provisioning practices, folk music, folk art, and movements for the sustainability of small agriculture, fishing operations, family businesses, and rural services and schools. At the same time this rustic folk ideology is also taken up by the state in tourism promotion (Kelly, 2013) and in established regional capitalists' marketing of products and services (such as petroleum and forest products, food and alcohol, entertainment, and recreation). This complex mix of rural imagery, cultural capitalism, and uneven power relations creates tensions that mobilize the idea of rurality and rural social space in ways that are complex and not always predictable. At the same time it is now more widely understood how this imaginary, and its resilience, discourages immigration and social and economic development (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014; Moreira, 2009).

Where is Rural Education in Contemporary Policy Discourse?

So while rurality has been an important demographic, cultural, and psychological location, little has been made of what rurality means in education. This is because the rural seems to be a space the educational apparatus efficiently modernizes or wants to forget (Corbett, 2006; Theobald, 1997). Rurality is education's country cousin; it is other to a sophisticated, educated, and urbane sensibility (Berry, 1977; Ching & Creed, 1997; Theobald, 1997). This quote from the introductory statement for the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), held in Berlin in 2011 on the theme of urban education, illustrates the conflation of urban life and education:

> Cities are greenhouses for educational change and educational reform
> all over the world and also in Europe. Cities have always been regarded

as leading elements in Europe; they are modern, progressive, and networked. They are producers and traders; they are a medium for political and cultural development. (ECER, 2011 para 2)

If the urban is quintessentially education-focused, what might be said about the rural? The ECER statement goes on to address the dynamic and diverse nature of cities and the educational potential that post-traditional, networked, and less "rooted" circumstances provoke. Yet the field of rural education has been, and continues to be, caught up in a long-standing struggle to increase attention to the concrete and to place. Indeed, a commonplace part of the way that the rural-urban binary is constructed has do to with the hands-on, outdoor, pragmatic, decentralized, concrete working life of the rural versus the abstract, enclosed, cultural, symbolically-focused working life of the urban. Still, to deny that the rural-urban distinction is irrelevant is to risk the erasure of the qualitative differences in lifestyle, geographic location and surrounding, historical experience, spatialized poverty, and possibly social capital that rurality often represents. This can lead to a blurring of the distinctions in culture that the rural-urban distinction or continuum represents. To put it even more bluntly, if rurality is not defined as a distinct category and as a legitimate and consequential space of marginalization, then it is possible to ignore and blur the common and particular problems faced by people living on the fringes of the metropolis.

Educational questions figure importantly in discussions of public policy today; but how is rural education situated in these conversations in Canada? Dawn Wallin (2007) has produced a good synopsis of the kinds of policy issues taken up by various provincial jurisdictions around rural education in which she found relatively little that is specific to rural places in most Canadian provinces. Where the rural is addressed, it is typically framed in terms of rather generic policy concerns like the provision of special services, facilities, electronic learning, inter-agency cooperation, and staffing. These issues all have a particular rural inflection but they are, with the exception of the issue of school closures (Canadian rural education policy can arguably be boiled down to consolidation and closure of schools), questions of teacher recruiting and retention, and possibly distance electronic learning, which are not specific to rural contexts.

As Phil Cormack (2013) has pointed out recently, there is nothing in most contemporary education policy or curriculum that prevents teachers from modifying general expectations and outcomes to local conditions; indeed, in the era of loose-tight

governance, this is precisely what is expected of teachers. This form of educational governance actually puts considerable pressure on teachers and other lower-level system players to adapt standardized expectations to local conditions and to "close the gap" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). In the end, though, it seems that many teachers feel like they are dancing a dance choreographed in an office in the city. Increasingly, those living in rural areas are not content to accept the metrocentric vision of policy that tends to end up either misunderstanding or ignoring significant social and economic questions that plague rural communities.

Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992) have long ago pointed out that globalization cuts in two directions, creating the conditions of standardization and individualization at the same time. The tensions that this apparent contradiction sets in motion in policy is well articulated by Ozga and Jones (2006) who address "travelling and embedded policy," the former referring to the work of transnational agencies and networks of influence whose agenda it is to develop forms of surveillance that push national education systems toward common metrics for the measurement of human capital development and educational performance. Embedded policy at the same time is "found in local spaces … [where] global policy agendas come up against existing priorities and practices" (Lingard & Ozga, 2007, p. 69). On the one hand, we find a placeless discourse that imagines a unified "world culture" where education and the production of a generic human capital is the fundamental task of an equally unified global education system (Spring, 2008). On the other hand, we find in the very same global dynamics a strong challenge to the ability of nation states to organize "a particular set of cultural scripts" and a "collective narrative" (Lingard & Ozga, 2007, p. 72–73). These challenges come from a number of sources interested in cultural and social uniqueness, and these indeed include rural interests.

In this contemporary policy discourse we find a shift toward individualization, differentiation, choice, deregulation, and fragmentation. Globalization cuts both ways in education policy just as it does in other matters generating novel, unstable, and unpredictable institutional forms, riskscapes, identities, and configurations of power and authority. While there are ever-increasing centralized assessment and governance mechanisms, there is at the same time a corollary proliferation of alternative, custom-fit private and publicly funded (e.g., charter schools) "options" for what used to be a unified public school system. In addition to neoliberal fragmentation/choice initiatives (Ball, 2012), ethnic diversity, cultural hybridity, increasingly fluid flows of human and informational

migration, identity politics, and other contemporary change forces also generate pressure on all public institutional spaces, including education. The result is a new policy space, increasingly informed by big and small data, that contains dual pressures enmeshing the local and the global in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Increasingly, those at the bottom are actually told to work out local responses to circumstances that are created by globalized relationships. Place continues to matter in education policy, but primarily as a locus for the implementation of generic outcomes.

Whether or not these loose-tight governance structures make it more or less possible to interpret curriculum in a more place-sensitive way is an interesting question. While an analysis of the impact of loose-tight governance structures in rural education would be interesting in itself, I wish here to address a central rural-education policy problem and challenge stereotypes of rural schools as cosy and place-based, yet academically inferior institutions. Spring's (2008) analysis of the fundamental tension between education as a convergence mechanism that promotes what he calls "world culture" and the countervailing divergent tendency toward individuality, identity politics, and localism is my focus here. This tension, I argue, could create conditions where standardized outcomes are actually improved by strong, place-sensitive educational practices.

Standards and Place

The juxtaposition of standards-based and place-based educational practices is typically framed by setting traditional test-focused pedagogies against experientially focused progressive variants. The simplistic imagery around the former is a school that focuses on teacher accountability, test preparation, a generic and abstract basic-skills curricular agenda, and increased automaticity of response in students. The equally simplistic imagery around the latter is a school that is focused on connections between children's experience and vernacular knowledge practices in the community and constructive, non-automatic pedagogical engagements. Often in the rhetoric around rural education there is an assumed trade-off between one pedagogy that is relevant and engaging but does not address the problem of standards, and another pedagogy that is not particularly engaging but does lead to improved test scores. The reality, of course, falls somewhere in the space between these two poles.

To state the stereotype bluntly, Canadian rural schools are inferior to urban and suburban schools and, while they may be close and cosy and better reflect the communities they operate within, they produce inferior academic results. I want to attack this formulation not by comparing these two approaches to curriculum and pedagogy (e.g., place-based versus standards-based frameworks) but rather by examining some evidence at different scales. Nespor (2004) argues that it is important to consider scale in analyzing educational questions. What I would like to do in this section is scale down from the macro using data from the Programme for International Student Assessment and Census Canada to consider the possibility that rural schools in Nova Scotia, which tend to be smaller and relatively remote, actually perform well considering economic conditions in these communities. Of course, there are problems with this argument, not the least of which is that relentless consolidation and amalgamation of schools in most of rural Canada has meant a significant erosion of the locatedness and possibly the place focus of rural schools. Nevertheless, I think there may be evidence that points to a small rural school effect (Jimerson, 2006; see also Meier, 2003 for an urban example of this argument) that produces strong results in a hostile policy environment, even using questionable standardized measures as a gauge.

