

Assimilation, Resistance, Rapprochement, and Loss: Response to Woodrum, Faircloth, Greenwood, and Kelly

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Citation: Corbett, M. (2009). Assimilation, resistance, rapprochement, and loss: Response to Woodrum, Faircloth, Greenwood, and Kelly. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(12). Retrieved [date] from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-12.pdf>

To begin I would like to thank Michael Barbour for suggesting this themed issue in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. I would also like to thank Kai Schafft for taking up this suggestion and recruiting such an outstanding group of scholars concerned with rural education broadly defined. These scholars suggest in similar yet different ways that we need to think more broadly about what rural means and indeed how the connections between people and place matter. As each commentator seems to agree, all manner of these connections are currently under threat. In addition to the established historical stories of dispossession so well articulated by each author, contemporary economic upheavals have destabilized the connection between people and place secured by stable financial systems and real estate markets. Little seems certain these days and rural North America feels the heat disproportionately, as usual.

Further, each of the commentators seeks to problematize simplistic notions of rurality, thinking through what it is that more nuanced understandings of the rural and place might point toward in education. This is the kind of theorizing we need in rural education at this moment. The most powerful thread in the commentaries is the consistent focus on issues around the education in Aboriginal communities and the potential for dialogue between educational scholars in rural education and in Aboriginal education. It is perhaps here that we might find space to pursue Paul Theobald (1997) and Chet Bowers' (2006) vision of imagining a non-commodified "commons" of/in education. I think this is exciting and suggests that a future set of articles in this journal might be devoted to exploring this connection further.

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This commentary is part of a series in response to his 2007 book *Learning to Leave*, as well as his 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.

It has been my impression that one of the biggest problems with the idea of the rural is the way that it has tended to have an exclusive focus on a monoethnic farming demographic. Without getting into convoluted debates about what counts as rural, suffice it to say that people who are connected to the land and sea in a variety of ways and for a variety of historical reasons often have similar kinds of struggles. It is obvious that the longstanding struggles of Aboriginal people represent particularly strong claims to connection between specific cultural, environmental, productive, and spiritual practices and so I am gratified that three of the four responses to *Learning to Leave* deal with these questions specifically and directly.¹ The other piece takes up questions of alterity and identity in different ways, I think troubling the idea that people and place ought to be intimately connected and suggesting that learning to leave a variety of social and physical spaces represents an important objective for contemporary rural schooling.

Assimilation

I think Arlie Woodrum's piece (2009), speaking forcefully to the assimilatory project of modern education, probably comes closest to my own analysis of the challenges faced by rural people—be they situated in Appalachia, New Mexico, or Atlantic Canada. Woodrum situates the problem historically, tracing the history of immigration to New Mexico as well as the history of schooling and curriculum in the United States. Interestingly the one chapter from the dissertation upon which *Learning to Leave* was based that is not in the trade book recounts a similar history in Canada.² What my chapter failed to address was the schooling

¹ In the introduction to *Learning to Leave* I recount a bit about my first teaching experience in a Cree/Metis community in northern Manitoba. For a fuller elaboration of this experience see Corbett (1999).

² A version of this chapter has been published in the Canadian journal *Historical Studies in Education* (Corbett, 2001).

of Aboriginal people in Canada, and it is wonderful to see Woodrum take his argument in this direction. Rural education is indeed more complex than perhaps my book allows and there is a particular danger in a community study to treat the community as a space cut off from other overlapping spaces. This is a very important critique of place-based education generally and various attempts to rethink or revive simplistic notions of community in social theory (Bauman, 2001) and in educational thought (Nespor, 2008). Woodrum also seems to wonder if there is any hope for a different kind of education, or a different way of doing school that is not an assimilatory project or that does not disembed and displace people. I share this concern.

There is one caveat I would like to add though. In my study I did indeed argue that the project of modern education is about disembedding and assimilation. I found however, that in the community I studied, the project was not as successful as I might have predicted and that many people in this particular community found multiple ways to resist what school tried to do with them historically. Much of this resistance came in the form of local networks, practices, and knowledges that allowed 3 of 5 people (who grew up in the community from the 1950s to the late 1990s: N=714) to remain close to home at least physically.³ I don't want to idealize this statistic because there is more than a romantic "persistence" at play here, but if the goal of the project of schooling was to teach people to leave, it was in large measure unsuccessful even in a relatively "isolated" community caught up in the decline of the Atlantic fishery.

