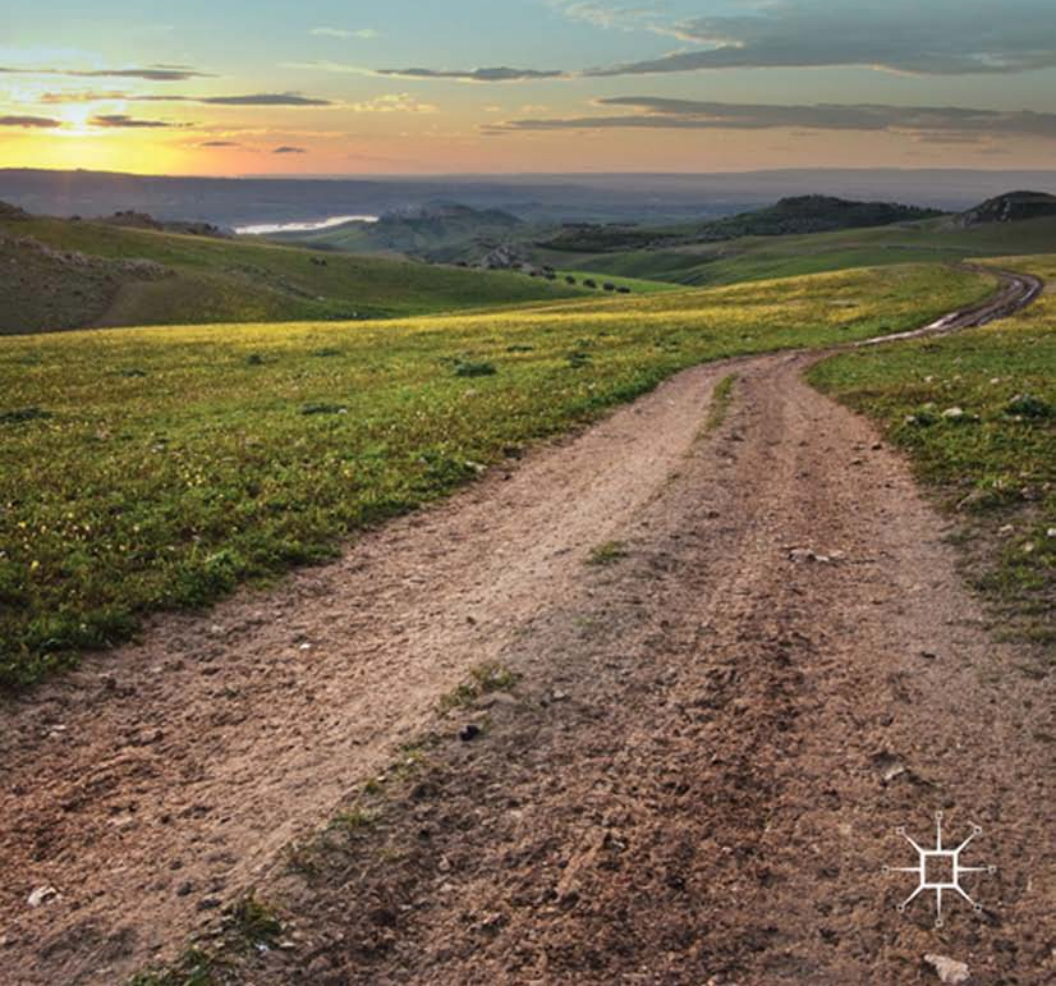


Rethinking Rural Literacies

Transnational Perspectives

Edited by
Bill Green and
Michael Corbett



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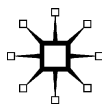
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RETHINKING RURAL LITERACIES

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
------------------------------	-----

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
------------------------	----

Rural Education and Literacies: An Introduction <i>Bill Green and Michael Corbett</i>	1
--	---

Part I Conceptualizing Rural Literacies

1 Literacy, Rurality, Education: A Partial Mapping <i>Bill Green</i>	17
2 Why Not at School? Rural Literacies and the Continual Choice to Stay <i>Kim Donehower</i>	35
3 Find Yourself in Newfoundland and Labrador: Reading Rurality as Reparation <i>Ursula Kelly</i>	53
4 My Roots Dip Deep: Literacy Practices as Mirrors of Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Ruralities <i>Karen Eppley</i>	75
5 Another Way to Read “The Rural”: A <i>Bricolage</i> of Maths Education <i>Craig Howley</i>	93

Part II Literacy/Pedagogies

6 Exploring Rurality, Teaching Literacy: How Teachers Manage a Curricular Relation to Place <i>Phillip Cormack</i>	115
--	-----

- 7 Rural Boys, Literacy Practice, and the Possibilities of
Difference: Tales Out of School 135
Jo-Anne Reid
- 8 Reconfiguring the Communicational Landscape: Implications
for Rural Literacy 155
Kathryn Hibbert

Part III Place and Sustainability

- 9 Thinking through Country: New Literacy Practices for
a Sustainable World 179
Margaret Somerville
- 10 Literacy, Place-Based Pedagogies, and Social Justice 197
Lyn Kerkham and Barbara Comber
- 11 The Making of “Good-Enough” Everyday Lives: Literacy
Lessons from the Rural North of Finland 219
Pauliina Rautio and Maija Lanas

