

# Place, Survivance, and White Remembrance: A Decolonizing Challenge to Rural Education in Mobile Modernity

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Michael Corbett's writing on the irony of schooling in rural places inspires me to reconsider how place shapes my commitments and my learning as a White, educated class, land- and place-attached American male. In a time of climate change, economic collapse, and other related cultural and ecological crises, our assumptions about education and schooling need to be profoundly reexamined. In *Learning to Leave* (2007) and in "Rural Schooling in Mobile Modernity: Returning to the Places I've Been" (2009), Corbett evokes the failures and inadequacies of contemporary schooling in rural places, developing a deep analysis of the relationship between schooling and the larger disembedding culture of global capitalism (Giddens, 1990) in which rural people and places are exploited and undervalued. Such an analysis could be extended beyond the rural scene to also include the institutionalization of education as schooling most anywhere. The irony of schooling everywhere is that it provides a questionable education for everyone; everywhere schooling functions as an engine of questionable progress.

As I have been invited to contribute generally to the discussion around themes Corbett raises around people, place, and identity, I want to take the opportunity to practice what systems theorists call "10,000 meters thinking." That is, I want to pull back from a critical view of schooling and its everyday problems to consider the larger historical and geographical contexts in which culture and education take place. Rural, urban, suburban, exurban, or otherwise, the places that hold our lives also necessarily contain our

personal experiences of family, culture, environment, and time (i.e., a sense of the past, present, and the possibilities for the future). Places are pedagogical both because their contexts shape our experiences of learning and becoming, and because our experiences of learning in turn contribute to place-making, place-changing, and place-leaving. Although place is often spoken of in the singular, places are best thought of in the plural, as our lives touch a great variety of interconnected places, each holding a variety of sometimes competing and conflicting stories. I want to make the argument that all the places that impact our lives, and that we impact through our living whether we leave, stay, or simply visit with our dollars, have a cultural history worth knowing about—and not only because knowledge of place might improve one's chances for "school success."<sup>1</sup>

From a 10,000 meters perspective, place-consciousness reveals how schooling itself, and assumptions about school success and failure, remain a function of the larger process of cultural and ecological colonization endemic to Western industrialized societies. By colonization I refer to: a) the historical practice from the colonial era through the present of dominating other people's territory and other people's bodies and minds for the production of privilege maintained by military, political, and economic power, and; b) other assimilative cultural patterns (e.g., schooling or consumerism) that over-determine or restrict possibilities for people and places. In other words, place-consciousness provides a frame of reference from which one can identify, and potentially resist, the colonizing practices of schooling as a function of the larger culture and its political economy. In order to explore the dynamic connections between place, geography, culture, and education, and in order to envision a future that is sustainable and authentically integrated with its past, it is necessary to look back across time, and to look

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This commentary is part of a series in response to Michael Corbett's 2007 book *Learning to Leave*, as well as Corbett's article, "Rural Schooling in Mobile Modernity: Returning to the Places I've Been," published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, vol. 24, no. 7.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to place-conscious education, see Theobald (1997), Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b), Sobel (2003), Gruenewald and Smith (2008), and Smith (2002). The current author has changed his name from Gruenewald to Greenwood.

beyond schooling, for the places and selves we may not yet know. This exercise in perspective taking is not offered as a critique of Corbett's work, but as an elaboration on the theme of place that is central to his inquiry.

