

# **Troubling Contexts: Toward a Generative Theory of Rurality as Education Research<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Marsden (2006) suggests that rurality as a signifier is transformative, capable of changing behaviour and affecting the motivation of teachers, community workers, and learners. Research from the Rural Teacher Education Project in South Africa, which informs our argument in this article, demonstrates that the very generative and transformative nature of rurality serves both to inform but also to delimit the effectiveness of intervention programs designed, often with the best of intentions in mind, for education, health care, job creation, and poverty alleviation. This article asserts that a theory of rurality needs to take account of contemporary theories of globalization and society, drawing from the sociological as well as the postcolonial accounts of identity and environment. What emerges in this article is what we have termed a “generative theory of rurality,” in which the dynamic interaction between variables allows for both a descriptive and an analytical framework for data emanating from, and located within, research in rural areas.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

It remains a startling and disturbing fact that some 13 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, very little has changed in rural areas (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC]-EPC, 2005). This suggests that initiatives meant to bring about social change in these areas, including those concerned with teacher education and curriculum implementation, have not addressed the systemic challenges such as poverty alleviation or sustainable development. This article is premised on the assumption that an understanding of these challenges requires not simply a common sense empathy for, but activism in communities.

Regarding research on rurality, Marsden in the *Handbook of Rural Studies* (2006) argues that,

... [D]espite the deepening and growing plurality of theoretical and conceptual endeavour experienced over the last decade, this [area of research] still requires a need to consider a revised political economy of rural space; one which foregrounds the distinctive features of rural life but does so not at the expense of conceptually isolating it from broader social science theoretical and conceptual trends... (2006, p. 4)

In this article we develop the foundations for a theory of rurality by contextualizing it in terms of available research concerning rural lives and experience, and selected theories of space, place, and time in relation to rurality and globalization theory. The need for theory to reflect on, but also be reflexive of, the diversity of research on rurality as experience and idea, is self-evident and not a new approach. Place is a highly theorized concept that has been variously described by theorists such as Gallagher (1993) and Gruenewald (2003), who call for the idea of “place-conscious education.” It is, as Budge (2004, p. 3) suggests, a context in which the “peculiarities of the local ... must be understood.” Education is as much an activity as labour or production is and as such occurs within space and time even if new technologies and new media make the displacement of both space and time possible through interactive technologies. Conventional theories of space and time (see, for example, de Certeau’s [1998] theory of space and living) deal with westernised notions of the temporal and linear, categories driven by analytic systems associated with enlightenment philosophy. Social theories such as Ubuntu (Seepe, 2004) do concern themselves with the self in the environment, and the self in the community from an African perspective. In this article we argue that existing social theories, while useful for understanding particular systems or organizations, do not account for the environment as an active rather than a passive force in the formation of self and community identities. We also argue that any theory of rurality needs also to consider theories of globalization as pertaining to the conceptualization of margins and centres of influence and power. We begin with some discussion of globalization and its relevance for research on rurality in order to further contextualise the theoretical links between identity and context later in this article.

According to Weeks (1999), the ideology of globalization suggests a break with the associations (now regarded as suspicious, patronizing, and tainted) of colonization, decolonization, and neocolonization. Critical studies (see, for example, the analysis provided by Hardt & Negri, 2001), however, suggest that this ideology masks a hegemony of developed nations, powerful over those still regarded as developing. This power has been established and is maintained by the fact that financial capital, accrued as a consequence of transactions involving money, not goods, has become the ascendant form of capital. Typically this movement is between metropolitan centres whose effects on their rural hinterlands are centrifugal and centripetal; pushing populations out, and drawing them in, depending on the economic needs and climate. Nations which still rely on productive capital as their primary means of earning are particularly vulnerable to shifts in financial capital in the global economy (Weeks, 1999, p. 51). Productive capital is associated largely with agricultural, mining, and manufacturing industries

and the rural is heavily implicit in the dependent relationship between productive capital and production processes.

