

Rural Schooling in Mobile Modernity: Returning to the Places I've Been

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Citation: Corbett, M. (2009). Rural schooling in mobile modernity: Returning to the places I've been. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(7). Retrieved [date] from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-7.pdf>

In my book Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community (Corbett, 2007) I make the claim that there is a deep and established connection between formal education and mobility out of rural areas. The book reports on a study undertaken in a coastal community in Atlantic Canada focusing on the educational and life experiences of those who persisted and those who left the community during the economic and social changes from the late 1950s to the late 1990s. The book argues that place matters in a multitude of ways despite persistent attempts to erase and neutralize its influence in educational thought, policy, pedagogical practice and curriculum. Because I want to resist the abstract academic conventions also resisted by my informants, and because I want to argue that place should occupy a more central place in the way we think about and deliver education, this article situates my own analysis of what I think the book means in the actual places that grounded its conception.

Learning to Leave: A Brief Introduction

Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community (Corbett, 2007) presents the results of a multi-method research project I conducted between 1998 and 2000 in southwestern Nova Scotia in coastal fishing villages. The central problem the book tackles is the troubled and complex relationship between rural education and the sustainability of rural communities. The data upon which the analysis is founded include a two year period of field work, fifty in-depth interviews and an extensive quantitative socio-spatial analysis of educational trajectories and work histories of more than 750 people representing virtually everyone who grew up in one Canadian coastal community from the time of elementary school consolidation in 1956 to the late 1990s. The analysis looks at the complex relationship between the history of the fishery in the community and the way school

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This article is part of a series in response to Michael Corbett's 2007 book *Learning to Leave*. For commentaries by Arlie Woodrum, Susan Faircloth, David Greenwood and Ursula Kelly, as well as a rejoinder by Michael Corbett, see the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, vol. 24, nos. 8-12.

was understood and experienced by parents, educators and students.

In the book I argue four things. First, formal education has been and continues to be what Anthony Giddens (1990) calls a key institution of "disembedding," loosening ties to particular locales and promoting out-migration from rural places. I argue that this process generates ambivalence about the value and outcomes of formal education within rural communities, and crucially, that formal education is designed for those who leave. Throughout the 36-year study period this analysis explores, I found a stable population of approximately 60% of residents who remained within 50 kilometers of where they were born. Those who remained within the 50 kilometer circle tended to have less formal education compared to those living "outside" the circle.

Second, this ambivalence is experienced in different ways by differently positioned social actors in the rural community (in terms of social class and gender particularly), and these differently positioned individuals come to develop specific socio-spatial identities connected to their access to resources and position in the social structure of the community. These place-specific identity constructions represent a complex set of resistances and accommodations.

Third, the particular social class structure and gendered labor market of a resource-based coastal community creates a variety of informal "education systems" that work to integrate young men into resource industry employment

and into cultural and family traditions and practices. The result is that the particular features of the local labor market, coupled with local cultural codes, compete directly and often successfully with the dubious promise of schooling. For women, this restricted labor market creates the conditions for more successful careers in formal education as well as for mass outmigration. As a consequence, women were approximately three times more likely to leave their home villages and schooling was largely equated with femininity. The qualitative data demonstrate in numerous instances how “success” in formal schooling was understood locally as not being “particularly gifted” by community standards, not able to handle a complex and difficult life of entrepreneurial risk-taking, raising a family on limited resources, and the physical toil and manual skills in the “real world” of the community and on the water (Corbett, 2007, p. 32).

Last, rural and coastal communities themselves are transforming in late modernity as transportation and communication technologies rapidly “shrink space.” At the same time, rural communities become spatially “larger” and more sustainable through the development of improved transportation systems, virtual networks, as well as through increased access to consumer goods and services in rural service center magnet villages. These transformations appear to create conditions which make members of this community, particularly men, *less* mobile than was the case in previous decades because access to urban labor markets increasingly required higher levels of formal education by the 1980s and 90s. At the same time rural communities became more similar to urban centers in terms of access to mass consumer goods and services possibly making them more attractive as places to live.

In sum, *Learning to Leave* is a book about mobility, movement, and restlessness and how formal education promotes these things, for better or for worse, like a tortuous, inescapable marriage. In the book I wonder if schools can really foster anything else. For me personally, and I think for a lot of “educationally successful” people (and by this I mean only success in the formal education system), the connections between a movement away from place and the processes of formal education are so well established and ingrained that we seldom even recognize them. I doubt that any of the key thinking in the book would have occurred to me had I not begun my teaching career in a community where failure in the formal education system was normal. It is the routinization of failure, its virtual acceptance amongst typical educators, and the all too common acquiescence in the process on the part of most failing students themselves that continues to haunt me.

That Big 8-Wheeler Comin’ down the Track:
A Narrative Foundation

That big 8-wheeler comin’ down the track
Means your true -lovin’ daddy ain’t comin’ back
I’m movin’ on
Keep rollin’ on

- Hank Snow, Nova Scotia songwriter

In this section I want to situate the production of *Learning to Leave* in the context of my own life narrative. The book comes out of a 20-year teaching career in rural communities and a desire to understand the way that so many of the students with whom I worked were not resistant to learning, but too often were resistant to school. I also want to challenge a set of inter-connected assumptions about educational success and failure, assumptions which I think end up painting people who remain in rural places as somehow deficient. So the book probes both the spatial politics of education in North America along with the long history of rural-bashing, much of which has been perpetrated from within institutions of formal education. It also probes in tandem the way that grand sociological narratives have fashioned a vision of institutions of formal education either as a functional meritocracy in which people get what they deserve or can handle, or alternatively as totalizing social class reproduction machines whose fundamental processes achieve similar results in different contexts.