Evoking White Remembrance: Past and Present from  
10,000 Meters and Beyond

One evening this winter, I was thinking about the colonizing aspects of schooling in *Learning to Leave* as my wife Jill and I attended a presentation/performance by Indigenous artist LisaNa Redbear at the Fine Arts auditorium at Washington State University. Redbear's (2009) presentation and art exhibit featured intense audio/visual mixed-media that depicted her experience as an Indigenous woman on a long healing journey from "the soul wound of colonialism." She challenged the mainly White, privileged audience to acknowledge not only our complicity in enacting and legitimizing the disruption and destruction of Indigenous people worldwide, but also to acknowledge our own wounding in a culture based in militarism, individualism, and separateness from the land. Her performance in the Ivory Tower was a bold interruption of educational business as usual, and included a spontaneous condemnation of the U.S.-backed Israeli destruction in Gaza, where over 1300 people were brutally killed in late 2008, over half of them civilians, over one-third children. She spoke and sang out as well against the 31-year-old unjust incarceration of Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier, and the atrocities of the wars people have gotten used to here in the United States, where many are numb to the daily reports of horrific hi-tech violence against poor people in poor countries, and where men, women, and children continue to be killed from "collateral damage." Redbear showed us at last a film of herself and her son in their plain and colorful kitchen, where she teaches the boy how to make tortillas against the homogenizing White power of Wonder Bread.

In dry academe, the always marginalized and threatened arts are one of the few places where the experience of being alive, or the experience of dying, can be embraced and performed with heart and soul as well as the mind, where we can remember that we are an embodied and emplaced people connected to other embodied and emplaced people.

Redbear's challenge to remember evoked an uncomfortable silence in the Fine Arts Auditorium, my own discomfort included, which reminded me of Michael Marker's (2006) comments on the dissonant nature of epistemic encounters between settler societies and the Indigenous other:

There is a deep insecurity within the consciousness and conscience of settler societies that, when confronted by the indigenous Other, is awakened

to challenges about authenticity in relation to land and identity. There is embedded in this encounter with indigenous knowledge a challenge about both epistemic and moral authority with regard to indigenous relationships to land and the spirit of the land. Whereas other minoritized groups demand revisionist histories and increased access to power within educational institutions, indigenous people present a more direct challenge to the core assumptions about life's goals and purposes. (Marker, 2006, pp. 485-486)

In evoking and taking Redbear's message seriously—that we all have healing work to do around the soul wound of colonialism—I am taking a small initial step inward toward facing the insecure settler in myself—not out of guilt, but in pursuit of authenticity and recovery of what I myself have lost to a colonizing culture. There are many ways that my own living and ways of knowing are limited and constrained by the dominant culture, particularly in relation to the land and to my own sense of life's meaning and possibilities. As a White, privileged male, I am taking another small step outward by asking a largely White, academic audience that is sympathetic to rural place: What are the implications of Indigenous thought and experience to our own dwelling, our own identities, and to our vision of education? How does Indigenous knowledge challenge "life's goals and purposes," as well as our view of the past and possible futures?

For some educators, for whom Indigenous presence has been wiped off textbook maps and out of consciousness, these may seem like impractical questions. What does it have to do with the hard dilemmas facing rural schools and communities? Yet, if we as a community of scholars are to think deeply about place and identity anywhere in the Americas, or most any place on earth, we must think deeply about colonization and the land-based power relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, the settlers and the displaced. Urban or rural, how does settler society come to terms with the reality that colonization and its pattern of violence, slavery, genocide, and ecocide are the foundation of Western industrialized culture that is reproduced in part through schooling? Acknowledging colonization is not to reject everything about Western culture, and it is not to deny the democratic intentions, for example, of some of the "Founding Fathers." Speaking about colonization simply acknowledges the obvious fact that American "progress" and settler societies everywhere have "developed" through violence, exploitation, forced displacement, and other forms of oppression. The point is not to demonize America or to promote "revisionist" history, but simply to acknowledge that our living colonial legacy, and its contemporary counterpart in economic globalization, is important educationally,

especially in the study of the relationship between people and place.

