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Editorial Introduction: Recognizing the Rural

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Editorial Introduction: Recognizing the Rural

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It is my honour to be the guest editor of ACT 15 (4), a special issue highlighting rural music education scholarship and research. As an emerging scholar, I am grateful to Vincent Bates for the opportunity to edit this issue and I take this opportunity to thank him for our many stimulating conversations over the past few years, which have enriched my understanding of the diversity of rural music education practices. In this introduction, I draw from literature in cultural geography, rural sociology, and rural education to situate the articles in this issue.

Soja (2010) has cogently argued that, “The urban condition has extended its influence to all areas: rural, suburban, metropolitan, exurban, even wilderness, parkland, deserts, tundra, and rain forest” (6). Critical rural sociologists suggest that this pervasiveness of the urban condition is not an impartial state of affairs. Rather, it is driven by *urbanormativity*—the assumption “that the interests of the cities are of paramount importance, [and] that urban cultural norms and values are not only dominant but superior as well” (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014, 5). From the urbanormative standpoint the rural is depicted as that which the city is not—a wild, but simple, homogenous “out there”—existing only to supply city dwellers with the resources and food that they require, and the opportunities for rest and recreation they desire. This historic urban¹ bias is deeply and invisibly embedded in both language² and the human psyche.

According to Fulkerson and Thomas (2014), urbanormativity has been packaged “in such a way that it seems normal, natural, and even desirable” (17), and is reinforced in the social imaginary by media depictions of rural people as backward, poor, and ignorant (e.g., country bumpkin, hick, redneck, from the boonies) or rural places as bucolic (e.g., escape from reality, place for recreation).

An urbanormative approach (Florida 2002) does not acknowledge the dependence of the urban on the rural, or the possibility that rural locations might also be complex social sites of creativity and innovation. Rather, it extols the social, cultural, economic, and creative supremacy of metropolitan settings over rural spaces, fuelling geographic hierarchy and hegemony.

Urbanormative assumptions often lead to *spatial* and social injustices (Soja 2010). Spatial (in)justice, defined as “an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice” (Soja 2009, 2), is inherently intertwined with social and historical factors. Although Soja’s (2009, 2010) conception of spatial justice encompasses the multiple layers of space that we inhabit (e.g., body, household, neighbourhood, nation-states), and is useful for considering spatial inequalities in their many forms, researchers who have examined issues in rural settings have used this lens expressly to examine tensions between urban and rural priorities—for example, regarding development projects (Pailloux 2015) and disparities in rural land structures and rights (Fautras 2015).

According to Soja (2010), spatial (in)justice is both an outcome and a process. In his view, governmental policies are not objective; they are derived from the calculated, “political organization of space” (27), producing structural and “distributional inequalities [that] are the more visible outcome of deeper processes of spatial discrimination set in place by a multitude of individual decisions made by many different, often competing actors” (47). Following this reasoning, it makes sense, then, to uncover the spatial bias—conscious and unconscious—that is inherent in *education* policies and practices in order to enact improved educational opportunities for rural youth.

Scholars in the field of rural education have identified many urbanormative assumptions and spatial injustices that are ensconced in educational structures, policies, and dynamics (Green and Reid 2004; Johnson and Howley 2015), and have countered them, in part, by using an asset-based approach. In accordance with Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011), they regard distance from urban influence as an enabler for flexibility, experimentation, and innovation that support local communities. For example, place-based education theorists promote curricula that focus on local histories (Bowers 2008), geographies, and culture in order to provide authentic, relevant, experiential, and community learning experiences with which to engage students (Green and Corbett 2013; Schafft and Youngblood Jackson 2010; Sobel 2005; Theobald 1997). Such curric-

ula, they contend, help disaffected students appreciate and invest in their communities, hopefully contributing to their sustainability and flourishing (Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b; Theobald and Nachtigal 1995). Although place-based strategies may be effectively adapted for use in any geographic location for any subject area (see Stauffer 2009 and Schmidt 2014 for the application of place-based strategies in metropolitan areas with regards to music education), their application is especially suited to multi-graded classrooms in small rural schools where a holistic, thematic approach may be more viable than one that is grade-specific.

Place-conscious education theory is a more critical stance deliberately adopted in support of maintaining rural communities and designing relevant education experiences, also providing new ways of thinking about the purposes of education. According to Greenwood (2009), a critical lens is especially useful in examining curriculum and forms of pedagogy that do not acknowledge rural students' realities because they most often reflect an urban perspective. For example, Howley (2009) has shown how the school curriculum promoting "the one-best way to live—the middle-class professional way" (544), often works against rural sustainability and vitality because this perspective may sometimes be aligned with national/global aspirations over rural interests. Often, the employment options or *mobility capital* (Corbett, 2007) that educated rural youth acquire tend to work against environmental and rural sustainability and towards rural brain drain (Tompkins 2008).