Another feature of globalization according to Hobsbawm is that “it has taken place under conditions of immigration control imposed by all the large capitalist countries” (2000, p. 64). In South Africa, such movements have been paralleled to devastating effect internally in the influx and resettlement policies of the apartheid era (1949–1994), confirming Halliday’s assertion that,

... [T]he lived experience of globalisation draws on conceptions of power and inequality derived from earlier periods—the cold war and, before that, colonialism. Indeed the whole discourse of conflict within globalisation reflects the continued impact of these times, since that very discourse is in large measure phrased in a vocabulary and conceptual system derived from earlier conflicts. (2001, p. 21)

Since the 1980s the liberalization of state economies has encouraged what theorists refer to as a drive toward the bottom as countries compete to offer cheaper labour, fewer taxes, and relaxed restrictions on the movement of capital. These phenomena tend to support a class that already enjoys access to the benefits of a global economy, while undermining any protection the state might offer to classes that do not. Typically those who are protected are the urban middle class, leaving the urban working class and the rural peasantry marginal. In any analysis of the rural, access to resources is critical to an understanding of the limits and effectiveness of community or individual agency.

In South Africa no sustained scholarship concerning the rural in education existed until perhaps the publication of the *Emerging Voices Report* (HSRC, 2005), in which attention was given to the challenges and problematics associated with rurality as a learned and lived experience. That said, there has long existed an extensive literature concerning the challenges of rural life in South Africa, particularly as they applied to marginalized or dispossessed peoples (see, for example, Bundy’s [1988] work on the South African peasantry’s experience of poverty, migration, and dispossession in rural areas). Moore (1984, p. 6) has noted that the very term “rural” produces a variety of associated and overlapping meanings. Typically ideas of rurality are concerned with space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion. Odora-Hoppers (2005, p. 8) notes further that the theoretical work available to us to understand rurality tends to focus on space rather than people, and even then tends to homogenize space such that the multiplicity of variation, identity, behaviour, and nuance becomes simplified against the immensity of space or the geo-economic landscape and its attendant politics. Seldom is rurality conceptualized as dynamic, or as a set of preferences that have value independent of urban influences. The problem of rural research, as Marsden (2006) notes, is thus in some ways one of definition and conceptualization. Thus, it is precisely the need to avoid static definitions that compels us in this article to argue for a dynamic and generative theory of rurality rather than an approach to rural research, or a model of rural development. We believe that models and approaches which tend to define large processes in order to capture their meaning cannot adequately explain rurality, because they ignore the dynamic, generative, and variable

interaction of particular drivers. These drivers, despite also being found in conurbations, are nevertheless peculiarly experienced in rural environments.

“Ruralities,” as multifaceted lived experiences and ideas, are core to the identity of many rural community-based professionals in South Africa. It is perhaps unsurprising, given the urban-focused, middle class teacher education curricula of the past two decades (in which outcomes-based education [OBE] and other participatory pedagogies are endorsed), that education in the rural areas remains beset with problems and challenges simply not considered within policy, theoretical, and pragmatic initiatives (Chisholm, 2004). In this article our work in the Rural Teacher Education Project (RTEP) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal informs our proposal of a generative theory of rurality as a transformative agent. One of the project’s intentions is to provide the observation data as an entry point to conceptualizing a theory and pedagogy of rurality through the lens of 22 beginning teachers experiencing a practicum in one rural district of KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>2</sup> We found that rurality research is largely associated, by urban-based teachers in rural areas, rural learners, and campus-based student-teachers, with contextual assumptions concerned with deficit and disadvantage. In this article we suggest that there is a need to conceptualize a new theory of rurality that might account both for the diversity of lived experiences and ideas and for the drivers that enable or disable the transformation of such contexts. Such a theory might serve two purposes. First, to enable researchers to analyze data emerging from projects in which, though employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, need to take into account the relationship between space, time, and agency in the rural environment. Second, such a theory might also account for the ability of people in space and time to sustain themselves both as subjects and as agents able to resist or transform the environment, depending on the resources available.

The rest of this article is devoted to a description of the variable features such a theory might consider essential and how these would interact and articulate. We consider three broad areas for discussion: rurality as context, forces (space, place, and time), agencies (movement, systems, and will), and resources (situated, material, and psychosocial).