This book was probably conceived in the office of the Canadian National Railway station where my father worked. While I lived *somewhere* (Amherst, Nova Scotia), in the childhood world inside my head, this community was part of a grid of *other* places represented in a concrete way by the railway tracks and by the huge, rumbling trains that appeared over the eastern and western horizons several times each day. Its abstract representation was the large map of North America that took up much of the wall in that office. This map instantiated my town, the place I knew in that visceral way that children come to know places¹ (Aitken, 2001; Nabhan & Trimble, 1994) as one point on a massive gridworks. My family’s business was movement across that matrix. Like the mid-century Canadian novelist Earnest Buckler, the train is my metaphor. I could also feel

¹As Aitken (2001) puts it drawing on literature from geography, cultural studies, psychology and psychoanalysis: “space becomes place for the child with all its attendant symbolism and politics.... Spaces and places are important not only because they embed and contextualize children, but because they enable an important form of corporeality through which sex, race and culture are experienced rather than imposed” (p. 116).

the importance of mobility in the movement of people and goods across vast spaces, so the metanarratives constructed around static foundational sociological concepts (i.e. society, community, social structure) never made as much sense to me as the dynamics of change and movement. Of course, the ongoing challenge of social analysis is to imagine stability and change at the same time.

Nevertheless, it gradually became obvious that not everyone had the same ability to move around. Zygmunt Bauman (1998) puts it powerfully when he writes:

Residents of the first world live in *time*; space does not matter for them, since spanning every distance is instantaneous.... Residents of the second world, on the contrary, live in *space*: heavy, resilient, untouchable, which ties down time and keeps it beyond the residents' control.

This is why I prefer the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990, 1998) and Raymond Williams (1958, 1961, 1973) both of whom understood social class not only as a set of objective structures that matter, but more importantly as a complex of human and cultural dispositions, habits, algorithms for calculating life choices. These nuanced cultural practices are never routine and represent multiple ways of making distinctions, everyday judgments, and assessments of what matters and what is worth paying attention to. I saw in that railway station the track workers and baggage handlers whose pride and sense of masculinity were founded in their ability with tools,² their heavy powerful bodies, and their integration in place-based networks of social capital, knowledge, and land. Their identities were also integrated with a command of a localized dialect every bit as grammatically complex as the more formal registers the

² This ability with tools was not limited to the particular tools of their routine paid work, but it also extended out into a general facility with all sorts of tools and knowledge domains. As such, these abilities constituted a generalized “working intelligence” as Mike Rose (2004) calls it. Multi-skilled workers transferred abilities across domains and it was not unusual for these men to be capable and competent carpenters, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, stone workers, roofers, and machine operators. Richard Sennett discusses this transfer in his recent book on craft work (2008) and the physical enskilment of the body that develops from a meticulous and protracted training of the hand. Another seldom read literary gem is Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker* (1836/2007). This book is the story of a Yankee peddler who travels through rural Nova Scotia finding the typical person to be unspecialized, multi-occupational bricoleur, uninterested in machine time and wholly unsuited for modernity. The clockmaker works to modernize the peasant, jack-of-all-trades Nova Scotians by lecturing them about railroads and about the importance of measuring time carefully. His way of selling clocks is simply to leave them for a lengthy trial period in rural farm-houses and once the families have gotten “hooked” on time, to return to collect his bill.

uniformed and “suited” functionaries used with “the public” on what Goffman (1959) would call the front stage of the railway ticket office or on the train itself. The formalized public language of the office tended to mirror the linguistic structures and demands of the school and yet there was always space in which to play and to experiment with multiple identity postures and discourses.

In the end though, Bourdieu’s habitus appears to me to be a bit too much of a straight-jacket. Rather than having to choose between particular fixed identity positions and then work out how to behave coherently within them, it seemed to me that identity construction was more powerfully understood in mobile terms. In other words, social actors can float in and out of identity positions and indeed the differential ability of some actors to achieve this identity flexibility or mobility is itself an important measure of power. We do move metaphorically, socially, or even spiritually between constructions of the self which are put up for a time, but that are increasingly less likely to remain fixed. To be good consumers we must accept and indeed embrace change, newness, and desire represented by Lacan’s incessantly retreating *petit objet a* (1978). For this reason the work of the poststructuralists and other contemporary social theorists, who in different ways place mobility and indeed individualization, consumerism, and desire at the very center of their analyses (e.g. Bauman [2004], Urry, [2000]; Castells, [2004]; Giddens [1990]; Beck [1992]), seem important to me.

At a more personal level, the mundane mobility that fascinated me in the train station was buttressed in my own small town Nova Scotian adolescence by the message that when schooling is finished, you will have to leave because, “there’s nothing for you here.” This was sometimes actually articulated, but it was in the air everywhere, just as it is in so much rural fiction represented for me most powerfully by Alistair MacLeod short stories and in his wonderful novel *No Great Mischiefs* (1999).³ As it does today, ready money in Alberta beckoned.⁴ Most of my graduating class in Amherst (the class of 1976 which was incidentally the largest in Canadian history) shuffled off to university, college and to the oil patch in Alberta.