Part IV Mobilities and Futures

- 12 Reading Futures: Exploring Rural Students’ Literacy Practices
in Neoliberal Times 241
Kate Cairns
- 13 Mediating Plastic Literacies and Placeless Governmentalities:
Returning to Corporeal Rurality 257
Michael Corbett and Ann Vibert

Notes on Contributors 275

Index 279

Illustrations

Map

8.1	Rural Ontario and Location of Participants	163
-----	--	-----

Figures

8.1	The Family Farm	157
8.2	Banksy, Detroit, 2010	159
8.3	The Salty Chip: A Canadian Multiliteracies Collaborative	170
10.1	Sound Map	210
11.1	Aesthetic Literacy	228

Table

6.1	Features of the Rural Mentioned by Teachers	120
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Rural Education and Literacies: An Introduction

Bill Green and Michael Corbett

This volume explores the relationship between literacy studies and rural education, expressly from a transnational perspective. It is worth clarifying, at the outset, what we are dealing with, in bringing together not only two quite distinct fields of scholarship but also researchers from a range of countries, with contributors from Australia, Canada, the United States, and Finland. First, we see the need to take into account the possibility that there may be quite different *ruralities* in play, but also, conceivably, quite different *literacies*. Indeed, it seems highly likely that there are, across and within national contexts, differing constructions of the rural, as well as different manifestations of rurality, depending in part on geography but also on culture (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 2011, p. 10). Second, what counts as literacy, and also literacy studies, needs to be (re)articulated, and made explicit. This is because there may be distinct affordances in different scholarly cultures and different educational systems, from primary schooling right up to graduate work and beyond. Different things are imaginable or intelligible, according to standpoint, and acknowledgment of the now thoroughly globalized nature of academic inquiry, including that associated with both literacy studies and rural education. Hence, there are different rural imaginaries evident across this book, and divergent experiences and histories, *despite* important commonalities and connections. Literacy is also variously understood and realized, with some of us working with a more constrained view of literacy, at least semantically, as referring to more or less recognizable textual practices, while other uses are more, as it were, metaphorical, or at least more open-ended and adventurous. That range is only to be welcomed, it seems to us, partly because it conjures up possibilities for new realizations and articulations of literacy, rurality, and

education, but also because it helps in rethinking the familiar, *including* the literacy practices of the school, and thereby in enriching both praxis and inquiry.

As indicated, the book explores the intersection of contemporary research in literacy/literacies education from the perspective of the multiple understandings of rurality that globalization opens up. Notwithstanding the rich development of literacies research in recent years, particularly under the banner of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), there is a notable absence of work addressed specifically to the intersection of rural education and literacy studies, as fields of research and praxis. The book brings together scholars from these two distinctive fields to explore various issues within an emerging nexus of concerns about literacy, rurality, and education. It takes an explicitly socially critical interest in matters of equity, disadvantage, and social justice, as well as with regard to its own terms of reference—"literacy," "rurality," and indeed, "education." Hence the very notion of "rural literacies" is thematized *and* problematized.

There is much value, at this particular moment in history, in providing scholarly insight into the role and significance of literacy practice and education in and for rural society. We might begin by defining rurality (albeit provisionally) as the ecosocial world beyond the Metropolis, recognizing that this definition itself needs to be interrogated. While it has recently been announced that, for the first time, more people across the world are living in cities than in the country (Davis 2004; Schaft and Youngblood Jackson 2010, p. 1), that does not mean that rural life should be assigned to the past, or viewed now as more or less irrelevant. For a whole host of reasons—environmental, economic, political, and so on—rurality needs to be kept on the agenda and it is hoped that this book makes its own innovative contribution in this regard. Attention to reconceptualized rural literacies has, therefore, larger (global) ecosocial significance.

The book builds specifically on recent work by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007), whose pioneering book *Rural Literacies* raised questions concerning sustainability in rural communities. They looked at literacies as a window for conceptualizing positive social change that gets beyond preservationist nostalgia and promotes forward-looking transformational thinking. The approach is to confront established stereotypes about rural people and to support them in recognizing and strengthening their literacies, while at the same time supporting a general broadening of the frame of what counts as literacy. This expanded view of literacies is linked to rural social development, the reconstitution of rural places in the face of global change forces, and productive thinking around sustainable

futures (Woods 2007). It has implications well beyond the rural sector, moreover, as Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007, p. xi) assert: “[R]ural literacies are not something for only rural people to pay attention,” since, “rural should not be seen in opposition to urban but as part of a *complex global economic and social network*” (emphasis added). Hence, the book can appropriately be seen as a *complement* to the now burgeoning work addressed to urban education, to questions of place and space in education, as well as to rural education per se, and more generally to global studies in education.

Further, *Rethinking Rural Literacies* works with and yet seeks to go beyond Edmondson’s (2003) account of three distinct “*rural literacies*”: (1) a “traditional” rural literacy; (2) a “neoliberal” rural literacy; and (3) a “new” rural literacy. While seeking to contextualize the first two of these, then, our book provides a further basis for thinking about the third, a new or still perhaps emergent “rural literacy,” to be understood with specific regard to notions of globalization, sustainability, place and space, mobility, representation, and post-rurality.