Place conscious educators also call into question those global solutions to "rural problems" that are harmful to rural communities and their ecologies, illustrating strategies that assist both environmental educators, who introduce students to ecological issues that threaten rural places (e.g., water impurity due to negligent resource extraction), and social justice educators, who work with students to advocate for social inclusivity (Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b; Gruenewald and Smith 2008; Jayanandhan 2009). In uncovering the ways in which standardized curriculum and pedagogy work against rural sustainability, place-conscious education theorists have pushed back against established educational practices and policies that consistently favour and embed middle-class urban values into school curriculum and pedagogy rather than valuing local, rural understandings that seek to find creative ways to sustain and balance economic, cultural, and environmental health.

Given the analyses of rural education scholars, which detail how educational policies that promote standardized curricula, pedagogy, and practices are often unsuited to rural settings, it is logical, then, to ask the question, “Are urban normativity and spatial injustice also implicit and embedded in established *music* education practices, policies, research, and scholarship?” To date, despite the efforts of a few pioneers (Bates 2011a, 2011b, 2014; Hunt 2009; Isbell 2005; Maltas 2004), the rural has been largely absent in music education discourse. Although an electronic search yields some articles on the topic (see the limited number of rural music education references in this issue’s articles), a comprehensive body of scholarship on rural issues in music education does not yet exist. In fact, to my knowledge, this special issue on rural music education scholarship and research is the first of its kind, published by an international peer-reviewed music education journal. Thus, our purpose in publishing this special issue is to attend to and uphold Action Ideals III and VI of the MayDay Group,³ which underscore the importance of social justice and inclusivity in music education practice and scholarship. Our aim is to recognize (in terms of both *acknowledging* and *honouring*) the rural by highlighting recent music education research in and scholarship on rural practices that have broadened our understanding of music education.

Most of the articles in this issue are written by emerging music education scholars, signaling, perhaps, greater recognition that scholarship on music education in rural settings may offer “alternative understandings of the world” that are simultaneously unique and relevant to all (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014, 19). The authors of this issue’s articles make evident that rural music education spaces are complex sites. Some of their findings concerning music educator reflexivity and dispositions, curricular innovation, and pedagogical change challenge more traditional approaches to music education. Their observations support the claim of rural sociologists, who have noted that “the greater the social and or geographic distance from dominant political, social and economic actors, the greater the potential for cultural and social innovation” (Lowe 2014, 131).

Scholars from three countries (Australia, Canada, and the United States) have contributed to this issue. It is our hope that this initial conversation will stimulate a more global dialogue with scholars from other countries who examine music education in their rural communities. We welcome their input and responses to the ideas found in this issue.

Several threads run through the articles: the significance of place, the importance of relationships, the role of the community in music education practice, forms of musical literacy, and diversity of rural music education practices. First, **Michael Corbett**, a rural education scholar based in Australia, reflects on what the field of rural education might contribute to the study of music education. Corbett uses his personal experiences of informal music learning and making in rural Nova Scotia as a departure point to query contested notions of musicianship, musical knowledge, and pedagogy. He describes how the folk and rock and roll music he heard in his youth provided him with the impetus to open his ears, experiment musically, and recreate what he had heard. As he recounts some of his informal music learning experiences, we capture glimpses of the various people who fostered his musicianship, and the dynamic, respectful and reciprocal relationships that characterized the folk music circles in which he played. Drawing on Bernstein's (1999) conceptions of vertical (independent of context) and horizontal (dependent on context) discourses, Corbett argues that a key role for music educators is to recognize, validate, and introduce local music making or horizontal practices, while also bridging them to context-independent musical practices in a non-hierarchical manner.

Using an autoethnographic frame, poetic inquiry, and metaphor, **Daniel Shevock** examines how the "intersection of rurality, Whiteness, and poverty" has "affected his attitudes, actions, and roles in relation to music teaching and learning." He, like Corbett, critiques traditional school music education practice that is "uprooting" and dismissive of informal music learning and practice. Shevock reflects on his youth in rural Pennsylvania, performing rock music in informal learning settings while also participating in his school music program. At the university level, he relates how he ultimately rejected popular music making in favour of classical forms, becoming what he terms *Homo Educandus Musicae*, a reference to Illich's (1992) critique of formal education as a universal good. He explains how his decision to focus solely on classical music resulted in a decoupling from experiences and places that were important to him. Exploring themes of uprootedness, church, music styles, and dominance of class, Shevock reveals the ways in which the values he gained from his personal experiences conflicted/harmonized with the values of the varied teaching contexts in which he found himself. He suggests that music teachers schooled in the Western classical music tradition avoid a salvationist mindset when working in poor and

working class settings; rather, he recommends a more mindful approach, cognizant of the need for humility.