³ While a quote from Atlantic Canadian literary lion Alistair MacLeod opens the book, *Learning to Leave* deals in a cursory way with this literature. For a more detailed and focused analysis of the social context of rural fiction in Atlantic Canada see Kulyk-Keefer (1984), Kristiansen (1994), U. Kelly, (1993), and T. Kelly (2009).

⁴ For a gritty evocation of the contemporary migration of Atlantic Canadian youth to the Alberta “oil patch” see Donna Morrissey’s (2008) *What they Wanted*. On the other hand, Lynn Coady’s (1998) *Strange Heaven* and Joel Hymes’ (2004) *Down to Dirt* tells perhaps even more gritty Atlantic Canadian stories of a young people who will not or who cannot leave.

Coming to Terms with Difference:
The Spiritual Power of Place

You people have only been here a little while. One day you will be gone. Us, we've been here a long time, and when you're gone, we'll still be here.

- A Cree elder in Grand Rapids, Manitoba (from my personal diary, 1986)

If conceived in Amherst, *Learning to Leave* was born in the Cree/Metis community of Grand Rapids, Manitoba, in the mid 1980s where I took my first teaching job. Its toddler phase was the creeping suspicion that secondary schooling was, in this community, an attempt to wrench some subset of youth out of their allegedly dysfunctional homes and "integrate" them into life in the south. This project was, for the most part, a failure. Dropout rates were extremely high. This is the tension, the "stone in my shoe" (Neilsen, 1994) that *Learning to Leave* tries work out. In Grand Rapids, I encountered a population that really did not appear interested in leaving. These were people who did not think the way I did. Their spirituality was rooted in spatial and temporal *connection* rather than in mobility.

This was all very strange to me and to my mobile teacher colleagues. We were ourselves educational "success stories." We were fully integrated into a system that simply assumed that a willingness to be deployed⁵ where the opportunities

⁵ I use the term deployment in a deliberate way here and I think that it is important to distinguish its mobile connotations from the non-spatial idea of employment. There is a long tradition of both episodic and permanent out-migration from Atlantic Canada to both New England and other parts of the United States as well as to central and western Canada. This trend continues to this day. Conservative economists call this phenomenon "labor market adjustment" while critical social analysts in the Marxist tradition call it the "reserve army of labor." However it is understood, the uprooting of labor from disadvantaged communities or depressed markets for use during times of expansion of capital in booming markets represents a key form of disembedding (Giddens, 1990; Taylor, 2007). In the Marxist tradition the military analogy of the "reserve army" was used to describe the exploitation of a hinterland underclass which is deployed to the metropolitan "core" when needed. My analysis generalizes this phenomenon of the deployable labor force to other social class positions and particularly to those class fractions most successfully produced and reproduced in institutions of formal education: professionals, managers, bureaucrats, cultural producers and other elements of what Richard Florida (2002) calls the "creative class." This "class" must be highly deployable and ready to be uprooted from any particular place. This is not to say that place becomes unimportant for this group, quite the contrary in some respects. It is to say however, that place becomes yet another lifestyle choice that allows this elite to ask itself, "who's my city?" (Florida, 2008). In Florida's analysis, the creative class is highly place-

existed was a rational and appropriate orientation to life. In fact, we measured our students' potential in terms of the likelihood that they would be able to "survive" outside what we saw as the cocoon of the community. In other words, students' general intelligence and educability was conceptualized in terms of their mobility potential. We could not imagine why our students failed to jump at the free postsecondary education that was available to them in Winnipeg, or wherever they wanted to go.

I remember the evening when this struck me for the first time while building a trapper's cabin with a group of academically marginal students and men from the community. It finally dawned on me that this group of people, for all of their challenges and what might be characterized as poverty, possessed something none of my teaching colleagues had: they had community and deep knowledge of place. They knew with a remarkable clarity who and where they were. We built that cabin from scratch with little more than chain saws and log scribes (basically a geometer's compass). From that time I began to think about education as something other than transmission of my culture to the "other."

Through the 1990s, the book then grew up on Digby Neck and Long Island where I found shades of this place attachment. Despite seemingly persistent trouble in the fishery, most youth seemed to me to be sticking pretty close to home. It was there that a social equation began to suggest itself to me. This was not an elegant or neat abstract mathematical equation. Instead, it was a messy conflicted, pragmatic social one: educational success equals leaving. At first I saw this as a phenomenon particular to small, relatively isolated communities, or what contemporary regional studies scholars call "deep rural" (Halperin, 1990). More recently though, I have begun to wonder whether formal education more generally is what Ching and Creed (1997) have called an "urbanization of the mind" whose fundamental feature is geographic disembedding. There is no "place" in standardized accountability schemes and centralized curricula. In fact, the whole point of such institutional practices is to create an acontextual, standard comparative metric which functions independent of the particular places in which it is applied.

conscious, but at the same time ready to move on when conditions change. In fact, unequivocal rooted commitment to a particular place is one part of what Florida thinks makes certain locales economically stagnant, or at least suitable only for the kinds of routine manufacturing that can now be shipped offshore for a fraction of the cost. It is no great stretch of the imagination to see most rural communities in this characterization of economic dysfunction (Corbett, 2006). On the other end of the spectrum are those doomed to be deployed to the civilian equivalent of Middle East war zones, for instance, Alberta's Athabasca tar sands.