Conceptual Framework

The book’s overall theoretical orientation draws on three principal strands of thinking. First of all, it is located broadly in the idea of *place-conscious education* (e.g., Gruenewald and Smith 2008), particularly as this applies to literacy education (Comber, Nixon, and Reid 2007; Thomson 2006). The broad argument in place-conscious education is that while educators have long understood the importance of context to learning, we have tended to value more the abstract, the generic, and the imagined “fairness” of allegedly objective forms of standardized pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. Place-conscious educators contend that the most powerful forms of learning engage people in real problems and issues, beginning in their particular, nonstandard communities of practice.

Second, the book is informed by and situated in the context of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), as elaborated further in chapter 1. The NLS framework understands literacy as a social practice through which differently placed agents engage in different kinds of literate activity based upon their social context, the contingencies of work, established family textual practices, personal networks, interests, and inclinations. In this framework, literacies are *multiple*, rather than singular. Projects inspired by the NLS investigate the ways in which ordinary people are literate, rather than trying to understand the extent to which individuals possess particular decoding/encoding or other abstract skillsets assumed to be the foundation

of literacy. Rather than evaluating individuals on an abstracted and generic level of mastery of decontextualized literacy skills, the NLS investigate how people use their situated literacy skills and knowledges in practice. This view of literacy as social practice focuses not just on print, but also on sound and image, and digital-electronic resources more generally.

In this regard, we also want to highlight the key connection between textual practices and life practices—"literacy" and "life"—in the sense that we see literacy as a set of connected political, economic, social, spatial, and psychological practices. So we wish to expand narrow ideas of literacy toward questions of "reading and writing" political, ecological, and economic practices as well. We see these forms of what Freire and Macedo (1987) provocatively called "reading the world as well as reading the word," as fundamental to contemporary literacies in general. Obviously, literacy practices, understood at this level, ought to engage with the distinctive problems, such as widespread poverty, that are endemic to rurality globally. Our book then takes up key problems in educational analysis such as social justice, power, difference, and change, connecting them to cultural and language practices in rural education, broadly understood.

Further, the focus of the book is predicated on the relationship between rural literacies, new understandings and formations of rurality, and what might be called *ecosocial justice*—a concept extending the established notion of social justice to take into account ecological and environment challenges and injustices (Martusewicz and Edmundson 2011; Orr 2004). This is an important and innovative contribution to the existing literature, and to the field more generally.

It is appropriate at this point to make some preliminary observations about rurality, rural studies, and rural education, as an established field of study. This is the third key conceptual strand that informs and infuses the book. Rurality itself is a contested and problematic concept that is caught up in what might be called an oppressive biopolitics. In contemporary societies, rurality has come to represent a category of alterity, a collective and complex identity position that can be either assigned or embraced. It is this very complexity, and the diversity of human and physical geographies that the term rural subsumes, that speaks to its enduring importance. In countries like Australia, Canada, Finland, and the United States, there are massive tracts of rural land that have been acquired forcefully, in most cases from Indigenous people. Today, these lands contain some of the most valuable resource deposits on the globe, and ironically, some of the most economically disadvantaged people. It must also be said that many of these people are disadvantaged principally by their deep connections to place (Berry 1977; Theobald 1997) and by

their inability or unwillingness to become mobile, detached, and “educated,” in the Western sense of learning to live comfortably disengaged from land and sea. It is becoming increasingly clear that historic patterns of colonial/capitalist exploitation and degradation of these lands and the “ruralized” people who are consigned to them is a situation that is both unsustainable and unconscionable.

Given the problematic nature of our key concepts, rural and literacy, many of our contributors were from the outset rather resistant to the whole idea of the rural as a frame of reference, as well as an object of concern. Even so, we believe that thinking of “rurality” remains important and productive, notwithstanding the conceptual and definitional difficulties associated with the term. In this regard, we agree with Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2011, p. 10) that “the rural” must be understood “not only demographically and geographically but culturally as well”—all the more important, given the postmodern turn and the emergence of new formulations and problematics such as “post-rurality.”

The question of *(dis)advantage* is crucial here. Thinking through the relations between space and equity, education and poverty, literacy and social justice, is clearly a matter of some urgency. Addressing the rural in these terms is crucial. At issue is the structural disadvantage experienced in and by rural communities, socially and educationally. More generally, though, the challenge of widespread rural poverty is linked with environmental degradation and racism. In America, a recent report (*Rural Policy Matters*, August 2009; see also Johnson and Strange 2005) identifies 900 rural schools districts (representing 10 percent of the total) as having the highest percentage of student poverty. No doubt similar cartographies could be produced for other countries. In Canada as well, income and unemployment are unevenly distributed, with some rural areas such as Atlantic Canada, northern Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, for instance, suffering greater stress (Canadian Rural Secretariat 2012). In the case of Australia, mapping rural poverty and associated forms of disadvantage is something still to be done. There is no doubt, however, that rural poverty is a significant issue. Taking account of social and educational disadvantage with specific regard to rural (especially inland) Australia remains important, notwithstanding understandable concerns about stigmatization and deficit rhetorics. As Australian rural sociologist Geoffrey Lawrence (1997, p. 32) writes,

[I]n the context of increasing economic polarisation in the countryside and widespread and continued poverty among isolated rural (but especially Aboriginal) populations it could be argued, with some force, that a

return to studies of the causes and consequences of rural social disadvantage is long overdue.

Like more urbanized spaces, rural locales are deeply networked and connected. Today, in a more thoroughly globalized world, the opportunities that present themselves for transnational, collaborative rural education and literacies research are considerable.