I think this is particularly important in the analysis of the impact of educational policy in rural areas and in centralized national education systems, but also in relatively decentralized systems like that found in Canada and the United States. Bringing "laggards" up to national standards in the Canadian case is not the responsibility of the nation state, but rather the unequally resourced provinces. In terms of scale, by placing the emphasis for curriculum interpretation more squarely on the shoulders of teachers within the framework of centrally defined outcomes overseen by centralized bureaucratic surveillance regimes, responsibility for educational failure is downloaded on to school boards and teachers.

One way to illustrate this problem is in the analysis of recent results from the Project for International Student Assessment (PISA) (CMEC, 2010). Nationally, Canada scores somewhere near the top of participating countries. Canada, however, has no national education system, and when provincial systems are compared there are significant differences in performance. Here I compare three predominantly urban provinces with one predominantly rural province, Nova Scotia. According to Statistics Canada's

definition of rurality, Nova Scotia is 45% rural, as compared to Alberta and Ontario, each of which is less than 20% rural.

It is easy to see here how family income appears to influence test scores. What is also evident though is that the difference in PISA scores is considerably less than the difference in income between more urbanized provinces and more rural Nova Scotia. In fact, the percentage difference between Nova Scotia and Canada's top-performing province, Alberta, in aggregate reading, science, and math scores is between 3% and 4%. This compares with an income differential of approximately 30%. Additionally, Nova Scotia's reading results in the 2006 PISA assessment were the most equitably distributed of all Canadian provinces, and the province's results are the second or third most equitable in the other two subject areas. In the past decade, Nova Scotia has also had the lowest or second lowest per-student expenditure on education of all Canadian provinces for the past decade and a half, hovering right around the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in recent years. Finally, Nova Scotia's graduation rate has been over 80% for the past decade while that of Alberta has lagged well behind through the same period.

The point here is not to suggest a simple causal connection between school size or rurality and academic achievement but rather to point out the complexity of the way that what happens in schools has a great deal to do with what happens outside school and in communities. For instance, despite the fact that Alberta has the best financed education system in Canada, and the best overall performance of any province on assessments like the PISA, the oil boom and a high demand for both skilled and unskilled workers has a profound impact and young people often leave school to take high-wage, low-skill jobs. Still, the question remains as to whether or not there is a small, rural school effect, and some evidence suggests that there might be. A 2003 Statistics Canada sponsored study, that compares rural and urban reading scores based upon the 2000 PISA results, provides one explanation (Webber, 2003). This study found that while reading scores were higher in urban areas vis-à-vis rural areas of Canada, there were interprovincial variations in the extent of these differences. Overall, though, the study concludes that rural students were more likely to come from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. This is no particular surprise, and it has been confirmed by other analyses (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Cartwright & Allen, 2002). What is surprising is that when Webber

(2003) controlled for SES and community background factors, schools in rural areas would outperform their urban counterparts in all provinces but one, Alberta.

The question then arises as to whether the difference that rurality and place makes in explaining both relative social and economic inequality. A second question concerns the possibility that rural communities also retain a level of social capital and small school size that actually may support place-based educational practices that in the end support academic achievement (Howley & Howley, 2010; Jimerson, 2006). This is certainly an argument that generations of small-school activists have made to save their schools from closure and consolidation. This could also serve as an argument for looking more carefully at educational practices in rural schools that tend to be smaller and more inclusive than urban schools. We do not know the answers to the empirical and policy questions I am suggesting here, but I think that in rushing to close small rural schools as fast as we can (allegedly to save money), we may, in fact, be missing an opportunity to evaluate a potential mechanism for the improvement of academic performance in communities of economic disadvantage, and thus, potentially improve living conditions in those communities as well. Indeed, others have gone so far as to suggest that small rural schools are a better model for national school reform than the big-box school (Klonsky & Klonsky, 2008; Theobald, 1997).