What is interesting about education, however, is that its subjects are intentional cultural beings who actually live somewhere. There is a segment in Russell Banks' (1991) novel *The Sweet Hereafter* in which the city lawyer character attempts to understand the rural community he is trying to bilk after a school bus accident kills several of the town's children. He describes the way that place is written into the personalities of the townspeople, whereas for him places are interchangeable chunks of the planet. For me the lawyer's imagery conjures up ideas of maps and grids, networks, the cartographies that are now so much a part of how we think about place and space. The giant map of North America about which I marveled as a child was a quintessential representation of this point of sight. This map symbolized the way I was raised to understand place, as a point in a network, rather than as a worthwhile locale in its own right. This, I argue in *Learning to Leave*, has tended to be the professional's eye view of places. It is this view that reduces an utterance, a gesture, a response to a question, and subsequently a person to a data point set within a grid of other data points. Just as a map condenses multiple places into singular spaces (e.g., towns, cities, states, provinces, regions, nations, alliances, the globe), the crunching of standardized test numbers creates populations of adequately or inadequately formed subjects: the mobile "winners" who achieve educational "tickets" to escape place and the "stuck" underperformers who are either left in marginal communities, on the fringes of metropolitan spaces, or deployed to economic or military war zones as foot-soldiers.

Many contemporary sociological theorists like Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman all use networks and mobility as their key metaphors for late modernity or postmodernity. For Giddens (1990), the central feature of late modernity is what he calls "disembedding" or the lifting out of social relations from particular locales. Place has become, he says (and I love this word) "phantasmagorical."

If place is indeed phantasmagorical, what I thought I saw in my rural teaching career did not fit this image. I actually saw people seeming to become less mobile and even more embedded in place as time passed. If anything was phantasmagorical, it was the idea that formal education could deliver anything worthwhile to people whose economic, cultural, and social capital networks remained localized. Leaving was expensive; higher education was expensive. It seemed to me that a lot of people stuck around, made local lives and made do in a place that was, as Ursula Kelly (1993) writes, tough, but at least well known. At the same time mobility as a value and as a moral discourse was certainly alive and well. People were "supposed" to get out, just as my own generation was supposed to get out of the small town of Amherst in the 1970s.

One day as I was writing *Learning to Leave* I encountered a former student in a Digby grocery store.⁶ She was a very capable student when I knew her in school. When I asked her what she was doing, her eyes lowered and she mumbled that she had, "just hung around home" and was, "doing nothing." She actually apologized to me for not leaving and going on to post secondary education. She saw her decision to stay as an educational failure. Yet she loved where she was. She was happy to be raising her child in her home community. What she got from her schooling was the message that "smart kids," especially smart girls were supposed to leave. *Learning to Leave* documents the ambivalence of this sentiment and attempts to understand the undervalued intelligence of the largely educationally unsuccessful or under-educated majority that stayed to form the resilient foundation of the present-day community. This group is surely decreasing in size and facing increasing pressures from corporatization of traditional resource industries and emerging new industries that represent unknown threats (Richler, 2007).

As I spoke with people who stayed close to home, I came to appreciate three things: 1) the multiple skills and intelligences that it takes to make it in a rural community, intelligences largely misunderstood and dismissed within formal educational contexts; 2) when I talked with people about learning, these conversations had little to do with school; people wanted to tell me about what Jack Shelton (2005) calls their *consequential learning*, their survival despite the odds, and their success in life not in school; 3) the powerful interests aligned against people who were trying to resist the forces compelling them to leave, specifically the commodification and corporatization of the fishery and other local primary and secondary industries, and the politicians and bureaucrats who make policy to support the concentration of control of marine resources.

I do not think it is going too far to say that people in these villages saw themselves (and still see themselves) as victims of a shadowy plot conspiring to drive them out. And I could certainly see their point. It did appear to many of the people I interviewed that they (and/or their progeny) were part of the massive, urban-centric, global diasporas that are relentlessly emptying rural places and filling urban ones. The modern world, one informant told me has "no use for peasants."

So what part has formal education played in all of this? I am still not sure and this is the question I struggle with throughout the book. One reviewer thinks that I exaggerate the actual and potential impact of schools and schooling

⁶ As I describe in the book, Digby is the regional service centre village and county seat in the community I studied. It contains most centralized services for the cluster of rural villages that surround it including the regional secondary school.

on rural economic development (English, 2007). I am not arguing that schools drive an economy. But neither is what happens in schools entirely driven by the economy. In fact, I conclude that school plays an ambivalent role in rural communities and indeed in all communities, a role that has many facets, one that is difficult to characterize simply. I do think, in the end, that this ambivalence is at least partly responsible for many challenges that rural schools face. Traditionally, rural schools gave the majority of students a foundation in literacy and numeracy and at the same time provided an introduction to community values, social practices, institutions and sometimes, to the physical geography of the place itself. Some commentators have bemoaned the lack of connection between the community and the school (Stegner, 1955; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998), while others have argued that rural schools were *too* embedded in the local (Cubberley, 1922). Today new forms of ambivalence confront rural schools as the communities in which they are set become increasingly marginal in a globalized, urban-centric, network society where place itself is subordinated to spaces of movement, or what John Urry calls “scapes and flows” (2000, 2007). Additionally, the concept of rurality itself with all of its baggage has come to be abandoned by many contemporary academics to be replaced by regional studies.