Perhaps then we ought to pay as much attention to the failures of this project as to its successes. Interesting tensions develop out of the complex relationships between national and global economic and political transformations and local lives. In my book I tried to show how these transformations infiltrated the place of schooling in one particular community. I think the case of Aboriginal education in North America might also teach us a great deal about the gap between what the system claims it wants to produce (i.e., assimilation) and what it actually tends to produce (i.e., exclusion/localization).

Resistance and Taking Control

Susan Faircloth (2009) offers a powerful narrative reminder that neither globalization nor what I called the migration imperative is anything new. She situates the broad European colonial project as the process of globalization

³ Physical location is only one dimension of the way that geographers currently understand space and place. The educational literature dealing with space and place have begun to demonstrate the ways in which places and spaces are rendered increasingly complex in mobile modernity. For an analysis of contemporary conceptions of place and space in rural education, see Green and Letts (2007).

that has been a part of the experience of the America's Aboriginal people for more than 500 years. This is a history that is seldom understood for what it is in rural education scholarship, and this history is even more seldom located in terms of globalizing initiatives designed to subdue peasant and other resistant populations, to control labor forces, and to conquer and control territory. The present configuration of power, ownership of land and control of resources is one manifestation of this history of brutality, oppression and ideological warfare. The violent genocide and the ongoing marginalization that this globalization has represented has both mobilized and localized people who find themselves in the cross-hairs of major social, political, and economic transformations. No group has felt this more powerfully than Aboriginal peoples.

So what is the solution? How can the monster forces of globalization be resisted? And even more poignantly, how can the ambivalent process of formal education that Faircloth recognizes only too well in her own education, and which represent a migration to spaces far from home, be used as a way to protect and preserve cultural identity? Faircloth suggests that by taking control of education Aboriginal peoples can and must protect culture and language, building upon strengths passed on across generations within communities. I see this kind of initiative as a form of resistance to the broader social processes of assimilation, disenfranchisement, and alienation at work in advanced capitalism.⁴

In *Learning to Leave* I drew on a view of power developed by French theorist Michel deCerteau (1984) who saw social life as a continual dance between the strategic power instituted and promoted in strategic institutional discourse and the on-the-ground tactical responses of those who are the objects of this power. Think about Bart Simpson and Principal Skinner in the long running cartoon *The Simpsons*. The rules are set out. Bart transgresses. The principal finds Bart out (sometimes at least), and Bart is either punished, or more likely concocts an elaborate set of excuses or subterfuges to get away. This causes the principal to have to develop more complex rules and disciplinary strategies. While the principal has institutional power, Bart has the inventive possibilities allowing him the space to challenge the ways that he is defined as deviant.

It is no surprise that school children tend to love this program. It is also no surprise that many teachers tend to hate it. *The Simpsons* shows in relentless detail the way that power is negotiated and how institutional authority is

⁴ In a recent book, for instance, Paul Theobald (2008) argues that to think about education for democratic citizenship in a broader political context which is thoroughly undemocratic is a sham that students see through readily. He argues that a necessary precondition for democratic education is a thoroughgoing structural reform in the American political system that actually engages ordinary citizens.

always playing catch-up with resistance. It is in a sense resistance that leads the dance of power rather than strategy. It is also true that resistance is the always retreating, ever present object of strategic desire. As soon as it is captured, diagnosed, and contained, there is another Bart peeking around the corner.

However, neither deCerteau nor *The Simpsons* represent a complete analogy for many important forms of resistance including the development of relations between colonizing cultures and Aboriginal people in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia for instance, or indeed for the dispossession of rural small holders. For me, deCerteau provides a frame for understanding how people who were supposed to be erased have managed to hang on. What I saw in Grand Rapids, Manitoba, and later in coastal villages of Nova Scotia were populations that confronted the master strategy of the education state which is to attempt to insure that people who are connected to land will be severed from it in important respects if not physically. In *Learning to Leave* I interrogated how this process played out in one coastal Canadian village. I continue to see the act of choosing to stay in that area as a refusal of the bright promise of mobile modernity and I suppose I am leaving myself open here for the inevitable criticism of romanticism and nostalgia.

