

Learning to Lose: Rurality, Transience, and Belonging (A Companion to Michael Corbett)

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In *Learning to Leave*, Michael Corbett (2007) documents the ironies and contradictions of formal education and rurality, demonstrating how education is implicated in the depopulation and decline of rural areas, a consequence of increasing urbanity, in turn fuelled by global forces naturalized through narratives of progress within modernity. His arguments imply a central point I wish to make in this commentary: education, and in particular what is called *rural* education, is premised on loss. This loss is often not fully articulated, but it is deep and abiding. It is registered in efforts to stop the flow of peoples and resources, to resist consolidation and closure of schools, and to attract and retain educators. I want to argue however that such loss can also be productive in that it unsettles. And within such unsettling lie opportunities to generate new knowledge.

A reconceptualization of loss as a central and explicit component of an education that addresses the concerns of rurality enhances our understandings of what is possible. While it is important to understand the sociological conditions that frame the *physical* mobility of rural people, it is just as important to consider its affective, even psychic, dimensions as mobility relates to attachment, to belonging, to transience—and to loss. For whether one stays in or leaves a rural area (and the oscillations of mobility and transience are rarely so simply demarcated), indeed, regardless of geographical place attention to such affective dimensions, what William Pinar (1991) calls “a social psychoanalysis of place” (p.165), can reap rich insights into both the challenges and possibilities for education and/in rurality.

Furthermore, wrestling with the vicissitudes of loss is a

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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.

reminder of a shared global and planetary vulnerability, one which, while highlighting the intricacies and specificities of place, also *transcends* those specificities and shores up our *interdependence*, the manner in which our destinies—and our places—are intimately connected to others. As Jonathan Lear (2006) argues, this deeply etched vulnerability is both *ontological*, a part of what it means to be human, as well as *inherited*, a part of what it means to be cultural beings who inhabit a way of life. An education for rurality would encourage a fuller consciousness of this shared vulnerability through an examination of loss—real, anticipated, generational—as it relates to our felt or refuted attachments. It would also encourage new forms of belonging (Bromley, 2000) and new practices of inhabitation as the basis of both reparation and hope.

Reconsidering the Place of Loss in Rural Education

The meanings of home, place, and belonging have never been more highly contested than in these times of unprecedented migration, displacement, and exile, shifting national borders and identities, and multiple diasporas. As large scale and ubiquitous as these forces are, they are lived and experienced within deeply specific sociocultural relations and highly localized geospatial arrangements. Such specificity underscores the importance of a focus on place as a means to excavate possibility and interconnection. In local and global contexts, a reconsideration of loss and its provocations is critical to the objective of renewal—itsself borne of loss.

As Corbett suggests, dominant technicist, rationalist, and decontextualized modes of education are woefully inadequate to address the complexities of places. An education that might begin to address the needs of places must first of all resist simplistic binaries of identity and locale, and ask broader questions about loss, vulnerability, and difference, and what these questions suggest for a *new* project of conviviality and sustainability within rurality. Such an education asks students to consider the responsibilities and challenges of staying and leaving and

to understand the conditions of citizenship and attachment. For, within what Corbett calls “mobile modernity,” whether and when we stay or leave, we are always travellers: cultural boundary crossers who benefit from an understanding of the relations of difference that underpin all forms of movement when we are able to converse across these differences while striving to live respectfully in relation to others. The kind of education to which I refer may feel, at certain times, more pressing in some locales than others, but it is an educational discourse that has implications for all of us and for all the places on which we depend for solace and sustenance.

The context through which I have considered what I call an *educational discourse of loss and place* (Kelly, 2009)—the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador—is one that has been deeply marked by the ironies and contradictions to which Corbett refers. In the past three decades, the province has been culturally reconfigured by the ecological crisis of the world’s oceans, resulting in the collapse and closure of the province’s historical *raison d’être*, a five hundred year old cod fishery. The depopulation that followed—12% of the total population in a 15 year period—resulted in a radical decline of community infrastructure. Schools, churches, fire halls, and medical facilities closed as a profound cultural disorientation grew. This disorientation is still felt province-wide, but reverberates most profoundly in rural and “outport” places. Coincident with this demise is the rise of an oil and gas industry, also fuelled by global greed, overproduction, and disregard for the finitude of planetary resources. Such circumstances of pronounced cultural (and ecological) crises, loss, reorientation, and change dramatically increase the stakes of leaving and staying. They also heighten the need for a more complex approach to any efforts designed to ensure the viability and sustainability of places.