This ambivalence is also buttressed in higher education with a very clear set of prejudices about which places matter and which do not. Some places are serious. Such places have an economic reason for being. They are on the ascendant and contain the networked, diverse elite of Florida’s “creative class.”⁷ They are places where higher education is useful and where life inside and outside school blends together. These are also places, it must be said, that need to be escaped from time to time because they are so intense. And there are places that have died or which are well into the process of dying. These are the rust belt cities and industrial towns that grew around “sunset industries,” or the mined-out, farmed-out, fished-out, logged-out

⁷ There is a curious problem of cause and effect that seems to me unexplored in Florida’s analysis. Places that are experiencing economic boom times have always attracted diverse immigrant populations. So is it the inherent creativity of those attracted to growth centers that drives economic prosperity, or is it the attraction of people who hold liberal as opposed to conservative value orientations and lifestyles? It is rather easy to dismiss or avoid this order of question, but conservative social thinkers like Wendell Berry (1977, 1990) and Chet Bowers (2003, 2006) challenge us to think about the value of protecting and preserving social practices that have stood the test of time rather than adopting change for change’s sake. It can be argued that the unreflective, novelty-seeking “creative class” are simply a contemporary incarnation of Berry’s “boomers” on the hunt for opportunity to exploit what they can and then move on. Whether this ethic is correct or even sustainable in the long run is debatable.

remnants of a time and economy that has vanished despite the telling irony that in truth 6 of the 10 largest corporations in the world are resource companies that get their actual product on rural land (CNN, 2008). Then finally there are places that are asleep. They are somehow stuck in time. They missed something or something missed them. They include, for example, Nova Scotia’s “ocean playgrounds”⁸ where real people come to vacation, relax, and escape modernity (McKay, 1994) by spending time amongst happy story-telling, sweater-knitting, step-dancing, fiddle-playing rustics stuck in time. In an important sense it is their very sleepiness and unreality as places that have become their greatest assets and core identity markers.

Back in the late 1990s, in one of my first doctoral seminars, all participants identified themselves in the usual way. Interestingly, it was only me and a Quebecois student who actually spoke about a place when we talked about who we were and what we were interested in researching. To me, an introduction has to answer the question: “where are you from?” How could you speak about yourself without answering the fundamental place question? I came to learn that this quintessential “down-home” question was met with a kind of puzzlement in Vancouver. “What do you mean: Where I was born?” as if to say, “what does that have to do with anything?”⁹ It is an impolite and inappropriate question that is thought to belie a lack of sophistication if not xenophobia and even racism. Modern identities are implied to be detached from place. The important question, the question contemporary, real, educated people ask, is “where are you going?” It is movement that matters, not where you have been. As soon as one arrives then there will be yet another place and another journey to desire.

What also struck me was an assumption I discovered amongst my peers in doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia. They actually congratulated me for getting out and escaping the backwardness and poverty of Atlantic Canada. With a Ph.D. I would be moving to a city. They actually said things like: “you won’t be staying there now,” and, “you’ve made it out.” After all, *Educere*, one Latin derivative of the word education, is sometimes said to be best translated as: “to lead out.” There it is: education is

⁸ Nova Scotia has been promoted as a tourist destination for several decades under the heading of: “Canada’s Ocean Playground.” This slogan is emblazoned on provincial automobile license plates.

⁹ I have since come to understand the loaded nature of this question in a diverse environment where one’s past location has no particular bearing on one’s present location. It is in fact a privileging of origins and belonging to a particular place and “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) that marks out a form of racialized discourse that locates a particular group as natural inhabitants of a place. The question assumes the alterity of the addressee, an alterity which ironically is increasingly normal and normalized.

not about where you are, it is about where you are headed as the people at Microsoft remind us when they ask in their advertisements: “where do you want to go today?”

More recently I have become interested in the tension in education between place and space, between the emotionally invested physicality of where we are and the increasing absorption of some of us into more ethereal networked spaces. I’m interested particularly in those people who continue to resist being wired or hooked on new mobile technologies, a group of students who are becoming increasingly marginal in schools. In *Learning to Leave*, the fundamental tension is spatialized in a juxtaposition of community and the urban “away.” There are two quotes in the book that I think illustrate the tension in rural education (maybe in all education) between here and elsewhere. In the book I make the distinction between “stayers” and “leavers,” a definitional move that is problematic, but which at the same time seemed to jump out of my oral history data. One is from a school-successful migrant who will probably never return.

I remember some of the teachers talking about other places and making it sound exciting and making us feel like Digby was the bottom of the barrel, your horrible little community where nothing important is going on. In grade twelve it was all geared to getting us to think about where we’re going next year and what you’re going to do next year. I wasn’t going to be embarrassed. I wasn’t just going to stay here. It wasn’t a cool thing to do. If you wanted a career, a success story, you had to leave.

One is from a person who is educated in a different way and who will probably never leave.

You know learning and education is a funny thing. I can remember being called up to the board in grade six to do some simple multiplication problem or some math that wasn’t too hard and my mind going right blank, I was that scared. But I’m not stupid. I’ve been on jobs where I figured out things that licensed carpenters and college trained engineers couldn’t. I’ve learned more out workin’ than I ever did in school. I learned there because it was all part of doing something and I always had the confidence to look over a job and figure out how to get it done. I never had that in school because I couldn’t see the job that had to be done there. Fishing is my roots; that’s what I grew up around, so it’s work that’s natural to me.

I did not have to read very carefully to hear the difference, and it is a difference between the radical mobility of Giddens’ disembedding from phantasmagorical place and Florida’s creative class on the one hand, and the radical

embeddedness of a residents of a First Nations community or of a social thinker like Wendell Berry on the other. On the latter side of the ledger we also find Bauman’s immobile, glocalized, redundant “human waste” (2004) and Bourdieu’s (2000) marginalized working class informants resentfully bearing “the weight of the world.”