Most conversations about schooling are silent about a deeper, emplaced and embodied past, and thus people speak mainly about school rather than education, living, and learning. Since beginning my study of place-conscious education, I have been encouraged and challenged by Indigenous people worldwide to consider more deeply the implications of Indigenous thought and experience on my own theory and practice. This inspiring challenge is beautifully voiced in the custom many Indigenous people have of honoring the ancestors and the land before speaking to a group, and by acknowledging the Indigenous people of other lands when they travel to other places. Thankfully, these challenges to remember my own embodiment in a storied landscape have been so persistent, sometimes surprising me like signs from spirit to *pay attention*, that I now cannot think about place and education without respectfully considering an Indigenous perspective. And in my learning, considering an Indigenous perspective in education today must include (for starters): a) acknowledging and listening to Indigenous people and their stories of connection to land and place; b) learning how colonization and settlement impacted and impacts Indigenous people and cultures; c) tracking the living link between colonization and today's economic globalization, and; d) encountering and the fact of Native *survivance*.

The term *survivance* is used in Native American Studies to describe the self-representation of Indigenous people against the subjugations, distortions, and erasures of White colonization and hegemony (Grande, 2004; Stromberg, 2006; Villegas, Neugebauer & Venegas, 2008; Vizenor, 1994, 2008). Gerald Vizenor (2008) calls Native *survivance* "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; *survivance* is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction....*Survivance*, then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*" (pp. 1, 19). Like the construct of "place" itself, the idea and experience of *survivance* opens space in educational scholarship for a determined resistance to violence toward a storied, living landscape and Indigenous ways of being that are rooted in place, land, and community; *survivance* in place is both to survive and resist the placelessness of schooling and all of its violent erasures and enclosures—including the erasure of the land's history and of Indigenous presence, and the enclosure of everyone's experience of the land, what Jay Griffiths (2006) calls "the deforestation of the human mind" (p. 25). I use the term here to refer both to Native *survivance*, and to other forms of resistance to erasure that allow one to survive and maintain presence in ways that are counter to dominant cultural narratives.

It is not uncommon to speak of colonization and cultural violence among my academic colleagues, but the objects of violence in these contexts are usually the "subaltern others" who stand in binary opposition to the White, privileged, or educated class of "mobile modernity." It is more difficult to acknowledge what Indigenous scholars Redbear and Marker asked their mainly White audiences to consider: that all of us carry a psychic or soul-wounding inherited by the colonial mindset, which is the foundation of our formal educational systems. White people need to acknowledge this wound in order for it to be healed in themselves as well as in space and time. This sentiment is evident in the worldwide movement for reparations from genocide, slavery, displacement, apartheid, and other forms of colonization and oppression. Similarly, Freire (1970/2005) insists that the oppressor is no more free than the oppressed: "As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression" (p. 56). While Freire's work may be rightly criticized for its own colonizing potential and for reproducing simplistic binaries (e.g., oppressor/oppressed relations), the idea here is that Native *survivance* is a place-based "pedagogy of the oppressed," and that *survivance* can refer also to recovering and maintaining other ways of being and knowing that schooling threatens to eliminate.

To speak of colonization, soul-wounding, healing, and the struggles of resistance among the Native people I know is to speak the obvious. By suggesting that non-Native people, even White people, share an analogous wounding and need for healing, I do not mean to equate Native and non-Native experience or to minimize in any way the trauma of 500 years of forced displacement and violence against Native people. Indeed, it is precisely this history, and the history of Native *survivance*, that I believe needs to be remembered in any conversation about place and education that is literate about the historical record of the land and its peoples. If we are at all interested in place, pursuing the questions—What happened here? What needs to be remembered, restored, or conserved?—needs to become a prominent feature of educational inquiry. Such an inquiry does not only suggest learning from Indigenous people's relationship to places over time and into the present; it must also probe the dissonance between Indigenous and settler epistemologies, the thinking and deeper assumptions behind relationships with place.