Becoming REAL

An immediate context for the book is the establishment of the Rural Education and Literacies Research Network—called, in short, REAL. A concept originally proposed in the mid-1990s, by Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid, REAL is a transnational network of literacy scholars and rural education researchers who work for the most part in specific national contexts. To initiate the network, we (i.e., Green and Corbett) made a successful application for preliminary funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) in its International Opportunities Fund. This enabled us to call for expressions of interest, out of which formed a group that first met in New Orleans, in early 2011, to workshop the preliminary accounts of “rural literacies,” which subsequently became the chapters here.

We firmly believe that bringing together rural education scholars and literacy researchers in this way contributes to informed understandings of rural social space and provides fresh understandings of key problems of rural economic and social development—problems that are increasingly global in scope. Further, and more specifically, questions of rural-regional sustainability are also questions of how rural populations and rural educators understand and manage emerging literacies and textualities, within a globalized and increasingly networked world.

A recurring theme internationally is the variability of educational performance of rural students, particularly relative to those living in the larger centers. For instance, until recently in Australia, this was a constant feature of mainly anecdotal understanding, namely that children and young people from inland rural Australia were educationally disadvantaged relative to their metropolitan counterparts. That has now been confirmed by recent formal evidence, including that arising from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international assessment programs (Welch, Helme, and Lamb 2007). Quite a few Canadian studies have come to similar conclusions (Canadian Council on Learning 2006; Wallin 2009). But

it is what is actually being measured and accounted for that is most relevant here. Educational performance and achievement scores are theoretically broader in their reference than just literacy and numeracy, but in practice it would seem that all too often they are effectively reduced to these kinds of reductionist formulations. This is a particular problem in thinking through the relationship between literacy studies and rural education in Australia—although it also pertains to other countries and jurisdictions, in varying degrees. This is to take due account of what has been called, following Bell (2006), “the ‘transnational rural’ or the way the rural can be imagined globally” (Gorman-Murray, Darian-Smith, and Gibson 2008, p. 41). REAL may well be an appropriate forum to investigate such issues and anxieties, nationally and globally.

However, these questions should not limit the mandate of REAL. Indeed, as we indicate in this book, that mandate extends well beyond the sometimes limited and limiting (albeit still powerful) version of literacy that predominates in policy and schooling, to embrace more open-ended, expansive, inclusive versions, in which “literacy” becomes seemingly more metaphorical. A Deleuzian view of literacy as multiplicity might well be appropriate here, thereby allowing for a more generous and generative understanding of what the project of rural literacies might entail, as a field of possibility.

This book is, hopefully, just a beginning. Already it has occasioned a series of gatherings at meetings and conferences of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), and the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE). We hope that REAL continues to evolve, and gather momentum, with this book being just the first in a series of projects addressed to the articulation of literacy studies and rural education. We see it as a platform for ongoing and expanding transnational dialogue and rich research collaborations that enhance and consolidate literacies work in our national contexts.

A Brief Tour of the Book

The book is organized thematically into four sections: Conceptualizing Rural Literacies, Literacy/Pedagogies, Place and Sustainability, and Mobilities and Futures. From the beginning of the project, the authors have debated the problematic histories and uses of our two central concepts: “literacy” and “rural.” Both, it seemed to many of us, grew out of binary conceptions that have done more to marginalize, discipline, and restrict than they have to open educational, social, cultural, and

economic possibilities. Thus, we began our work from a place of deep discomfort, a discomfort that runs through each of the chapters, most of which speak to substantive literacy work in rural contexts. In an important sense, this is a book in which a group of literacy scholars, working in multiple contexts, trouble their own readings of the rural, with the explicit intention of moving forward by troubling the fixities that are embedded in the common images of both literacy and rurality.

Bill Green's conceptual overview links issues and concerns in rural education with extensive contemporary developments in literacy scholarship and particularly with the sociological/ethnographic turn in literacy studies represented by the NLS. Green sets out several key tensions that are taken up in the chapters that follow. He demonstrates, using spatial theory, how rurality and literacy are both concepts that can be understood only relationally. There is no essential rural, for instance, and the idea of rurality makes sense only when it is placed within a semiotic matrix in a relationship of difference from other concepts (e.g., urban, modern, developed, etc.). Phil Cormack also takes up relationality as he draws upon poststructuralist theory to offer a complex, interconnected, understanding of both rurality and literacy/literacies.

Green further addresses the tension between conceptions of literacy that emanate from neoliberal educational discourses and those alternative situated literacies of emplacement. This tension runs through virtually all of the chapters, as authors grapple with the always-difficult relationship between standardization of curriculum, standardized assessment, and literacy practices and those alternative situated practices that reflect an embodied sense of place. This tension has played out in different but complementary ways in literacies scholarship and in rural education scholarship, respectively, and one key contribution of this book is to explicitly bring these discourses into conversation with one another. For Green, literacies are simultaneously multidimensional cultural-critical practices and operational skillsets, and many of the chapters address literacies as culturally located and diverse rather than singular. This is in part a question of scale, a point made by Green, Margaret Somerville, and also Pauliina Rautio and Maija Lanäs, in this volume. Indeed, as Kathryn Hibbert suggests, literacy and standardized (child, youth, and adult) literacy assessment is often mobilized as a way of defining an educational hierarchy of places, with rurality as deficient and left-behind on the time/space margins. Conceptions of literacy range in scale from the international comparative down to conceptions of literacy as a practice of living in place, and by scaling up or down, governance, disciplinary, and surveillance arguments and policy are made in the neoliberal state.