Strategic discourse, in the end, needs to be able to demonstrate its effectiveness and we are learning that the promise of jobs and wealth often associated with both education and mobility are for many people questionable. We are also, as Tony Bennett (1998, p. 187) argues, able to find examples of Aboriginal (and I might add) rural citizens who are not willing to accept the hegemony of the colonizers and the developers who make powerful arguments for ownership and control over lands that cannot be so easily dismissed and denied. Increasingly these arguments are pressed not in tactical response, but in strategic contestations, often in the legal system. Voices formerly consigned and confined to the margins are more and more insisting to be heard in the corridors of power. Furthermore, they are being heard in the form of landmark legal cases concerning such things as land rights, access to and control over natural resources, and the appropriateness and legality of industrial megaprojects on or near aboriginal lands. Increasingly, people living in established rural communities are making and sometimes winning these same kinds of arguments (Richler, 2008; Woods, 2003). That some of these struggles have already been successfully fought in the courts, state institutions, as well as in civil society mark a fundamental change. For me there is now a sense that a different kind of conversation has finally begun between people who live *somewhere* (represented most profoundly by Aboriginal peoples), and capitalist market-based interests that reside *everywhere*—and therefore nowhere at all.

Rapprochement

David Greenwood (2009) raises a question that is both deeply challenging and potentially very productive. Greenwood too returns to history and to the big picture. When he considers the connection between people and place he is drawn to think through the historical atrocities that have led to the current configuration of land tenancy, ownership and indeed, his own place in this landscape as a privileged White male. The way that most people and land are currently joined by contract and through property law has located the connection of people and place within a market which is perhaps the most important face of the mobility fetish I tried to point to in *Learning to Leave*. While I documented the struggles of an embattled group of Anglo-White fishing families to retain some measure of control over land and resources, these very struggles serve as a microcosm of a larger process of displacement that has been going on for centuries. As Wendell Berry points out so graphically at the beginning of *The Unsettling of America* (1977), when any group of people inhabit land in a way that is truly integrated, spiritual and founded on deep place-based knowledge, they are eventually castigated as atavistic and displaced allegedly for their own good which is typically merged with some amorphous sense of a collective good. This amounts to racism masked as virtue.

This has been the case for Aboriginal people both in North America and in Australia. While there have been some symbolic moves in Canada (I cannot really comment on the situation in the United States) such as a formal apology from the Prime Minister about the atrocities and abuse committed in state and church-operated residential schools, the ongoing inattention to living conditions and educational problems is a national disgrace.⁵ And these connections are recognized in at least some jurisdictions by formal legal attachment of Aboriginal people to specific tracts of land. The question of how people came to be where they are raises additional questions about whether or not they ought to be able to stay, which in turn challenges some core modernist values privileging markets and mobility. In Canada for instance, “mobility rights” have been enshrined in the constitution. In a sense, mobility rights might be understood as a severance of any vestiges of connection between non Aboriginal people and place. An ironic legacy of the reservation system is that it has legally instituted an inalienable link between Aboriginal Canadians and reserve lands removed from the market. Increasingly, rural activists are making similar

⁵ A major commission of inquiry into the living conditions of Aboriginal Canadians (Canada, 1996) has been gathering dust now for more than a decade. This Royal Commission made numerous recommendations to the government, few of which have been implemented.

claims to a profound connection to land upon which they and their ancestors have lived for generations. Greenwood's fundamental question relates to rapprochement and how we move forward in the face of the history of colonialism that has so thoroughly influenced all modern social institutions. This legacy of colonialism is deeply implicated in the way all of us are schooled, particularly those of us who enjoy privilege resulting from colonial atrocities. This is a profound and vexing question.

Additionally Greenwood wonders what kinds of bridges can be built between rural education and Aboriginal education. I think there is something important here, although I do not believe or mean to suggest that the depth of connection between people and place are equivalent between rural dwellers who are descendants of European colonists on the one hand and Aboriginal people on the other. We clearly need new concepts for thinking through the often troubled relationship between these two groups. I believe common ground is often possible, albeit sometimes difficult to negotiate. This sort of broadening out of the concept of rurality to seek common ground and indeed, to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which exclusions have been created and maintained are precisely the kind of rural education scholarship I think we need. Greenwood's partial answer is to suggest that place-based education offers an opportunity to link the contemporary project of schooling to the inevitably local struggles of people living in real places rather than in some imagined generic and standardized technoscape. While I think he is right about this, it is also becoming clear that we need to think carefully about what we mean by concepts like place and community (Nespor, 2008). One particular danger is a retreat into a vision of place that is essentially sealed off from the broader flows of ideas, people, and things within which most places are networked. I think the final commentator in this issue points in this direction.