So one can argue that the more heavily rural school system of Nova Scotia, given the relatively low income level of its family units, actually overperforms on the PISA, and is quite possibly performing at a level similar to that of francophone Quebec, another possible performance anomaly given low family incomes in that province. In the more rural province of Nova Scotia, with its concentration of small, relatively isolated schools, it is possible that academic achievement as measured by tests like the PISA may actually be excellent given the economic disadvantages endemic to the province's underserviced and economically marginal rural communities. This might signal that there is an interesting relationship between school size, place, and standards that warrants more careful study. The reality is that, as yet, nobody has asked the question in a serious and systematic way.

Rural Education in Mobile Modernity

Of course, no actual education system can or should educate anyone to reproduce life as and where it currently is, notwithstanding attempts of various sorts of fundamentalisms to put a lid on change. By the same token, all education happens in a place, and it is inevitable that the experiential quality and character of life in that place will enter into the educational experience no matter how hard we may try to remove it. In much of my previous work, I have encountered the staying-leaving binary as a marker of identity that is embraced by a large number of those youth who wish to reproduce the communitarian and productivist dreams of their elders. It was common for young people to point to a fisherman who had made a lot of money in the 1960s and 1970s and claim that they too could do the same thing if they worked hard enough. Apart from a failure to recognize changes in the industry, this kind of perspective is part of what Woods calls the "paradox of productivism" (2011, pp. 74–80). The paradox of productivism is the idea that a "good" farmer, fisher, or logger produces more each year. The goal of the work is to expand production and make more profit that, paradoxically, both increases and decreases the stability of the industry. There is no doubt about the instability of global resource industries and thus of many rural communities that have depended on them.

To prepare young people for the communities that exist only in rural imaginaries that have passed into history, or that are unsustainable, is inappropriate if not unconscionable. It might be more useful to imagine what a good farmer or a good fisher might look like outside the productivist paradigm. Furthermore, what might a rural education system look like outside the productivist paradigm? I am suggesting here an alternative to what might be called an "educational productivist paradigm"; its results are a school system which is focused on increased, measured "production," and educating students for deployment in other places. At best this this vision encourages the reinvention of spaces and places that youth will have to create themselves by dint of the entrepreneurial initiative and creativity-focused education they receive if they are privileged or lucky enough to attend a good school. This suggests a new level of difficult-to-measure innovation-focused outcomes to layer over the existing roster of easy-to-measure outcomes.

If we imagine good farming, fishing, and logging in another way though, the whole equation might change in a way that will require more workers and different workers for a multifunctional rural economy. For instance, how can traditional industries

be profitably and sensibly combined with emerging industries like ecotourism and information technology? It is quite probable that formal education will play an important role in the emerging possibilities that rural communities will be able to exploit. It is also fairly clear that, in a more complex economy, the kind of education that focuses on specialization and a highly differentiated, technically-focused division of labour may not be the best preparation for the emerging rural economy. Ironically perhaps, it may be a more academic, creativity-based, and innovation-focused curriculum that fits best with this new reality and the real challenge for 21st-century rural education is, I think, to support policy thinking that may not seem immediately relevant and job-ready.

This new educational sensibility may be emerging in the form of the smart farmer, whose small-scale, ecologically sustainable operation provides specialty food to niche markets of ever more demanding and quality-conscious consumers. He or she is not so much an innovator as an improviser riffing differently on well known structures and cadences (Corbett, 2013). And what new sort of good logger or fisher might be born in a revitalized rural space which is newly attractive to telecommuters, vacationers, retirees, small-scale entrepreneurs, artists, and innovators? These new producers need more than ever to see themselves, their activities, and their products in a broader market and ecological context, and this will require a broader and deeper education, which is attuned to complex and dynamic rural space. What kind of curriculum, what school, and what pedagogical practices might fit well with the culture and the needs of changing multifunctional rural communities that will no longer be separating the allegedly intelligent from the allegedly dull for out-migration? To my mind, all of these questions require a careful interrogation of the historically problematic relationship between the country and the city.

Conclusion: Beyond the Binaries

The tensions to which I point above serve the ambivalent purpose of both inscribing established binaries while at the same time providing the conceptual material for consideration of new ways of thinking about education and/in rural places. Williams' (1973) classic problematization of the city-country binary, and the way it both enlivens imagination and identity while at the same time obscuring the fundamental connections between rural and urban spaces, set the agenda for more complex thinking about what the rural

might mean. Similar analyses have been common in the rural studies literature, at least since Ray Pahl's classic essay (1966) that problematized the rural-urban binary.