I am not sure how we can bridge these two world views and address the profound social justice problems implicit in Bauman and Bourdieu’s analysis, but it seems to me that both quotes raise fundamental questions about what we are doing in rural schools. I would like this book to complexify the educational conversation beyond our current fixation with data, quantification, measurement, placeless standards, and time-worn educational practices that we know do little more than contribute to deepening social inequality while at the same time contributing to the deepening crisis in many rural communities effectively abandoned by the state. I also want to challenge what I think is the naïve idea that we can somehow look backward to simpler times for the answers. I am even more convinced that holding youth in rural communities and small towns, educating them specifically for life in those places would be a grave mistake.¹⁰

Can a child be taught to know a home place intimately and to act as a steward protecting local environments? Why can’t this child be taught to become rooted, cosmopolitan and mobile at the same time? And finally, why are we so worried about what the OECD or right-wing corporate-financed think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Adam Smith Institute, or in Canada, the Fraser Institute, or the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies think of us and of our children? Why are we so colonial? Canada as a whole¹¹ is actually doing very well on these international tests (even in largely rural, economically poor Atlantic Canada), but you would never know it from the reportage. Of course, it’s much easier to generate dubious performance numbers than to actually think about educating real people living in real and diverse communities. And it must be said that the fixation on these numbers has generally led to some

¹⁰ For this reason I have chosen the apparent irony of donating royalties from *Learning to Leave* to fund educational travel and books. Indeed, I think we need to be clear and honest with rural youth that leaving their communities at least for a while, is typically (but not universally) in their best interests. I think we also need to be honest that rural schools are about building what Alan DeYoung (1995) called “cultural bridges” to other places and to broader spaces. In the meantime, the challenge for rural communities themselves as well as the state is to work on developing rural areas not as barren resource extraction grounds where no one would want to live, but rather, as places that have value in themselves and that can offer returnees and in-migrants a sustainable future.

¹¹ Of course the political and spatial construction known as “Canada” contains a multitude of communities whose children are doing more or less well, more or less reflecting the relative wealth and education of their parents.

questionable pedagogical practices, particularly from the point of view of those less easily measurable educational goals like environmental stewardship, initiative, caring, and political/social/civic engagement. It is my sense that it can be argued that there is a direct correlation between educational standardization, accountability/testing mania, and the ongoing decline of youth civic engagement. The implicit message in authoritarian pedagogies is that one is being prepared to take orders and do what one is told.

Is There an Alternative to *Learning to Leave*?

The persistent paradox in rural education is the ambiguous irony that even though it seems to promote out-migration, better educational performance for rural youth is both good for individuals and for their communities. Improved educational performance does seem to increase youth out-migration. Yet, rural communities need better educated populations if they are to prosper in contemporary economic conditions. In other words, rural communities may need the kinds of people who are most likely to leave.¹² This is what makes recent policy discussions on the subject of keeping rural youth in their communities deeply problematic. My research has shown that at least in one coastal community, a strong proportion of the youth population actually does remain close to home and that it may be becoming increasingly localized in some respects.¹³ Most of this population is male, and most of these men possess low levels of formal educational qualifications and understand their schooling as an alien and/or useless experience.

Nobody seems to have a clear idea about how to invest in rural youth in such a way as to both educate them well and keep them from moving away. Some of the discourse

¹² There is though, some debate about whether or not rural individuals actually improve their life circumstances by achieving more education and by relocating. Bollman (1999), Corbett (2007), and Pittman, McGinty, and Gersti-Pepin (1999) found that the linkage between formal education and higher incomes in North American rural communities is weaker than in urban places. Chapman, Phimister, Shucksmith, Upward, and Tera-Toscano (1998) have also questioned whether or not those who leave rural communities actually improve their occupational status.

¹³ This discussion raises the problem of what counts as staying and leaving, which leads to questions about the constitution and boundaries of "community." For a discussion of how I have dealt with this dilemma by spatially problematizing the idea of community, see Corbett (2005). Another dimension of this problem of re-localization is to think of the process as the beginning of a wider scale return to local communities as a result of peak-oil. It could be that the localization of disadvantaged and surplus populations described by Bauman (2004) and the small and shrinking personal milieu of the urban underclass (Bourdieu, 2000) will intensify in profound and potentially troubling ways (Kunstler, 2005, 2008).

around this question is simplistic and nostalgic and appears to amount to developing "local" educational programming that would effectively limit options for select rural students to those available at hand, often to the delight of local employers who are happy to see schools training their work force.

I would suggest that rather than keeping rural youth in place, a more appropriate challenge is to: 1) support and convince most of these youth to go and pursue higher education and a more cosmopolitan experience, and, 2) to create the conditions for their return to rural communities that make this return both feasible and attractive. Thus, leaving and returning should each be supported in a number of ways, all of which focus on the sustainability and importance of rural communities.

I would like to conclude with a number of specific policy suggestions that I think are suggested by current research in rural education. All of these recommendations suggest ways that we can move from the unproductive polarities of nostalgic preservation of a lost past on the one hand, and total despair on the other. Another possibility is an ethic of sustainability. In fact, I am inspired here by Paul Theobald's (1997) bold suggestion that rather than taking the consolidated, urban factory-school as the model of educational progress and modernity, we might actually reintroduce the small, intimate, community-focused rural school as an appropriate model for the 21st century.