Learning to Lose

In a remarkably fresh essay, Ursula Kelly (2009) suggests that we need to think about rurality and loss.⁶ She does so by arguing that rural communities are fundamentally sites of loss in which residents tend to struggle either proudly or desperately to "sustain" themselves by resisting loss and change in the face of what she calls "a shared global and planetary vulnerability." I recently attended a conference on rural education in Australia and listened carefully to a wide range of papers, most of which did two things. First of all, they articulated ways to raise standards in rural schools so that the well known achievement gap between rural and

urban places might be addressed. Secondly, they spoke to the importance of keeping communities alive and keeping rural youth in those communities. I have problems with both of these positions and Kelly has helped me think about why this is so.

To address the first point, there is a pervasive discourse in rural education that seeks to normalize rural schools and students by bringing them more fully into the standardized accountability regimes that have spread throughout the globe in the last couple of decades. Nested within this discourse is the often implicit, but sometimes articulated notion that there is a distinction between place-focused education on the one hand, and standards-focused education on the other. But this in itself is a construction that illustrates and reinforces an unstated hierarchy of places. All education is place-based and there is an ongoing struggle over which places will be represented in curriculum. In a metrocentric, generically structured and assessed formal education system it seems to me that it ought to be expected that children whose cultural capital is essentially rural will, as a group, struggle. Rural schools and rural jurisdictions keep losing to their urban and suburban counterparts and this loss is the educational face of other deep losses that mark the contemporary rural experience, including the loss of land, species, natural resources, and people.

What I did not hear at the Australian conference, at the risk of treading on rural education's most sacred icon, was the idea that rural youth ought to leave their communities both for their own good and for the good of their communities. It was as though many people seemed to hold on to a rather static idea of community trying desperately to "sustain" that mythic space.⁷ My idea of a nightmare for rural youth is a kind of schooling that only prepares them for life in their particular rural places. Nor was there any reference to the idea that many rural communities contain within them cultural and economic elements that need to be challenged and even jettisoned if rural places are to thrive and survive. Here I am thinking about the racism, sexism, homophobia, aggressive profit-taking, environmental destruction, poaching, pollution, and other forms of violence that are often part of rural life. It seems to me that many of these exclusionary practices and social/cultural norms have continued because rural places have very often been isolated from the cultural crosscurrents of a globalizing world.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of Kelly's ideas, see her recent book entitled *Migration and education in a multicultural world: Culture, loss and identity* (2009).

⁷ Some years ago a group of colleagues were working to establish a center for rural education at Acadia University where I work. We invited a number of "stakeholders" to take part in discussions about what the center might do and how it might situate itself. During the discussion of the name for the center the term sustainability came up. A young man from rural Nova Scotia who represented the university Gay-Straight Alliance was quite uncomfortable with the term sustainability because he wondered if it suggested keeping things the same in rural Canada. There are many things that are not perhaps worth sustaining he suggested.

Kelly's writing caused me to remember the fundamental ambivalence I felt researching and writing the book, an ambivalence that Woodrum identifies as a trade-off between cultural identity and money. There is, however, a deeper level of ambivalence that goes beyond this simple trade-off because schooling does tend to open up sets of questions for rural youth that challenge who and where they are fundamentally. This is the problem of hanging on to things that have passed on and imagining that the past might someday return. To put it even more graphically, there is a problem when the family of the deceased fails to recognize that the corpse is dead. The work of mourning and closure help us deal with loss and move forward.

To imagine a discourse in rural education that takes on this level of problem is, I think partly what Kelly suggests in her call to think about literacies as a movement between historical memoirs and contemporary power dynamics toward new possibilities for action. It is hanging on to an impossible world of nostalgia that is the problem because there is no bringing back the past. In fact, the harder we try, the more we misunderstand and make a mess of the present. She identifies the horrible irony that by failing to acknowledge the importance of loss in educational discourse we actually promote a nostalgic conservatism that alleges to preserve lifeways while actually exacerbating their demise! A critical analysis of what has been lost and why is necessary for imagining and working toward a truly sustainable future.