## **2.0 Rurality as Context**

The failure of national education policies is most pronounced in rural areas (Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Joseph, 2007). In spite of initiatives such the 2002 Schools Act or the 1997 Language in Education Policy (see Department of Education, 1997, 2002), the context of poor people in rural areas remains unchanged. We cannot argue that the urban context is free of the challenges or dynamics found in rural environments, but we can suggest that one of the defining characteristics of rurality is its intensity. For example, even though there is poverty in urban context, the fact that there is better support and infrastructure and a better chance of obtaining assistance (in the form of social services), such support often is either absent or inaccessible in rural areas, owing to distance, poor transportation, and neglect. An example of this occurs in relation to schools and clinics, which, even if they exist in close proximity to each other, often are accessed by communities that are remote in time and distance. The experience of such intensity is altogether different from that experienced in the city, where the multiplicity of stimuli makes for both the need for additional stimulation and its other side: alienation, anonymity, and loneliness. In other words, the cosmopolitan experience as a

distinct postcolonial development associated not with forced migration or indentured labour but with the compelling attraction to the city and the promise of modernity provides an informative contrast for generating a compelling theory of rurality in modernity.

These are not new ideas. Although we cannot devote too much attention to a further elucidation of the urban (by which the rural may be contrasted, though that is not to suggest defined), it might be useful to state here that the association between ideas of cosmopolitanism and the rise of the middle class was established in 1979 when Gouldner argued that the defining characteristic of the new, and necessarily urban, class was its cosmopolitanism (p. 148). Bridge (2005, p. 148) argues that these are the “characteristics of the cosmopolitan professionalism: acquisition of relevant specialist knowledge, and its ritual deployment free from local passions and in a form of conduct that is transferable between very different situations.” This definition, while useful as a point of contrast, demonstrates the links that need to be made between theories of globalization, urban cosmopolitanism, and rurality concerned as it is with locus. It is disconcerting to notice how the language of such theorization, when describing the poor and disenfranchised, might just as easily be applied to conceptions of the rural. For example, Amin (1999) defines the capitalist countries of Eastern Asia as “emerging,” Latin America and India as “marginalised,” and Africa and the Islamic world as “excluded.” “Marginalised peripheries ... have little independent strategy of their own ... [and] are therefore the passive subjects of globalisation” (Amin, 1999, p. 19). In not dissimilar terms, the rural is often defined as the passive attendant to the urban. If cosmopolitanism is the new identity marker of the urban elite, what identities are available to rural elites or the rural poor? A new theory of rurality must then seek to counter in its discourse the categories already available to us precisely because existing discourse employs those categories as much to disempower as describe.

An example serves to illustrate this point. In South Africa it is true that adults who have moved from rural areas into urban centres pursue, or at least share in, that idea of the cosmopolitan, though the links to the rural community remain strong. This movement contributes in part to the difficulty scholars have had with arriving at accepted definitions of the rural in South Africa (HSRC-EPC, 2005). This is not a deficiency, because many South Africans not only live this experience but also do not experience it as a clash between modernity and tradition; these concepts in fact are so corrupted they possess little value. This position supports our assertion that any theory of rurality must respond to theories of urbanization, modernity, and identity.

Given that movement between the rural and urban is variable and dynamic (not simply a pull toward, but a return from), we argue that the rural is rural precisely in terms of its dispersion from three dynamic variables available to address its challenges, named here as forces, agencies, and resources. These three variables generate a paradox, which because of its nature is also a dynamic peculiarity (to borrow from Budge): that the very isolation of the rural makes for the intensity of lived experience in more or less proportion to the forces, agencies, and resources available for intervening in that experience.