In this book, literacies are also conceived as implicated in environmental and sustainability practices that, in rural areas, represent commitments to subsistence and cultural activity (including mathematical reasoning, as Craig Howley shows) as well as to emotional and spiritual connections between people, animals, and the nonhuman world. To use the language of Actor Network Theory, the land, the farm, the village, place, or indeed “Country” (as Margaret Somerville characterizes it) are “actants” with which human agents correlate. This is also illustrated in Lyn Kerkham and Barbara Comber’s analysis of how stewardship, eco-social justice, and affinity with the land problematize classic boundaries and binaries that separate people and place and integrate literacies pedagogy with solidarity, struggle, activism, and environmentalism. Similarly, Ursula Kelly shows how the land itself can be brought to life as a powerful textual agent/persuader. Green speaks to the established but still emerging framework of place-based or place-sensitive education that has (both through the lens of the NLS and that of rural education scholarship) kept alive the importance of the local. Both movements have been criticized for truncating analysis and practice at the level of the immediate locale, and we hope this book sufficiently problematizes the idea that rurality is associated only with the small and insular place.

These chapters illustrate how small rural places are not insular and disconnected from modernity, and powerful literacies are fluid personal negotiations. Kim Donehower offers a substantive look into the lives of rural “hyperliterate,” juxtaposing what might be called unschooled literacies of desire with literacies of compulsion, as found in formal educational contexts. Donehower’s work presages a number of later chapters by challenging the way that literacy has been co-opted by efforts to create a mobile, flexible, neoliberal subject, in investigating the placed conditions that have actually supported rural people who engage enthusiastically and deeply with (print) literacy. Kate Cairns’ analysis of a personal development simulation game in a Canadian rural middle school is a good example of the tension between literacy pedagogies that deliberately inculcate neoliberal sensibilities and students’ own literate engagements with their home places and how they enact resistances to the way they are framed pedagogically. Pauliina Rautio and Maija Lanås also take up the theme of literacies of desire in their analysis of Finnish Laplanders’ conceptions of beauty as a way of relating to the symbolic and the imaginary landscapes they inhabit. These are literacies in the rural, indeed in the very bodies of people living in places they consider “good enough,” aesthetically satisfying, and beautiful. Michael Corbett and Ann Vibert also find a *jouissance* as Atlantic Canadian middle school

students improvise with video cameras, exhibiting powerful literacies that represent their own desires and fantasies. At the same time, though, these students and their teachers and parents also worry about the restricted and conventional literacies that seem to really count in the world of the neoliberal school, where they are expected to constitute themselves as disciplined (global) subjects. Lyn Kerkham and Barbara Comber also address the challenges of competing commitments and complex identity negotiations of environmentally sensitive rural literacy educators who both live and teach in rural communities as they enact a rich yet always problematic and tension-filled pedagogy of place.

Ursula Kelly's haunting chapter on a Newfoundland media tourism promotion that is ubiquitous throughout Canada develops a complex argument about how the campaign invokes natural imagery aligned with emotionally laden depictions of rural lifeways to create texts that, perhaps ironically, invite the viewer/tourist to "find yourself here." Kelly argues that simply seeing these texts as a commodification of the rural undervalues the complex psychoemotional work that the texts accomplish. These texts invite connections both for the tourist and for the resident, connections that point to the relational nature of both literate and rural phenomena. Neither rurality nor literacy can then be understood as stand-alone concepts, causing Kelly to wonder: "what is the role of rurality within modernity?" For Jo-Anne Reid, literacies represent an opportunity for a fundamental renegotiation of relationships, a powerful point she makes looking at how her own son and other young males negotiated a complex, multilayered masculinity in a rural space, participating in a nationally broadcast filmmaking project about youth and violence—like Corbett and Vibert, she is concerned with moving image production as a ("new") literacy practice. Hibbert's take on virtual literacies, and the way that rural places can be brought together and represented in online spaces outside the constrained boundaries of formal educational sites, imagines that the Internet ironically creates opportunity for place-based educational practices. The problem of renegotiation is also taken up in Margaret Somerville's chapter, which opens with an explicit rejection of the concept of the rural because of the way it is formed in fundamentally colonial, oppressive, and marginalizing binaries. Somerville enacts her research on Australian Aboriginal lands in concert with her research participants, using a concept she calls "thinking through Country" as both a methodology and a perspective.

Somerville also explicitly problematizes the complexity of relationships in the research act, highlighting the centrality of reflexive awareness. The relationality of literacy practices is also illustrated in Karen

Eppley's account of a county Fair. At one level, the Fair is a celebration of traditional farming practices and lifeways, but at another level, Eppley shows how most aspects of the Fair are inflected by complicated intersections of family farming practices and values, agrarian traditions, corporate agriculture, presentational literacies (such as the formal essay delivered by Fair Queen candidates), and commodification. Eppley demonstrates how the Fair is ultimately a postmodern "mess" of multiple tensions, practices, and literacies. Eppley's account, like that of several others in the collection, balances the analytical lens of the scholar with the self-reflective analysis of a lived practice. Also, in the analyses of Corbett and Vibert, Kerkham and Comber, Cairns, and Hibbert, and even more explicitly in Kelly, there is a powerful association between rurality and loss—perhaps the most familiar single trope in rural education scholarship.

