

Barbara Ching, Gerald W. Creed. *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*. New York: Routledge, 1997. viii + 277 pp. \$36.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-91545-8.



Reviewed by David B. Danbom

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Knowing Your Place is a collection of ten essays by academics in anthropology and modern languages. Its purpose is to begin to redress a scholarly imbalance resulting from the unwillingness of academics to recognize the significance of rurality in shaping human identity.

The "Introduction" by editors Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed is worth the price of the book. Ching and Creed argue that there is a "culturally valuable rusticity" that must be identified and explored by scholars because of its great shaping power in human behavior and experience (p. 4). The editors distinguish--quite correctly, I think--between "rusticity" and "rurality," arguing that one can be rural without demonstrating rural behaviors or values; to paraphrase John Winthrop, one can be "in" a rural place without being "of" it.

To Ching and Creed, the separation of rurality from rusticity represents the power of urban cultural hegemony (my phrase, not theirs) in the modern world. Our values, behaviors, and habits of mind are urban-based and urban-shaped; consequently, even those of us who are "rural" are often just urban people in non-urban places. I be-

lieve that most of the essays illustrate the truth of that observation, albeit unintentionally, but more on that later.

Ching and Creed are especially critical of academics for ignoring the salience of place in shaping human identity and for perpetuating urban cultural hegemony. The editors criticize the present preoccupation of social scientists with race, gender, and class, not for what they see but for what they fail to see--the significance of place in human experience.

The editors also point out how urban cultural hegemony creates its antithesis. In our overwhelmingly and overbearingly urban culture rural people--the "rustic" ones, anyway--are marginalized, but their very marginalization creates a source of opposition to the hegemonic urban culture.

Ching and Creed imply that this opposition is positive and healthy, and it often is, but it can be sociopathic. In *Rural Radicals*, Catherine Stock shows that some noxious weeds sprout among rural folk opposing urban cultural hegemony. If Timothy McVeigh and the Freemen exemplify the

oppositional possibilities of rurality, as I think they do to some degree, then I'll take urban cultural hegemony and learn to love it.

My questions about what was unsaid in this "Introduction" should not be taken to indicate disagreement with what was said. Those of us who have worked in "rural studies" for very long are aware of the issues Ching and Creed raise, even though we have not been able to delineate them in such a clear and articulate fashion. Most subscribers to H-Rural will vigorously agree with most of the points raised in this essay, I believe.

The nine essays that follow the "Introduction" deal mainly--but not exclusively--with how rurality is defined in a variety of settings. In "Rurality and 'Racial' Landscapes in Trinidad," Aisha Khan explores the conflation of rurality with Asians on that Caribbean island in a knowing and effective way.

"Is It True What They Say About Dixie?": Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, and Rural/Urban Exchange in Modern African-American Literature," by William J. Maxwell, discusses the implications of a debate between two black authors during the 1930s regarding the significance of a rural southern background to modern blacks. The essay is interesting, as are all of the contributions to this collection, but I found the connections to the major theme of the volume tenuous.

In "Ain't It Funny How Time Slips Away?": Talk, Trash, and Technology in a Texas 'Redneck' Bar," Aaron A. Fox explores "redneck" conversation and music, which are closely connected to his way of thinking. The subjects of his investigation are the regulars at a bar thirty miles from Austin, Texas. Had he visited the Republic of Texas compound he might have found a less charming set of "rednecks."

A particularly impressive contribution to this volume is Marc Edelman's "'Campesinos' and 'Technico': New Peasant Intellectuals in Central American Politics." Edelman displays a grasp of the subtle ways in which Central American peas-

ants and intellectuals have converged in the last twenty years or so, and the dynamics resulting from that convergence.

In "Class, Gender, and the Rural in James Joyce's 'The Dead,'" Elizabeth A. Sheehan painstakingly analyzes one of the short stories in *The Dubliners*. Sheehan's ability to tease meaning out of this story is noteworthy, and the reader will learn a good deal about Irish culture and society.

Another literary analysis is presented by Beatrice Guenther in "The Roman du Terroir au Feminin in Quebec: Guevremont's and Blais' Revisioning of a Rural Tradition." Guenther explores the approach of three novelists to ruralism in Quebec--a place where the peasantry has been seen traditionally as the repository of an authentic national character--and its relation to feminism. As this century has proceeded, Guenther's subjects have developed an increasingly, skeptical view of the main elements of the Quebecois rural myth and its patriarchal bias.

In "Rurality, Rusticity, and Contested Identity Politics in Brittany," David Maynard impressively explores the ambiguity of Breton nationalism. The urban intellectuals who largely compose this movement, Maynard argues, simultaneously embrace and reject a rural past that makes Brittany distinctive.

In "The Rise and Fall of 'Peasantry' as a Culturally Constructed National Elite in Israel," Susan H. Lees suggest that the social view of rural people in Israel has shifted over the course of this century from celebration to denigration due to a complex of economic, political, and social factors. While the Israeli situation is unique, I found striking comparisons and contrasts with the United States in Lees' essay.

The final chapter in the volume, Michele D. Dominy's "The Alpine Landscape in Australian Mythologies of Ecology and Nation," contrasts the urban and rural views of the "bush" in Australia. Interestingly, both interpretations of the bush

draw predominantly on urban cultural constructions.

This last point highlights a basic question I have about this volume, a question that is embedded in the concept of urban cultural hegemony itself. As the term suggests, urban cultural hegemony is so overwhelming that it shapes not only our definition of the rural, but also the rural definition of itself. The self-images of so many of the people here, from Fox's rednecks to Lees' Israelis to Dominy's bushwalkers, are shaped at least in part by an often-romantic urban image of them. The consequence is that we find little of the "rusticity" for which Ching and Creed are searching, but which they, and the other contributors, have difficulty defining or identifying. It may exist, but there is precious little of it here.

To argue that the "Introduction" promises more than the essays deliver is not to suggest that either is deficient. Indeed, I found the former quite exciting and many of the latter quite instructive. But I do believe that *Knowing Your Place* is more valuable in showing how far we have to go than in showing how far we have come.

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