Additionally, work in critical geography (Soja, 1996, 2010; Massey, 2005) and cultural studies (Anderson, 1991; Bhabha, 1990; Appadurai, 1996) have interrogated the way that established binaries have served to naturalize social differences. Both Soja and Bhabha argue for the exploration of new spaces of combination, or what they call "third-spaces." For Bhabha, colonialism is best understood as a complex encounter that creates new hybrid social, cultural, and economic formations, as well as new identities that neither represents colonial assimilation nor an essentialized aboriginality. John Ralston Saul (2008) makes essentially the same argument about the way that historic racial "essences" have impeded an understanding of the complexity of a Canadian identity, which has been formed out of the multiple relationships between First Nations and settler societies that began arriving in the 17th century. The difficulty though with much of this contemporary geographic analysis is that it seems to be largely uninterested in either the condition or the fate of rural places. This lack of interest seems to create a vacuum that continues to be filled with utopian/dystopian simplifications that do little to help rural communities facing uncertain futures (Baeck & Paulgaard, 2012). Nor do they help address the massive environmental challenges that must be met on the transnational landscape of a global rurality.

There has been a tendency in rural education to understand place as a kind of antidote to everything from individual alienation to the ravages of corporatization, mechanization, marketization, and commodification. But the rural utopian and/or therapeutic imaginary (Kelly, 2013) is troubled by the divergent imagery of irrelevance, decline, and backward traditionalism. Those who live on the land and who know it well are in the way of progress. Consider Wendell Berry's (1977) powerful imagery of any steward of the land being caste again and again as a "savage," and more or less violently moved out of the way for ever-emerging forms of development which concentrates an increasingly alienated, desensitized, and narrowly-skilled population in the cities.

At the same time though, this highly emotional discourse of dispossession can be, as Nespor (2008) has argued, misguided by visions of place-based education that imagine a natural connection between people and place. A sense of never being at home seems increasingly normal. We are, as Sherry Turkle (2012) suggests, "alone together" in networked "spaces of flows" that transcend bounded "spaces of place" (Castells, 2009; Urry,

2000). Obviously, our lives are framed within a matrix of networked globalization that none of us completely understands. No longer can rural places be defined by insularity outside the flow of information, goods, and services. No longer are rural places any less "thrown together" (Massey, 2005) than urban locales. It is worth quoting Doreen Massey at length here:

> Attempts to write about the uniqueness of place have sometimes been castigated for depoliticisation. Uniqueness meant that one could not reach for the external rules. But "politics" in part precisely lies in not being able to reach for that kind of rule; a world which demands the ethics and the responsibility of facing up to the event; where the situation is unprecedented and the future is open. Place is an event in that sense too. Reconceptualising place in this way puts on the agenda a different set of political questions. There can be no assumptions of pre-given coherence, or of community of collective identity. Rather the throwntogetherness of place demands negotiation. In sharp contrast to the view of place as settled and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by "external" forces, places as present here in a sense necessitate invention; they pose a challenge. (2005, p. 141)

As Massey writes, this understanding of space as an emergent construction rather than a neutral container can help us understand why conceptual binaries have led to dead ends and to an endemic failure in the social sciences to understand, manage, and predict as effectively as they might. Educational reform has never come to grips with the emergent nature of social space and the extent to which all efforts at control and governance are met with the inevitable resistances of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2008; deCerteau, 1984; Scott, 1999; Foucault, 1998). This is not simply an educational problem; it is a general failure of imagination at a broader national level. The catastrophe that many parts of rural Canada represent is a fundamental failure to confront the scale and scope of the opportunities that vast tracts of resource-rich land offer and at the same time accept the stewardship responsibilities these geographies need today. Until rural places, along with other marginalized geographies, are considered as key parts of national and international economics, as complex cultural landscapes, and as spaces of opportunity rather than spaces of liability, we are likely to continue to see rural depopulation, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment.

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