In her case study of a successful mid-western American rural music education program, **Andrea Van Deusen** found that humility was also key to successful *rural* music education practice. Van Deusen's purpose in conducting her study was to explore the "perceived value of a rural school's music program by members of its school community, and to determine the ways in which school and community members showed their support." She chose to study one particular secondary school in the mid-West because "despite its rural location, susceptibility to economic disadvantage, and teacher transience, the secondary school music program was thriving." Three themes emerged from her study: the presence of a long-term music program tradition within the greater community, the school district's philosophical and financial commitment to providing a comprehensive education (that included music) to students, and the music teacher's interest in and openness to the wider community. The music teacher recognized and built on the musical values and traditions that already existed there. Rather than forcing his independently developed ideas on the community, he used a more unassertive and humble approach, focusing on forging relationships with administrators and community members, and working with them to achieve musical goals. Van Deusen suggests that it is important for music educators to determine the impact of place and context on their own school music programs, in part, because such factors affect the degree and quality of support for the work that they do.

The relational and place aspects of rural music education also loom large in **Janet Spring's** collaborative narrative research study of four rural music educators' lived experiences in Simcoe County, north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. As part of her study, four participants described the contexts of their elementary rural music education experiences using literary and music metaphors "to better express their attachment to place and the relationships that they have developed with their students, school, and local community through music." Although most of the participants also worked as school librarians, administrators, and classroom teachers, music and music education were central to their identities and permeated all aspects of the work that they did. Some of the themes that emerged from her study are: the multiple roles that rural music educators fulfill in their music communities; the fragility of music programs and lack of music facilities in

rural communities; music educators as community liaisons and community builders; passion for local place, heritage and culture; and the importance of place in music curricula.

Similar to Van Deusen and Spring, **Julia Brook** took a case study approach in her research. She used place-based education theory as a conceptual frame, examining the extent to which it might “describe the music program and the interactions among and between the music program, the school, and the local and provincial communities.” Her purpose was to determine the features of a vibrant rural school music program in British Columbia, the kinds of resources required to support it, and how a “music education program strengthens students’ sense of place” through providing them with the opportunity to engage in musical practices and strengthen relationships with community members. While she found that the music program provided students the opportunity to contribute to their local community, she noted that a lack of support structures made it difficult for the music teacher to incorporate into the program those non-Western musics that were pertinent to place.

My article (**Anita Prest**) emphasizes relationships from a more theoretical perspective. I examine conceptions of social capital as they have been used in music education studies, also drawing attention to how each conception illuminates different kinds of relationships. I note the limitations of each conception, and then review various critiques of social capital as a framework, responding to each in turn. I explain how my interest in using social capital as a conceptual framework for my study on rural school-community music education partnerships stemmed from Hanifan’s (1916) understanding of social capital, in part, as *goodwill*, which characterized the relationships of those who supported, participated, and organized a long-term rural music education festival that I had helped to found. I summarize my dissertation research on school-community music education partnerships in three rural communities in British Columbia and outline the findings that are related specifically to social capital. These findings illustrate how different conceptions of social capital intertwine in real life, which is a far messier system than a theoretical construct. Last, I argue that fostering relationships (and the social capital derived from them) in music education practice is vital to promoting inclusion in pluralistic societies.

In the last article of this issue, **Vincent Bates** takes up and develops the theme of urbanormativity in music education introduced in this editorial preface.

Using Bourdieu's (1986) notions of embodied, objectified, and institutional cultural capital, Bates systematically—and in scrupulous detail—demonstrates the ways in which music curricula, hierarchical systems and forms of music making, and consumer-oriented and elitist attitudes all work in consort to stigmatize rural music making and rural music education. As a way forward, he suggests that we educate youth about the pervasiveness and dominance of urban ways of thinking and living in society, and teach them to problematize the assumption that these norms are valid. Last, Bates urges all of us to “be mindful and critical of the urbanormative mission of music education” and to work towards a “sustainable future,” inspired by what we might learn from rural places, people, and practices.

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Notes

¹ The word *urban* is used here as a synonym for *metropolitan*, in contrast to its use in education scholarship to denote *inner-city neighbourhoods*.

² For example, the word *polite* stems from the ancient Greek word *polites* or citizen (of a city or *polis*), representing the quintessential ancient Greek urban dweller (male, landowner, educated). *Idiot*, meanwhile, is derived from the word *idiotes*, meaning layman, non-citizen, with only one's own knowledge—in large part, farmers who lived outside city limits who generally did not have access to formal education (Dictionary of Etymology 2011; Soja 2010).

³ Action Ideal III. As agents of social change who are locally and globally bound, we create, sustain, and contribute to reshaping musics, ways of knowing music, and spaces where musicing takes place. Thus, music educators must always strive to provide equitable, diverse, and inclusive music learning practices. Action Ideal VI. We must continually refine and broaden scholarship for music education in terms of inclusivity, relevance, and theoretical and practical interest.