### 3.0 Forces: Space, Place, and Time

How, then, does one describe the variables? The first, which we have identified as forces, is centripetal and centrifugal and involves, as we alluded to earlier, the movement of labour and production from the rural to the urban and back again. To describe these forces, we have drawn from previous theories of space, place, and time (see Gallagher [1993] and Gruenewald [2003]). Space is defined as both that which is inhabited (or place—the *habitus*, to draw from Weber [1996]) and that which is moved within. Lahire (2003, p. 1) suggests that *habitus* “focuses on social factors that may account for behavioural variations and changes rather than for irreducible differences between social groups.” For the purposes of this article, *habitus*’ dynamic operation occurs between and within rural and urban centres, and its capacity for identity formulation or renegotiation is vast and creative; people do not occupy *essential* identities associated with the rural, a point we have made earlier in relation to our discussion of theories of rurality and globalization. Thus we suggest that any journey out of the rural is also a journey inward, in which identity and roles are questioned in relation to the experience of rural-urban contrasts. For example, adults and children with links to rural communities define their locus as the rural farm or homestead, where loyalties still exist in relation to culture and authority systems in rural environments, yet their employed life and identity are also in the city.<sup>3</sup>

Budge (2004, p. 5) identifies six habits that define a sense of place: connectedness, development of identity culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and engagement. We return to these toward the conclusion of this article. As regards space and place (locus): In rural areas and the urban areas to which they are connected, the movement of labour means absentee parents (who are employed, for example, as teachers, nurses, and domestic workers), whose presence in the homestead is felt most often through the return of goods or wages for the schooling of children and care of the elderly. This space-movement is bidirectional, internal, and external and does not suggest a relationship of dependence by the periphery on the centre, since individuals return, both physically and in terms of identity affiliations, to the periphery *as* a centre: a space and place within as much as without. We also know that even within rural environments this movement is contingent upon factors that might be experienced as positive or negative. This brings us to the third constituent of forces: time.

One of the most noticeable features of rural life is the time it takes to move from place to place in space. Thus we revisit Gallagher’s (1979) notion of space and suggest that space not only is an enculturated and organizational concept in any discussion of rurality but also the one feature that changes or elongates time. This elongation of time in turn affects identities, since these are mostly constituted in relation to communities that exist in relative isolation in space and time from each other, and in greater isolation from urban centres. Our discussion of space, place, and time has its parallels in theories of globalization in which the latter is associated with the contraction of time and history and the pull toward integration. Because rural environments are often populated or depopulated as a consequence of global economics, we have argued that any theory of rurality must also take into account theories of globalization and identity. Just as globalization is associated with theories of identity (for example, Appiah’s [2006] notion of cosmopolitanism or Ashcroft et al.’s [1989] discussion of postcolonialism), so too are theories of

rurality likely to lead to theories of rural identity (e.g., rural communitarianism as discussed by Cloke & Marsden, 2006).

#### **4.0 Agencies: Movement, Systems, and Will**

Within a generative theory of rurality we consider the next constituent concept to be agencies. Agencies, and the critical theoretical apparatus from which they derive (the feminist postcolonial theorization on the subject) (see, e.g., Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin [1989] and Spivak [1987]), are critical to a theory in which the generativity and dynamism of the rural are emphasized. Agency is compliance and disruption, activism and entropy, and involves an exercise of will toward both ends. On the one hand, our commonsense perception of rurality is negative (for example, passive, static, backward, and ignorant) and sees the rural as being in need of rescue, help, pity, and charity. The most one can hope for, as Corbett (2007) suggests, is a type of nostalgia or romantic ideal of simplicity and innocence within time and space. On the other hand, the rural environ is transformative, capable of changing behaviour and affecting the motivation of teachers, community workers, and learners. Research from RTEP (Islam, 2007) demonstrates that the very generative and transformative nature of rurality serves to inform but also delimit the effectiveness of intervention programs designed for education, health care, job creation, and poverty alleviation. Unlike forces that are concerned with how space and time modify each other depending on movement between places, agency is exercised in relation to attempts to regulate both space and time. In some ways the concept of agency coincides with that of habitus mentioned earlier in relation to Weber. In Bourdieu's (1989) terms, *habitus* is a defined system of durable and transposable "dispositions" (akin perhaps to schemas insofar as they are lasting and acquired and consist of perceptions of thought and action). The individual agent develops these dispositions in response to the determining structures (such as class, family, and education) and external conditions they encounter. They are therefore neither wholly voluntary nor wholly involuntary. As with forces, these might be simultaneously internal and external.