First of all, the maintenance of a wide range of publicly funded infrastructure and services in rural communities is a crucial way to attract rural youth back to their communities following postsecondary education. This includes, most importantly I think, the structures that enable digital mobilities. It is inevitable that many youth leave their homes for places that have a wide range of services and opportunities. If the state effectively abandons rural places, mobile youth will be far less likely to return to under-serviced communities even if they truly want to live in these places. Additionally, public sector employment often requires individuals with postsecondary educational credentials so the retention of government services means the retention of good rural jobs. Keeping small rural schools functioning, changing, and vibrant is a key part of keeping rural communities vital. The provision of high-quality broadband infrastructure can also integrate rural communities into economic, social, political, and other opportunities which were formerly unavailable. It is entirely possible that small-scale, niche agriculture (e.g., organic farming) could once again become widely feasible under peak oil conditions in which long-distance transportation of food stuffs becomes problematic and even untenable.

Secondly, schools in rural places particularly should become community showcases for cutting edge ecological practices. An obvious example would be in the area of

energy efficient heating and cooling technologies such as geo-thermal as well as state-of-the art building and insulation techniques. Schools could also showcase alternate forms of energy generation like wind and solar power. In this way schools could actually demonstrate in a concrete way the kind of sustainability principles and practices that contribute to community and ecological sustainability. Because of their relatively small size and diverse locations, rural schools could provide perfect test sites for new technologies.

The next several recommendations relate to postsecondary education. My third policy recommendation is the development of a special form of student financial aid to offset the additional cost of relocation faced by many rural postsecondary students. This aid could take the form of residential bursaries which would help defray relocation and away-from-home living costs. Inequitable access to higher education on the basis of home residence is a fundamental barrier for postsecondary participation given Canada's particular rural geography (Frenette, 2003). Fourth, satellite campuses in rural areas and creative online program delivery could reduce residency requirements for rural postsecondary students. Fifth, programs that tie student support to commitments to return to rural areas like student loan interest relief programs presently being piloted in several parts of Canada could provide financial incentives to rural youth to return. Sixth, keeping a lid on tuition costs will substantially benefit rural youth whose overall postsecondary education costs are already considerably higher than most urban and suburban youth who typically do not need to relocate in order to attend. As commuting and living costs sky-rocket, the possibility of attending post secondary institutions will diminish apace for students living a distance from colleges and universities and cities. This is particularly important for young people whose families do not have established traditions in postsecondary education and who may resist the high cost of formal education as a prohibitive opportunity cost. Seventh, it is imperative that the teacher education programs begin to address shortages of teachers and particular specialties in rural areas by establishing rural student teaching placements and by developing programming to support beginning teachers in rural communities. Incentives to attract strong early career teachers to rural communities would also be a positive policy initiative.

My final two recommendations relate to K-12 programming. The eighth recommendation is that place-based educational initiatives and entrepreneurial education should infuse curriculum in rural schools. Broadly conceived entrepreneurial programming in rural secondary schools is essential to helping youth develop the skills to develop new opportunities in changing times. Place-based education is a now well established framework for developing curriculum and pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith,

2006; Theobald, 1997) that focuses youth on experiential education connected to consequential programming and assessment practices (Shelton, 2005) within the places they live. Vermont has actually developed a way to combine place-based education with more standardized educational outcome expectations (Jennings, Swindler, & Koliba, 2005) demanded by contemporary accountability regimes that are not likely to disappear any time soon. Rural communities need imagination combined with a strong sense of entrepreneurial initiative that may already be in place in traditional farming, fishing, and other resource-based locations. Finally, the reintroduction of strong geography teaching as well as the introduction of environmental studies programming focused on global connections could help rural youth develop a clearer sense of place, globalization, and mobility, along with an ethic of stewardship and caring for natural spaces.

In post-traditional rural communities and rural schools, the opportunities and challenges posed by present conditions complicate the established difficulties and contradictions of the rural schooling that have existed from the establishment of the public schools in the United States (Tyack, 1975) or what Curtis (1988) calls the Canadian Education State. The rural school problem of the early 20th century (Cubberly, 1922) began with an attempt to introduce science and technical rationality into agriculture through the mechanism of the school. This "problem" morphed by mid-century into an ongoing effort to educate redundant rural labor forces out of the country. More recently schooling has expanded its scope to serve a wider clientele and in more culturally inclusive ways while at the same time serving a wider range of socialization functions.¹⁴ Ironically, this has led to what Bauman (1991) calls a deep-seated ambivalence as we come to realize that every problem construction and every blanket policy solution has consequences we can never foresee. As Canada has become what Davies and Guppy (2006) call a "schooled society" mirroring the well established importance of formal education as an institution for integration of diverse populations in the United States (Arendt, 2006/1954), we continue to struggle with the difficult tension between an education that matters locally and that promotes environmental stewardship and strong rural communities while at the same time providing necessary intellectual, social and geographic mobility opportunities to rural youth.

¹⁴ Today communities on the rural margins have been joined together in a dyad of disadvantage that Tom Popkewitz (1998) calls drawing on foundation documents for the Teach for America Program, "urban/rural schools." This discourse represents contemporary code for marginalization standing in as an umbrella term for inner city neighborhoods and isolated and depressed rural backwaters.

The Times They Are A-Changing... Places, Too

You are not Atlas carrying the world on your shoulder. It is good to remember that the planet is carrying you.