But, importantly, loss and the work of mourning that Kelly invokes are aimed at moving forward into new spaces of possibility. Indeed, most of the chapters are pedagogical accounts of a substantive and generative rural education practice. Phil Cormack's analysis of the work of a group of rural teachers in Newfoundland, on Canada's Atlantic coast, argues that there is nothing in contemporary neoliberal curriculum that necessarily precludes the development of place-based educational practice—a point made by Kerkham and Comber as well. This reminds us again that the separation of educational questions into sterile binaries (place-based versus standards-based, for instance) obscures potential for emergent, perhaps "tactical," forms of educational practice that straddle boundaries and categories. Some of these boundaries are spatial, but others are disciplinary. Craig Howley adopts the image of the "stranger," another common trope in rural literature, to engage a reading of rurality and mathematics education. Just as reading and writing practices have been distilled to a generic and often disciplinary notion of literacy, so too have mathematical practices been reduced to "numeracy." It is the very abstraction of mathematics that gives it what Howley calls its "formatting power." In neoliberal discourses of educational change, standardized measurement, and placeless curriculum, literacy and numeracy have been anointed, abstracted, and elevated as a decontextualized, purely objective set of readily testable quantifiable skills.

Rural literacies then represent for us a confluence of theorizations and practices about place and pedagogy, text and reading practices, and place and space. To use Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) imagery, place is a stopping point in the multiple flows that space represents. We can imagine place, accordingly, as a plant in a littoral zone washed by the incessant advance

and retreat of the tide. The plant remains for a time, but it is continually changed by what flows through, in, and around it. Rural literacies are multiple, mutable, and mobile, and ever relational. They inevitably float in a global sea.

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PART I

Conceptualizing Rural Literacies

CHAPTER 1

Literacy, Rurality, Education: A Partial Mapping

Bill Green

Introduction: Rural Literacies?

How might we go about understanding and researching rural literacies? Is it indeed appropriate to speak of “*rural* literacies”? Is it possible or even meaningful to refer to *rural* literacies, with the adjective in this case being a genuine modifier? What does the adjective “rural” do? How does it add value to either literacy studies or rural education, as scholarly fields? What relationship exists between literacy studies and rural schooling, and between literacy studies and rural education more generally? This chapter seeks to engage and explore questions such as these, in order to open up discussion and debate in this undervalued and misrecognized area.

Donehower and her colleagues, as originators of the term, confirm that properly understanding rural literacy is indeed an issue: “As we tried to define rural literacies for the purposes of [our] book, it was telling that we couldn’t find a specific definition that we could work within or against in the field of literacy studies” (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 2007, p. 4). Their proposal is that it refers, in brief, to “the uses of literacy in rural contexts”: “Rural literacies . . . refers to the particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas”—that is, “pursu[ing] the opportunities and creat[ing] the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (p. 4). Further, they argue for “a notion of rural literacy based on a concept of sustainability” (p. 12). They explicitly connect such work with a larger agenda, linked to notions of global citizenship, and

involving a view of “rural literacies that are multiple and that encourage identification among rural, urban and suburban citizens” (p. 193). The latter is particularly important: it allows the project of rural literacies to be associated with a distinctly ethical commitment, working toward global ecosocial sustainability. They clearly want this concept and its accompanying program to function as advocacy for rural people and rural communities. “Rural communities have been ill-served in the past by both a lack of research on rural literacy and by research and education initiatives that mischaracterize rural literacy” (p. 27).

This provides a useful platform to work from here. It is important to note that Donehower and her colleagues make no claim to a definitive account of the territory, clearly seeing their work as needing to be extended and supplemented. Nonetheless, that work constitutes an important reference point for research and scholarship addressed to literacy studies and rural education—as is both confirmed and extended in their most recent publication (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 2011).

In my (Australian) context, very little work exists on rural literacy, and there is little sense of how a rural literacies research program might be qualitatively different and distinct from literacy research *per se*. A recent preliminary survey of the Australian literature revealed just a handful of papers and reports, and a single national study specifically focused on literacy and rurality (Muspratt, Freebody, and Luke 2001). Rural locations and circumstances do feature in articles on Indigenous education and literacy studies, but without marking rurality as a significant category. More recently, there have been several papers addressed to results of standardized testing programs that reveal disparities relating to rural and Indigenous populations. By and large, however, little attention has been given, to date, to the notion that there may well be distinctive features of literacy in the rural context, or that literacy and rurality can be brought together differently, outside of a hegemonic schooling logic. This indicates that research is urgently needed in this respect, focusing specifically on literacy, rurality, and education—on rural literacies in Australia.

There is more work being done in this area outside Australia (e.g., Brooke 2003; Edmondson 2003; Kelly 2009), even though it is at best a small (sub)field. Also, much literacy research and scholarship effectively still overlooks the rural, and thereby marginalizing it. As Donehower and colleagues observed, “literacy research in our field is skewed toward urban sites and subjects” (2007, p.12). Hence we are much more likely to find work on topics such as “city literacies” (Gregory and Williams 2000), “English in urban classrooms” (Kress et al. 2005) or “urban

literacies” (Kinloch 2011)—work for which the reference point is the modern(ist) city, producing, in effect, whether acknowledged or not, a form of metro-normativity. Understanding literacy as “translocal” and “situated,” and linking to critical-cultural work on space(s) and place(s), is, therefore, an important avenue for developing a research program addressed to rural literacies, or the relationship between literacy studies and rural education.