Cultural assumptions or "root metaphors" like individualism, anthropocentrism, and faith in progress are common to the dominant culture (Bowers, 1997) and they are now common to a commodified American landscape (Kunstler, 1993). Yet insecurities lurk behind the ideology of progress, which in the age of climate change, economic

collapse, and other related ecological and cultural crises, many are beginning to question.<sup>2</sup> Cultural institutions such as schools are built on the ideology of progress, the story of which is rarely examined even among educators interested in place. Place-conscious education, however, can potentially challenge learners to consider where they are, how they got there, and to examine the tensions between different cultural groups' inhabitation across time. In every case, in every place, this would mean listening for the voice of Native survivance, with an ear for learning from the relationship between Indigenous ways of knowing and local and global narratives of colonization and contestation. In the context of this remembering, place-consciousness also suggests a reassessment of all current inhabitants' relationships with land and people, near and far, now and in the future.

Like other trends in education, however, place-based education is always in danger of being absorbed as a methodology or an instrument to serve the conventional ends of schooling, ends such as preparing learners for what Corbett calls, "mobile modernity." Urban, rural, or otherwise, schooling on a global scale has always been a technocratic process managed to serve economic and political ends that are not primarily educational or in the best interest of learners and the places in which they live (Spring, 1998). Since 1983 and *A Nation at Risk*, it has been no secret that the primary aim of education in the U.S. is to prepare a deployable workforce eager to compete, achieve, and consume in the global economy. Publically valorized competitive nationalism has always been a fundamental feature of schooling, and it has been expressed differently through the decades (e.g., Sputnik-associated science education reform). Less publically owned, however (although an awareness is growing), is the recognition that the progress of prosperous nation states in Western industrialized society was achieved through, and remains dependent upon, a geopolitics that is colonial at its core.

In bringing the reality of soul-wounding alive to her academic audience, LisaNa Redbear dramatically re-minded and re-membered Indigenous experience to a complacent, White audience with well schooled memories. Others who have looked to Indigenous ways of being as part of a larger program for cultural and educational renewal in place have been critiqued for "romanticizing" Native cultures. Such critiques are important reminders that the simplistic idealization and misappropriation of Indigenous people's cultures must be avoided. However, critiquing efforts to invite a more central role for Indigenous experience

in education as mere "romanticizing" is historically and politically problematic when it becomes another excuse for forgetting the past and misunderstanding present and future geopolitical relationships. Contrary to the critique that to embrace Indigenous cultural and educational models is to romanticize, any honest look at Indigenous experience, or at the majority of the world's population, is to reveal the extreme romanticization and denial undergirding White notions of progress, which are fundamental to the project of schooling, and synonymous with the ongoing project of colonization under global capitalism.

No doubt knowledge about Indigenous life ways is underappreciated in the field of education and even in place-based education. But as Redbear recently taught me, the chief lesson of Indigenous experience is not only that Indigenous people maintain an epistemology that can contribute to more sustainable relationships between people and the places they inhabit. From 10,000 meters, listening for Indigenous stories of survivance is to disrupt the root story of modern colonization—which all of us carry in our body/minds—and to acknowledge the possibility for other ways of being.

#### Survivance: Reinhabitation and Decolonization in Place

The context of rural education—rural place—is especially connected to Indigenous people's survivance, first because of a shared connection to land and region, and second because Indigenous and rural people and places have similarly suffered from the colonizing practices of human and natural resource exploitation. Moreover, the schooling of both rural and Indigenous people, as part of a larger project of cultural assimilation, has not served these communities well, and has had the aim of intentionally breaking down ties to home communities. For Native Americans, this assimilative aim is seen most egregiously in the history of Indian boarding schools, and is still practiced today through school curricula, even place-based curricula, that either completely ignore Indigenous studies or reinforce stereotypes. For rural people, Corbett shows, assimilation is similarly enacted through a placeless and culturally non-responsive curriculum, and through the derogatory message of leave or fail.