Reading Kelly's analysis here I thought about Kevin Major's novel *Gaffer* (1995) in which Newfoundland has been turned into a tourist theme park that celebrates the work and culture of essentialized fishing people who have actually vanished. They have vanished because of a relentless pillage and a botched legacy of governance that has led to the demise of Canadian coastal communities (Ommer et al., 2007). And all the while the scene is set against a nostalgic background music celebrating a pure and simple "folk" essence as Ian McKay (1994) demonstrates so well in his analysis of the construction of the modern tourist industry in Nova Scotia. Rural places have always been invaded, from the time of European contact, but today the onslaught has intensified, as has the loss it brings with it. The fish are gone. The forests have been clear-cut and if they have been replanted, they have become a monoculture. Communities have lost people and services. The magnitude of the loss is indeed what the other three commentators speak to focusing specifically on Aboriginal people. This is rural life today.

Cosmopolitanism, Nostalgia, and Cultural Capital

Faircloth, Greenwood, and Kelly in different ways all speak to the importance of a rural education that is bigger than the small places in which schools operate. To stay, to leave, and to return are all parts of life these days as Faircloth

contends. Kelly and Greenwood warn against a failure to look honestly into history and into present conditions in favour of a retreat into nostalgia. These are important cautions for rural education scholars who can be drawn into sincere, yet misguided and dangerous forms of romantic pining for the return of a lost, simple, predictable world. To some extent I have been guilty of this error in *Learning to Leave* and the stayer-leaver binary I employ in the book is part of the trouble. We do need to think beyond this kind of binary to gain traction and look forward critically. I think Kelly is right, the departed world will not return; it cannot return. Let's move on.

Each of the commentators speaks to questions of educational equity. While the large conversation around equity has been in motion for some decades now, there is considerable evidence that schools continue to reinforce and contribute to multiple forms of social inequity much as they always have. We have come to understand that promoting equity through schooling and in educational spaces more broadly is a very difficult and complicated set of problems. How do we move equity conversations beyond attempts to make the Other conform, and toward the integration of multiple knowledge forms into formal education (Gale, 2009)? I think it is here that educators, educational researchers, and policy-makers need to learn to listen to the wide range of historically disenfranchised communities in order to understand how the inclusion of different languages, different ways of knowing, and different cultural practices will only enrich us. The present hegemonic alternative seems to be to distil a set of culture-free "basics" and test all children in exactly the same way to see how many of these "learnings" they have acquired. So we attempt to deal with the equity problems introduced by cultural difference by ignoring cultural difference. In the attempt to avoid the difficult non-quantifiable questions posed by culture, difference, and the complex way that cultural capital plays out in formal education, we exacerbate inequity.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that we might take heed of Ulrich Beck and Arjun Appadurai's sense of the cosmopolitan in rural education. By cosmopolitanism I mean that while each of us lives physically in some place, it is still possible to achieve many forms of connection to other places and spaces in addition to (rather than instead of) more strictly local connections. This cosmopolitanism eschews binaries and juxtapositions of the global and the local and other either/or categories. What this cosmopolitanism does is to recognize how we are now intimately interconnected and how the global and the local flow in and out of one another in additive fashion. This creates new third spaces for identity that integrate past traditions, local practices and influences from the far corners of the earth to create new and exciting possibilities. Many rural youth are already enacting this cosmopolitanism in ways which both excite

and frighten their elders, particularly as new communication technologies shrink space to the size of a mobile computer or a cell phone. Schools, as usual, are playing catch up. Knowing about one's community and how it is connected (for better and for worse) to global currents and flows of people, goods, services, ideas is no less pressing an educational problem for rural youth than for anyone else.

I certainly do appreciate the opportunity to interrogate some of the problems and indeed the weaknesses in *Learning to Leave*. The stayer-leaver binary is one such problem. There are of course, many spaces in between these two poles and it is in these spaces that we find people struggling with identity issues and indeed for their communities in the face of change and in the face of power. Another such problem is how rural education scholarship can find a way out of its traditional preoccupation with the local and with isolated struggles toward more coherent theoretical understandings. The problem concerning who controls what goes on in

particular schools raised by Faircloth and implied by Woodrum is central here it seems to me. As we have moved toward increasingly generic, narrow, and accountability-focused pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, the question of who controls the content and process of schooling has been taken from the table in many respects. Closure around such perennial educational questions is itself a problem that we accept at our peril. How we might put it back there is a political/policy question that interests me very much. The relationship between indigenous scholarship and rural education scholarship is potentially a very interesting idea. Finally, there are the twin problems of a tendency toward nostalgia in rural education scholarship and an insufficiently thought-out analysis of sustainability and how to move forward in the face of loss as Kelly suggests. I am pleased that *Learning to Leave* has helped to raise this level of question. This is precisely the kind of discussion I had hoped it might stimulate.

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