Space, Literacy, and Rural (Teacher) Education

Politico-administrative jurisdictions like states or provinces, or nations, bring together populations *and* territories, as objects of sociopolitical management. One way of understanding contemporary developments with the public use of data is as a heightened form of spatial governance (Jackson 2004). Governing space is a distinctive form of social power. Governing the spatial field involves practices of normalization. Furthermore, policy—organized as it is by the logic and politics of population—is usefully seen as addressed to the relationship between space and power. This includes education policy. And yet policy would seem curiously “space-blind” (Green and Letts 2007, p. 63; Green 2008). This is notwithstanding the observation that “[e]ducational phenomena are distributed in space” (Marsden 1977, p. 21), a formulation described as “a key defining element, however naturalized, in the practice and institution of education” (Green and Letts 2007, p. 59). The particular relevance and importance of this for rural education is clear.

As Cloke (2006, p. 18) has observed, “[t]he idea of rurality seems to be firmly entrenched in popular discourse about space, place and society in the Western world.” Indeed, the concept of rurality itself is “inherently spatial” (Halfacree 2006, p. 44). Building on this idea, Green and Letts (2007, p. 63) argued that what is needed is “a critical socio-spatial framework, a social-dynamic theory of space and spatiality whereby there is a dialectical relationship between space and society, practice and representation, and an emphasis on the social production of space”—more specifically, a way of “thinking *differently* about issues of space, equity and rural education” (p. 58; emphasis added). Moreover, this needs to be appropriately complex and sophisticated, and in this regard, it is useful to think of the rural as *real-and-imaginary*, following Soja (1996), or of rurality as pertaining to real-and-imaginary spaces and places. This allows due consideration of desire, fantasy, and anxiety, and the power and pleasures of the Symbolic, and provides a basis for drawing in psychoanalytic work as a further resource for rural education research

and rural literacy. In our case, we were able to think of inland NSW and specifically the Far West (“out there”) as an object of “racially-charged fantasies and anxieties” (p. 71). This is particularly resonant given the significant proportion of Aboriginal people living in these areas and the ongoing challenge of Aboriginal education in NSW, and indeed in Australia more generally, with literacy remaining a key and crucial area within which Indigenous disadvantage is realized.

A matter of particular interest arising from this work is what such an argument opens up in terms of a critical account of (rural) educational space. Taking a historical perspective, Green and Letts (p. 61) note “the view, deeply entrenched in the Australian system, that location is of no consequence to the delivery of education, that distance can be effectively annulled, and that space simply doesn’t matter.” Such a view appears to be even more supported and substantiated by contemporary arguments that introducing new digital technology into schooling overcomes many of the difficulties and disadvantages of rural education. The logic is remarkably consistent. Despite strong assertions that place matters, and a historical commitment to equity, this logic produces a particular form of governmental, normalizing space, making it hard to sustain place-based initiatives or to develop more effective equity programs.

This problem is noted by Jan Nesper and others, including exponents (and their critics) of what has been called *place-conscious education* (Gruenewald and Smith 2008), itself increasingly being drawn into new rural educational research and scholarship. Also, gradually more and more official maps and profiles are being produced, based on quantifiable, statistical data, operating at a range of scales. For Nesper (2004, p. 320), there are “powerful forces at work to produce totalizing maps that allow distant students and teachers to be plotted with respect to one another.” Referring specifically to the United States, but more generally indicating the pervasive rhetoric of “standards” in education policy and practice, he writes:

Buttressed by recent legislation, the standards portray schooling as a smooth, homogenous system, and the tests presuppose a static population in long-term engagement with neighbourhood schools. (p. 320)

In his account of “educational scale-making,” Nesper presents a number of scenarios, “scalar stories” in effect, introducing a set of characters (Zena, Jerry, Chester) and tracing their various trajectories and relationships in space-time. Here, “children are defined by the way they reflect off the standards and tests, that is, accordingly to whether or not they pass.”

Their situational specificity is obscured; where they and their families “live or work or how often they have moved is masked” (pp. 320–321). Moreover, “student learning takes a form that can be scaled at the level of the state, making all students within that political sphere comparable and summable, according to a standard metric” (p. 321). Place *and* specificity disappear. While Nespor’s focus is predominantly on the city, and on “imagin[ing] different ways for teachers to know cities, regions and communities” (p. 323), there are clear implications here for rural education, and for engaging with issues of space and equity for rural schools and communities.

There are implications too for researching rural literacies. In NSW, for instance, there is a considerable history of standardized literacy testing, now subsumed within the new National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). While there is still little public analysis of how students in inland NSW fare as a distinct grouping within the total population, Indigenous students are consistently marked out as falling below state averages—especially in more remote locations—along with others from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This is consistent with research drawing on available PISA and National Benchmark data demonstrating “the underachievement of rural and remote students in the area of literacy when compared to the performance of students in metropolitan areas of Australia” (Pegg and Panizzon 2007, p. 188; Welch, Helme, and Lamb 2007). Despite more enlightened forms of policy related to literacy pedagogy emerging in Australia, and widespread endorsement of “critical literacy,” a gap still exists between theoretical and practical ideologies.