Agencies may also refer to the "agencies" of the community (e.g., the religious or tribal authority structures and support systems), of the state (e.g., the counseling, clinical, and agricultural systems), or of individuals (to leave or return, to change or remain static, to intervene or withdraw). The defining characteristic of agencies is their ability to transform the relationship between space, place, and time. In urban environments the interplay between forces and agencies are various and multiple, since space and time are contracted through proximity and technology (Amin, 1999). In rural environments, the interspersed nature of the environment to alter the relationship between space and time determines the extent to which these require agency to be modified or brought into closer proximity to each other. In other words, accessibility in the form of physical proximity or distance from social and support services alters the time it takes to reach such services, and in turn alters the spatial relationship between people and the context they traverse in order to reach such support. Thus theorists such as Porter (2001, p. 265) have argued that effective intervention depends on an understanding of its being "radically local"; in other words, imminently translatable into action and belief. Since space and movement are not malleable in rural communities to the same extent as may be found in conurbations, the question to be asked is, what factors enable transformation or even change in rural environs? Corbett (2007) draws on the work of Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) to describe rurality as "place sensitive." Save the

Children (2002) argues that the “sense” of place is critical to individual and communal identity.

Nowhere is this truer than in rural environments, which, because they are not characterized by class affiliations (as the suburbs differ from the townships in South Africa, or the boroughs from the estates in the United Kingdom), offer a greater relationship between people, and between people and the land. This does not suggest that no hierarchies of gender and power exist in rural communities, but rather that the land itself acts as a determiner in relation to the relative status of rural inhabitants. Typically thus, women act as labourers as much as men do, and the ownership of, and responsibility for, land, while communal, is also held by the chief. In this sense, too, is the environment generative (an agent) since its landscape affects human interactions. And just as theories of cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2006; Bridge, 2005) struggle with the debate concerning whether the contraction of space and time is a movement toward greater democracy or a new transnational exclusivity of elites, so too must any theory of rurality concern itself with entropy as either a product of the environment or the exercise of a particular type of will that seeks to stratify the relationship between space, time, and agency such that these three drivers remain in static balance to each other. One often finds evidence of this balance in the interview material of teachers and learners (participating in RTEP) who articulate a sense that nothing will ever change or can be changed and that “that is the way it is.” Entropy thus is a form of stasis that constructs fatalism in response to the apparent hostility of the environment, the people, and the ineptitude or indifference of the state.

## **5.0 Resources: Situated, Material, and Psychosocial**

The third constituent of a generative theory of rurality is resources. As with agencies and forces, these have multiple and shared meanings, referring at once to material and emotional resources, as well as to conceptual and physical resources. Resources may well be what can be purchased, but their effective deployment or use is largely dependent on the influence of agencies and forces and the extent to which these might delimit not only their availability but also their use. The commitment and connection to an area (referring here to Budge [2004]) have the potential not only to extend access to resources but also to transform the relationship between space and time. Nowhere is this more evident than in home-care initiatives that demonstrate proactive engagement between community and health care workers to support those infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. Resources are also generative insofar as they are not given but generated. As such, the generative capacity of communities to deploy them depends in turn on agencies’ effects on forces. Research that has focused on rurality (see for example, Joseph [2007]) as locality, or approaches to such research (such as U.S. Department of Education [1994]), has tended to be driven by assumptions that attempt to account for ever-widening circles of deficit in terms of material resources and entropy. We believe, however, that the relationship between space, places, and time (forces), resources, and agencies is critical for a more nuanced description, understanding, and conceptualization of rurality.

While it is easy to construct rurality as a “static-passive” context, we have argued that rurality is an actively constituted constellation of forces, agencies, and resources that are evident in lived experience and social processes in which teachers and community workers are changed. What emerges further from such



reflections is that education needs to be understood as a “placed resource” (Blommaert, 2002, p. 20), where “resources that are functional in one particular place... [can] become dysfunctional as soon as they are moved into other places.” Understanding how such resources can be made effective across a variety of education contexts (urban, rural, middle class, working class) is the key issue affecting the quality of teaching and learning in 21st century South Africa. Our article describes theoretical features that we argue are key in a generative theory of rurality and that we believe will shift contemporary understandings of rurality in relation to curriculum as a technology for change.