The fishing outposts of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the fishing villages of southwestern Nova Scotia of which Corbett writes, are reminiscent of so many other distressed places worldwide ravaged by exploitive global economics, unrelenting conflict, and unprecedented cultural and ecological destruction. Rural places, now more than at any other point in history, are places of great loss—of people, natural resources, and, often, as a result, any vision of long-term viability. In such places, loss as a persistent condition of life is vividly felt. Yet, what is often misrepresented in such circumstances as an acceptance of disadvantage is more often an intricate and, on many fronts, satisfying negotiation of abiding attachments, longings, and hopes set against a backdrop of ecological and economic insecurity.

As Corbett acknowledges, leaving rurality is a deeply entrenched feature of the progress narrative of modernity. This form of mobility is often uncritically positioned as a necessary precursor to economic prosperity and enhanced social status—outward mobility as upward mobility.

However, forms of attachment and belonging are powerful forces to reconcile in the negotiation of such demands. Given the multiple ambivalences felt by those who stay and/or leave, a wariness about an education that mobilizes people for a departure from a place they are not sure they want to leave is understandable. Even if it appears that education has chosen a side in the debate about the worth of some places in relation to others, as Corbett suggests, students, whether they resist or accept this judgement, should not do so without an opportunity to consider the nature of the very ties that bind, shape, limit, and undo them—the psychosocial conditions of (be)longing.

An acceptance of loss (as change, redirection, or depletion, for examples) would create a space in which one might plan and preserve, turning love of place into an ethic of responsibility and sustainability. Without an acknowledgement of loss (the first principle of an educational discourse of loss and place), we inadvertently—and perhaps ironically—cultivate a seedbed for retrenchment, conservatism, and fatalism. Unacknowledged loss helps maintain the illusion that loss is neither real nor as severe as it might seem. Such disavowal inhibits forward thinking and new creations, for it dulls apprehension and inhibits our best efforts to respond, to challenge, to sustain, and to change.

But, loss is not easy to acknowledge or to articulate. Indeed, within cultural contexts where prohibitions limit expressions of loss and mourning, loss is rarely articulated in productive ways. For example, nostalgia, despite its register of dissatisfaction with the present through an idealization of the past, is often dismissed and misunderstood as lacking agency. But the dissatisfaction that fuels nostalgia is an expression of alienation and conveys in muted ways a nonetheless strongly felt desire for a better world (Hutcheon, 1998; Overton, 1996). For this reason, nostalgia should command our critical attention so that we might understand its inclinations and consider how best to tap its potential in order to promote change.

Likewise, solastalgia, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht, is a register of the profundity of human distress resulting from displacement and loss due to ecological crises by which places are traumatized to the point that they can no longer provide solace and sustenance. The social dysfunctions that accompany solastalgia—increased crime, substance abuse and addictions, family and community breakdown, and increased suicides—are powerful symptoms of unreconciled, partially articulated loss (Albrecht, 2005). Habitually disavowed loss—what Freud (1917/1989) called melancholia—often underlies expressions of loss such as nostalgia and solastalgia, preempting an acceptance of loss and a refocusing of life energies toward new, reconstituted and more life-affirming attachments.