Nonetheless, along with continuing work on disadvantage and poverty, and ongoing concerns with social justice, new interest has developed in notions of place and community—more specifically, place-based community (Nixon and Comber 2009; McNerney, Smyth, and Down 2011). These concepts and proposals have increasingly been drawn into rural educational research (White and Reid 2008; Reid et al. 2010) and, relatedly, work on literacy education and environmental change (Comber, Nixon, and Reid 2007; Cormack, Green, and Reid 2008). Yet, how this has connected with state and national policy agendas heavily invested in standardized testing, committed to accountability, and in practice still oriented to print (Tan and McWilliam 2009) remains uncertain. Do place-referenced pedagogies contribute to enhanced scores in literacy tests? At this stage it is impossible to know. However, there is a case for claiming that accountability regimes such as these constrain the possibilities for place-sensitive work. This is particularly so if they encourage a

tighter nexus between teaching and testing, or teaching to the test (Mills 2008). The challenge is to develop a research program that combines critique and creativity, or innovation, and engages with the potential of socially critical and responsible initiatives with regard to literacy, place, sustainability, and rural education.

Making such connections enables a direct link to the work of the Lancaster group on “local literacies” (Barton and Hamilton 2008) and “situated literacies” (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivančić 2000). The project of situated literacies is especially generative, however, and immediately relevant. Indeed, there is a potentially useful resonance between notions of situated literacies and place-conscious education, in ways that (to my knowledge) haven’t been recognized or capitalized on to date. At the same time, mindful of the critique that such work has attracted (e.g., Brandt and Clinton 2002) and wanting to move beyond its primarily ethnographic orientation, I want to put a somewhat different spin on the term. Following Soja (1996), literacies are to be understood as *socially*, *historically*, and *spatially* situated. Although Soja certainly sees these as profoundly interrelated, within what he calls a “trialectic,” it is the spatial that I focus on here, very briefly. Understanding literacy as spatially situated compels attention to how literacy is realized in space, whether that is the spatial field of the nation or the district, or whatever, and within which are inescapably socio-spatial hierarchies. Hence literacy becomes thinkable in terms of the social difference-dynamics of space, place and scale, and associated trajectories: for instance, what flows from where to where, with what effect. Hence, what has been described as “spatial justice” (Soja 2010) emerges as a focus concern. Introducing time as well as movement into consideration further enriches the picture. What such a revised view of situated literacies enables, then, is a larger field of reference and a broader research repertoire, bringing in explicitly sociological (and sociocultural), historical *and* geographical perspectives, and opening up inquiry accordingly.

Researching (School) Literacy: The New Literacy Studies and Beyond

Within literacies research, much has been made in recent times of the significance and value of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). This is regarded, rightly, as a matter of informed consensus referring to a burgeoning body of work that takes due account of literacy as sociocultural practice, of culture and history, of multimodality and digital technologies, and above all else of power (Baynham and Prinsloo 2009; Janks 2010). This work is

openly and avowedly “ideological,” following Brian Street’s (1984) pioneering ethnographic studies of literacy, and subsequently, important arguments from literacy scholars such as Colin Lankshear, Allan Luke, Glenda Hull, and others. It is also “worldly” as a matter of principle, oriented to social life and social organization, as well as social justice. Recently, there has been an important “practice turn” in literacy studies, which seems likely to be extremely generative.

What remains striking, however, is the sharp and enduring disjunction between this scholarly consensus and the educational mainstream—specifically, the everyday worlds of policy and classrooms. This disjunction is not only apparent in work seeking to engage with the challenge and opportunity of the new technologies—the so-called digital revolution—where much is heard of a marked discrepancy between policy and research (Tan and McWilliam 2009; Luke and Woods 2009). It is also apparent with regard to politics, and what may be called the socially critical imagination. Whereas it is commonplace to acknowledge the relationship between literacy and power as an organizing frame (Janks 2010), taking up a more generalized educational and social praxis can sometimes seem more gestural than real, or perhaps simply hopeful, and ever-aspirational. Reducing the world’s manifest inequalities and effecting global social change accordingly remains a distant goal. Growing interest in the notion of the “translocal” is a welcome development (Brandt and Clinton 2002), as is a global focus on literacy and poverty, although emphasis on locality, on *place*, continues to be important, and enormously productive, as a body of invaluable critique emerges, increasingly displaying a rich theoretical and political sophistication.

Even so, connecting (back) to schools and classrooms, and to teacher education, to formal schooling and professional development, constitutes a major challenge. Much of the early NLS work was indeed outward-referenced, deliberately, even programmatically so; it was addressed primarily to *nonschool* literacy, to textual practice *outside* or *beyond* the schools. The task was seen as one of bringing the outside in, somehow, and certainly of effecting policy and changing classrooms, but at some future moment. Although there are increasing signs of reengagement with formal education, as Street (2012) outlines in his recent review, a gap exists between rhetoric and reality in this regard, between advocacy for a new and expanded understanding of literacy practice and what continues to happen, in the general run of classrooms and schools.

In that context, it is appropriate and timely to recall an important essay by Jenny Cook-Gumperz, from 1986, in which she points to an