Despite these similarities, discourses around rural and Indigenous education remain distinct and overlap only infrequently, which means that coalition building between the two groups is rare. In some areas, rural and Indigenous people live in conflict over territory and resources. Such conflicts date back to the time of White settlement/invasion and Indigenous removal/resistance and can include disagreements over generational (i.e., rural) or ancestral (i.e., Indigenous) claims to the land and what it means to be from a place. Both groups have shown an interest in educational reforms connected to place, but from 10,000

<sup>2</sup> For a powerful example of the interrelatedness of contemporary social and ecological crises, see Hawken (2007) and *The Earth Charter*, a multicultural, multi-lingual people's treaty for peace, social justice, and ecological sustainability: [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org). For scholarship on the Earth Charter as educational vision, see Gruenewald (2004a, 2004b, 2007).



meters, Indigenous and rural perspectives toward place differ markedly. While discourse in Indigenous education begins with an understanding of how identity and place have been impacted by colonization, discourse in rural education generally fails to acknowledge the deeper history of colonization in the places that rural people currently occupy.<sup>3</sup> Although rural educational discourse generally overlooks the history of White colonization, rural people have more recently begun to be identified as another group marginalized by the colonizing tendencies of global capitalism. As the extractive economies that once allowed a rural people to prosper started to decline or become dominated by big business, and as rural places were mapped and targeted for low-income service jobs such as call center operators, rural people too started to feel subjugated, and like Indigenous people always have, they started to resist in order to hold onto, decolonize, or reinhabit the rural way of life. There is an echo in such resistance of Indigenous presence that needs to be remembered.

Corbett ends his current article with sensible policy recommendations for rural places, and I would like to add to his list first a research question and then a policy recommendation. First, the research question: What is the relationship between rural resistance/renewal and Native survivance, and what are the implications of survivance (both Native and non-Native) on rural life and education? Hopefully the space of this response at least suggests that this an appropriate research question for rural education.

The policy implication for rural schooling is that in all rural places, educators should actively pursue relationships with nearby Native American tribal leaders for the purpose of creating together educational curricula for all learners that tells the deeper story of rural places from the perspective of Native survivance. The states of Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, Washington, and there are likely others, have each enacted legislation supporting the project of learning from those who lived on the land before it was called rural, and such learning needs to become part of decolonizing rural schooling and reinhabiting rural places.

Positing the aims of decolonization and reinhabitation, critical place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003a) provides a theoretical framework for acknowledging the colonizing tendencies of schooling, past and present, and a curricular framework for place-based inquiry: What in this place needs to be remembered, restored, conserved, transformed, or created? There are many possible answers to these questions, and because places are “the contact

zone of contested place stories” (Somerville, 2007, p. 81), such questions can only be pursued in collaboration with the diverse others who inhabit shared places. Near the conclusion of his current article, Corbett (2009) comments: “Perhaps we have something to learn from people who know where they live and who have multiple practical life skills” (p. 10). I intuit from Corbett’s work that this statement is purposefully understated to invite the larger educational research community to rouse ourselves from a school-centric trance that continues to marginalize both practical knowledge and intimate relationships with the land. Without doubt, schooled educators have much to learn from non-schooled learners and teachers, people who know the land and who, despite the colonizing influences of a schooled culture, have conserved and created ways of being that allow them both to resist and to survive. Indigenous people are not the only people from whom we have something to learn about ways of resisting and surviving the colonizing consumer culture of mobile modernity. But if we are serious about place, Indigenous experience cannot be ignored as we reflect on what purposes we want our living and learning to serve.

In *The Practice of the Wild*, Pulitzer Prize winning poet and essayist Gary Snyder (1990) quotes a Crow Elder: “You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough—even white people—the spirits will begin to speak to them. It’s the power of the spirits coming up from the land” (p. 39). At its deepest level, critical place-based education is not merely about making school more meaningful or contributing to community life. It is about remembering a deeper and wider narrative of living and learning in connection with others and with the land. It is about resisting the colonizing erasures and enclosures of schooling that make such remembering seem impractical and unnecessary.

<sup>3</sup> Both groups, however, risk losing their unique identities by succumbing to and being absorbed by the No Child Left Behind rhetoric of closing the achievement gap, as there is scant room in this discourse for real diversity, that is, for diverse ways of being and knowing.

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