-Vandana Shiva

But who knows where any of us are going? Perhaps contemporary environmental challenges will force us finally to take these questions more seriously when the weather wreaks havoc with our complacency once and for all. It is entirely possible that small-scale, sustainable resource harvesting, which some of my Digby Neck friends have consistently promoted, will reemerge out of necessity. This vision of impending collapse in this instance is rooted in a view that the urban world rests on a rural foundation which is quickly and surely eroding.¹⁵ This is the view from the country that is expressed in survivalist discourse, some forms of fundamentalist Christianity, xenophobia, and most recently in dire predictions about the ultimate environmental and human consequences of peak oil.¹⁶ One pundit in this emerging literature writes:

We have to inhabit the terrain differently. Virtually every place in our nation organized for car dependency is going to fail to some degree.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that a statistical analysis from Statistics Canada actually demonstrated that rural population has been essentially stable at about six million since 1981. Of course, this contrasts relative urban population growth outside rural areas throughout the same period.

¹⁶ Several contemporary novelists imagine a frightening future, and the list includes the 2008 winner of the Nobel Prize Doris Lessing whose most recent novels, *Mara and Dann* (1999) and *The Snow Dog* (2005) take up post-apocalyptic themes. Following in the tradition of Phillip K. Dick's (1968) classic doomsday scenarios (e.g., *Blade Runner*), today we find popular films like P. D. James' (2006) *The Children of Men* (complete with an afterword by philosophical superstar Slavoj Zizek) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (Streiber, 2004) as well as popular novels like James Kunstler's *World Made by Hand* (2008), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2005), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2005). The extreme nature of these fictional scenarios recognizes (I think) a general acceptance that sooner or later we in the industrialized West will come to live lives that are considerably different in terms of mobility and choice. In this new space, whatever it does look like, rural land and lifeways will undoubtedly take on a new significance. Indeed this is already happening in Ireland which is touted as a kind of postindustrial miracle, the high-tech, postmodern Celtic Tiger. Integration into the European Union has not only created high-tech opportunities. In Ireland where more than half of the population continue to live in rural areas, EU bans on genetically modified foods have created new markets for organic and niche small scale agriculture. Unlike in North America where only a tiny percentage of the population is engaged in agriculture, Ireland is actually seeing a repopulation of its rural regions.

Quite a few places (Phoenix, Las Vegas, Miami ...) will support only a fraction of their current populations. We'll have to return to traditional human ecologies at a smaller scale: villages, towns, and cities (along with a productive rural landscape). Our small towns are waiting to be reinhabited. Our cities will have to contract ... If you can find a way to do something practical and useful on a smaller scale than it is currently being done, you are likely to have food in your cupboard and people who esteem you. (Kunstler, 2005)

An extreme view perhaps, but it is one that resonates with many rural people. Recent financial crises, global food problems, persistent security questions, and the increasing threat of significant infrastructural compromise in key urban areas all raise the question as to whether, in the long run, those who know where they are and how to live there will be the ultimate winners. Wendell Berry's place-conscious stewardship and sustainable agriculture (1977, 1990) and Richard Sennett's (2008) vision of craftsmanship and the complex physicality of working well with one's hands are not entirely nostalgic reverie. Nor are emerging place-attached political struggles between local rural citizens and the centralizing, corporatist interests of big capital always resolved in favor of Goliath. Increasingly, rural dwellers are learning to marshal arguments around a politics of rurality (Woods, 2003) and embeddedness that resonates against placeless, faceless corporate values to a sympathetic public and to fearful, image-conscious politicians.

The events of the past year in the very community I studied in *Learning to Leave* around a New Jersey-based quarry proposal have been interesting and indeed surprising. In this particular instance a group of rural activists actually stopped an industrial project through the mechanism of an Environmental Review process. The argument was in part directed toward the unknown environmental implications of the project, but broader ecological and community values questions were also cited in the decision of the review panel. Perhaps we all have something to learn from people who know where they live and who have multiple practical life skills. Tongue in cheek I actually developed an ERIQ test for one of my classes (that's embedded rural intelligence quotient). How do you think you would perform? Can you build your own shelter, hunt, fish, grow food, cut wood, prepare cooking fires, and live outside grids, systems and expert controlled mass delivery systems that undergird contemporary living? How would your children fair in a school system that was organized around the kind of skill sets imagined in this test? The fact that you can argue rationally that these skills are marginal and that such testing would never occur is beside the point. The point is that there are large numbers of rural people who continue to see that these kinds of skills, this commonsense pragmatism is what

really matters day to day in the world they know. Because it is little concerned with such matters, school is positioned in these social spaces as a principal example of heart-hardening, disabling uselessness (Cottom, 2003).

I will conclude with a quote from the book in which a gentleman cited in *Learning to Leave* sums this up much better than I could. I interviewed him just before the Y2K scare and he was having a very hard time figuring out what all the fuss was about. He wasn't worried about Y2K and I suspect he isn't much worried about terrorists or peak oil either.

This place here is one of the most beautiful places in the world. You can go out here anywhere and cut a truckload of wood. We can go down to the beach and pick penny winkles and mussels, we can go down to the wharf and catch a few fish for

supper and run in the woods and shoot rabbits. We've got lots of land there to put a little garden in for a few vegetables.... What more would you want? And all these beautiful people. I've never locked a door in my home. I've never took a key out of a vehicle in my life around here. You know they come from the city and tell about how they got to chain everything up to bolts in the ground.

It could well be that as Bob Dylan sang in *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, the wheel is still in spin and at the moment there's no telling who that it's naming. But it is not just times that change. More importantly I think, time is lived out in changing places aligned in spatial hierarchies (like the rural/urban divide, c.f. Williams [1973]) that are now as volatile as oil prices and real estate markets.

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