## 6.0 Implications

While this article is meant as a starting point in our own theorizing about rurality, it is difficult to refrain from sketching out some new possibilities for how we reconceptualize teacher education through the lens a generative theory of rurality might offer. What would it mean to adopt, as Corbett (2007) suggests, a place-sensitive orientation to teaching in rural areas? As a first step, we regard as critical some realignments within academic settings so that rurality as envisioned through such complementary programs as rural extension, community development, rural sociology, rural medicine, and public health, *along with* rural education, contributes to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary dialogue. At one end of the spectrum we might, as teacher-educators, explore the ways in which a faculty of medicine trains doctors for rural settings or how faculties of education might work strategically with faculties of agriculture. At the other end of the spectrum we might consider drawing on the rich bodies of work within cultural studies (see, for example, Wendell Berry’s [1977] classic *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*); African film studies and literature, ranging from the postcolonial investigations of homestead and childhood in relation to rurality and development; through to tropes within such films as *Jim Comes to Jo’Burg* (Rutherford, 1949) and *Yesterday* (Roodt, 2004); and of course to a study of visual images within the popular imagination of South Africa.

More specific to the study of education itself, we see that there may be some strategic ways of engaging with a place-conscious, place-sensitive pedagogy that takes account of important work that has already been carried out in South Africa by Adele Gordon (1997) and others on public schools on private property, such as the *Emerging Voices* study. Corbett (2007), in his work on the spaces of resistance within place-sensitive education, offers several suggestions that seem useful here. Rural communities must start by identifying and naming specific problems and struggles and not shy away from acknowledging the ways in which leaving and staying (and returning) operate within local structures. Corbett (2007) speaks to the significance of rural communities’ confronting issues of “racism, sexism and constructions of masculinity and femininity that lead to oppressive and systemic inequality” (p. 269). Indeed as our umbrella project title, “Every Voice Counts,” suggests, the affirmation of wide-scale participation in local communities is critical. There is no space, place, or time for silencing. Corbett goes on to suggest that rural schools “can and should be places where at least some of the complex intellectual work required to deal ... with rural problems is done” (p. 270), acknowledging, however, that this is far from easy to accomplish. Corbett (2007) notes that it is critical to build pockets of resistance against a “diseased and deceased” discourse in relation to rural life and to circumvent a type of

hopelessness that is often presented to youth (both to youth who stay and youth who leave).

In relation to work involving RTEP, we think that the development of a place-sensitive pedagogy is possible. Elsewhere we offer some of the views of the student teachers themselves<sup>4</sup>; here we see that the responses of some of the parents might be read as examples of critical resistance to a “diseased and deceased” view of rural life. During the first year of RTEP, some families, for example, invited their children’s new teachers (our student teachers) into their homes and commented on the significance of seeing young people (from the city) choosing to come to their (rural) community. Other parents in focus groups noted the significance of the presence of white and Indian teachers in their community and described the positive impact it was having on their children. The teachers based in several of the schools commented on what it meant to not feel left out. These perspectives will benefit more from theorizing than from romanticizing. Initiatives such as RTEP will be sustained only through a deep commitment on the part of the government and of national and provincial departments of education to the plight of rural communities. For faculties of education, however, the opportunities and not just the barriers to this kind of work need to be recognized. What would happen, for example, if we made more apparent the significance of place within the hundreds of theses and dissertations produced by our graduate students each year? What types of cumulative knowledge could be explored if the classification and description *rural, urban, township*, and so on became more theoretically explicit in our work, and how might we work more strategically within policy frameworks by highlighting and problematizing space, place, and time in educational discourse? These are just a few of the questions that we see being generated by this work, and like others working in the area of rurality, we see it as its own hopeful discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> Four other substudies on rural education and rural livelihoods along with RTEP make up the Every Voice Counts Project (de Lange et al., 2006), a Research Niche Area on Teacher Education and Community Development in the Age of AIDS: (a) life histories of rural teachers; (b) school management in addressing orphans and vulnerable children; (c) youth as knowledge producers; and (d) community-based approaches to addressing gender-based violence.

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating discussion of homestead and nonhomestead life is provided in the novel *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the exhibition *Things come together: Possibilities in a rural practicum* (Wake & Staniforth, 2007).