When we understand the structures and expressions of unresolved loss that constitute nostalgia, solastalgia,

and melancholia, we are better able to adopt a critical stance toward loss. Adopting this critical stance embraces mourning and all that it offers, including new opportunities to examine the nature of attachments, and to envision and forge new, healthier and more sustainable attachments. Mourning creates spaces for new projects in places where, as Judith Butler (2003) says, “belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss... [where] loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community” (p. 468). An education that encourages an investigation into the nature of our affinities and attachments—rather than one that romanticizes or zealously mobilizes them - is an ethical project. It is a project that respects our shared vulnerability and inquires into the conditions of conviviality—how to be in the world in relation to its diverse peoples and to the planet, while emphasizing the deep interdependence of all.

Learning to Lose: Toward a Literacy of Transience in Place

The responsibility of formal education in these respects is huge—yet it remains still largely unrealized, despite ever-increasing and highly promising efforts to reconceptualize its frameworks and practices. For example, despite decades of research into literacy as social practice, the New Literacy Studies, literacy education, the central enterprise of formal education, still remains largely severed from the complex histories of those who are expected to adhere to its demands, and is still locked into practices that continue to implicate it in a long history of inequity and injustice. For contemporary students, narrow educational outcomes—conceived either through the conservative lenses of traditional literacy practices or the more progressive lens of New Literacy Studies—continue to deny them, on the one hand, the possibility to imagine how their own lives and longings are textually constructed and, on the other, how to reimagine them.

Luke and Carrington (2004) contrast three modes of literacy, each of which implies a sense of place (or placelessness): *parochial* literacy, which valorizes local texts and experiences; *fantasy* literacy, which displaces locales and positions through a focus on the other worlds; and, *glocalized* literacy, a critical engagement with the relationship of local and other textual worlds in order “to remediate globalization” (p. 63). For times of transience and change, they suggest a reconstitution of literacy for a critical engagement with glocalised economies: a literacy to build cosmopolitan views and identities through a shunting between “historical memories and contemporary understandings of how these economies of flows actually structurally position (and perhaps exclude) one, how differing dispositions will have different effects in various fields of flows, and how to actively engage with those fields in agentive and transformative ways” (p.64).

Yet, even this important reconceptualization of literacy does not reach sufficiently deeply into the unexamined relations of flow and transience that sustain many of the problems of rurality. Whether one stays or leaves, attachments to and relationships of place need to be critically examined for both what they inhibit *and* enable. A passionate yet unexamined attachment to place, a fierce clinging to places and identities and their deeply embedded and often unexamined myths about “a way of life,” is no more liberating than acritical separation, an unquestioned acceptance of social hierarchies, or an attitude of resignation toward leaving. Those who reside in exile on the margins of the political status quo—in any place—may hope that in some of these spaces a more courageous education might emerge.

Education should *encourage* transience, a learning to leave different than what Corbett documents as its present legacy. Education must create the conditions for students to leave their home places, to travel intellectually and emotionally—within and across the borders of their own communities and elsewhere, and within *themselves*, in search of the forces that constitute them, socially, culturally, and emotionally. Only in these ways will students learn to lose: to understand the meanings of loss, vulnerability, and difference, to grasp their conditions, manifestations and possibilities, and, in so doing, to get some glimpse not only of what has been and may be lost, but what may be gained within themselves as they are drawn in and tossed aside by the flows and forces of “new times” (Hall, 1989).

Such an education should also demand an account of the manner in which what is lost has come to be. How are we complicit in what we have lost, and what might be done to reconcile these injuries to ourselves, to one another, and to the planet? Regardless of what credentials current education does or does not bestow, those who stay or leave following it remain inadequately educated through it to understand meaningfully why places should matter and how, the nature of their deep interconnectivity, and the implications of failing to sustain them. Rurality will always be characterized by loss. An education for rurality will see loss as an opportunity to reexamine old certainties, to provoke new knowledge and to forge new relations. Sustainability is not only for a population seen to stay and nor should it be reduced to a common yet narrow view of upkeep of a social and ecological status quo—susSTAYnability. Rather, sustainability should be a centerpiece of an education that attends to a profound form of inhabitation, involving ethics, politics and affect—a complex and compelling call to care in which transience is a feature of life, a way of thinking, a mode of identification, a form of belonging, and a mark of loss as possibility and hope—of reparation, for people and their places.

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