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Review of *Once Upon a Place: The Fading of Community in Rural Kentucky* by Kenneth D. Tunnell. Xlibris Corporation: Bloomington, IN. 2011

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In December of 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary gave a speech in which he warned that rural was “becoming less and less relevant” in America. Of course, he did not mean to suggest that rural America was becoming less important. Rather, he referred to the dwindling rural population that made rural a less potent political force. According to the most recent census figures, rural America accounts for only 16 percent of the country’s population, down from 72 percent 100 years earlier and at its lowest level ever.

In *Once Upon a Place* Kenneth Tunnell uses rural Kentucky to illustrate some of the economic and social changes that rural American has undergone in recent decades. In this case the word “illustrate” is both literal and figurative in that the book weaves together text and color photos. What sets this book apart from most is the extent to which photographs are used to illustrate the conditions described in the text. More than half of the pages are dedicated to photographs and these photos document failed farms and failed businesses, as well as religious institutions that continue to play a vital role in these communities. The photos emphasize where things are while the text emphasizes how things have changed.

*Once Upon a Place* focuses on factors accounting for changes in rural Kentucky and what those changes mean for those communities that remain. The concern is not only with economic shifts, but with the impact of those economic shifts on civic engagement and a broader sense of community. The story begins with the decline in tobacco production that once played an important role in the economy of rural Kentucky, but in recent years has been in sharp decline.

The story continues with the decline of locally owned businesses that have been replaced by big box stores and national chains.

Tunnell places these changes within the context of two theoretical frameworks. First, is social disorganization theory. Both rural areas adjacent to larger population areas and those in the most rural regions of the state are subject to disorganization. Areas adjacent to larger population centers may experience population growth as outsiders move in, but these outsiders have only weak ties to the local community and are more likely to exhibit a taste for conspicuous consumption rather than involvement in the community. They may, in fact, draw more resources from the community than they put into it. In more isolated rural areas population decline has been accompanied by the rise of social problems, including street crimes and drugs. Reminiscent of the “broken windows” perspective developed in urban areas, in rural areas illegal dump sites and roadside trash are signs of neglect and of a breakdown in the social order that fosters criminal behavior.

A second theoretical approach is called creative destruction, which “refers to the process by which older forms and processes are destroyed to make way for newer ones (p. 95).” From this perspective older community structures that form the basis for community (e.g., the country store or local garage) are replaced by structures (e.g., big box stores and fast food franchises) that are more efficient from a business perspective but that do little to foster a sense of local community. As a reader I found this second theoretical perspective more persuasive.

Tunnell ultimately points to local public officials as important in shaping the community’s future. He distinguishes between those whose objective is to maintain a local community identity and those who take a multinational or corporate world view. The author argues that local public officials who emphasize civic community and locally based development have the best chance for maintaining a vibrant local community culture.

If there is a weakness in the book it is in the disjunction between the words and the images. The words emphasize process and change over time, whereas the photographs are still images emphasizing the state of things after changes have begun. It would have been a more powerful use of photographs to have some before and after photos, though that may not have been possible.

*Once Upon a Place* addresses rural decline in one region of one state, but there are implications for other rural settings. Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is the reminder of the power of visual images to provide a deeper context for the social processes under study. Too often academic researchers fail to adequately provide a rich and detailed context within which their larger discussion is framed. As a result there is sterility in their work, a sense that humans have been taken out of the process. Photographs provide that context in a way that words alone cannot. The numbers used to describe such things as crime and civic community are important, but making sense of those numbers requires a deeper understanding of the social context in which they are situated. Photographs are too often overlooked as tools for providing that context. Another book that effectively combines photographs with narrative is *Righteous*

*Dopefiend* by Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg, about homeless drug addicts in San Francisco. One can only hope books such as these mark the beginning of a trend.