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Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to Leave The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

In this volume Michael Corbett demonstrates the remarkable depth of his knowledge as well as the care and sensitivity with which he encounters rural cultural settings. Quite simply, in his empirical and cultural study of the coastal fishing town of Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, Corbett asks why contemporary schools have failed rural communities and, more importantly, what can be done about it?

In answering this timely question, Corbett critiques the conventional tendencies to present the rural as being somehow deficient or emblematic of a pathology of place (33). As Corbett notes, the typical formulation of the rural education issue is constructed around the untenable assumption that rural inhabitants must learn to sever irrational regional attachments which hinder any prospect of individual mobility and success. This modernist, deficiency construct model, views rural communities as fated to languish hopelessly beyond the pale of modern, progressive, post - industrial society.

In response to such reductive approaches, Corbett emphasizes the broader structural, economic and cultural dimensions of rural education. Taking cues from a wide variety of theorists, including Marxist, postmodern and Foucaultian thinkers, Corbett suggests that reflective critical educators may want to ask whether: i) there is in fact a rural problem at all; and, ii) whether the educational system is part of the structural and ideological forces which help to maintain such inequalities.

In this vein, Corbett sees schooling within a framework of rural agency, identity and cultural capital whereby decisions to forgo schooling are often “rational” choices. In Corbett’s words, “[c]ould it be that rural resistance to formal education can be understood as recognition that one’s social capital is localized and of little value in the face of the placeless and individualistic mobility ideology of liberal schooling?” (29). As part of such a conceptual model, Corbett sees the unique symbolic capital and practical logic of rural communities as simultaneously underrecognized and central to the reconceptualization of the relationship between modern schooling and complex, rural societies (45, 46). And yet, for Corbett, such a reconceptualization is only possible if educators begin to develop a more sophisticated and situated comprehension of resistances which moves us towards an understanding of “what indeed is being resisted, how, where and particularly with what results” (68).

Notably, Corbett finds the work of Manuel Castells as offering unique insights into the rural relationship between identity and agency. As Corbett notes, “the search for community is a creative process of constructing what Castells calls ‘resistance identities’ which oppose the ‘legitimized identities’ constructed for us in the context of civil society and its state apparatuses” (69). Seen within this context, educational underachievement is

assessed in relation to powerful communal relationships and local cultural capital which situates rural lives between overlapping, competing modernist and rural discourses (63). While teachers conceive of rural cultural politics and forms of perception as ill informed, naïve, or overtly romanticized, Corbett emphasizes how “Castell’s resistance identities result in the formation of communities of resistance that stand in opposition to the metacommunity of civil society, the democratic ideal citizen, which is the object of most visions of key state apparatuses” (58)

But, for Corbett, not all identities are unproblematic from a moral or political perspective. Reinventing rural pedagogy, he maintains, requires confronting the sexism and racism found in many rural communities (269). Particularly salient in this regard is the role of gender, given the fact that the levels of retention and achievement among females were significantly higher than that of males in the area surveyed. Corbett suggests that a substantial part of male educational resistance or ambivalence arises from rural constructs of masculinity, since “education failure fits into a longstanding male tradition in many families, and being ‘born and bred’ a fisherman involved establishing an identity resistant to schooling” (244). Moreover, he adds, male resistance has not significantly declined even in the wake of a severe crisis in the local fishery with devastating impact upon local economies. Corbett explains this phenomenon as consistent with a stoic culture predisposed to weather downturns in the fishery and the association drawn between formal education and powerful corporate and scientific interests implicated in the fishery’s abrupt decline (245).

According to Corbett, given the nuanced nature of rural cultural realities, transformative rural education must build on the failures and misperceptions of the past in order to articulate a more responsive, place- based, pedagogy. First and foremost in this regard, is the need to ensure that “schooling...be connected to the specific struggles and problems encountered in specific rural locales” (269). As Corbett points out, such positionings are also consistent with his characterization of the diversity and nuanced complexity of rural lives. In his words “what I found on Digby Neck is not a discourse of entrapment, but multiple discourses of strategic decision- making, which are more consistent with Castell’s resistant identities and which are formed as a community based response to big government and big capital” (247).

However, there is also the perennial, seemingly unsolvable rural problem of outmigration as the educational system attempts to come to terms with “how rural schools transform economic capital into mobility capital for elite students” (271). While learning to leave may indeed be part of the needs of individual students and their communities, rural education must not be engrained with a cultural narrative of rural decline and fall which functions as a reductive, self fulfilling, prophecy. Seen within this context, the crux of the rural educational issue remains centered around our capacity as educators to “imagine rural schools as sites of resistance to the forces that threaten families and communities without at the same time falling back into simplistic notions about community” (272) As part of this challenge Corbett sees the need to integrate place- based pedagogies with local knowledges as a means of creating a “third space” outside of increasingly standardized and centralized educational institutions and curricula (273). Unlike

alienating modernist pedagogies, communal identity and individual freedom intersect in such cultural spaces where liberation includes “the power to choose how and where to construct an identity and to discover where one belongs” (273)

Corbett’s book, then, offers a compelling synthesis of critical analysis and empirical field work. By framing the mobility issue in terms of the larger context of capital relations – in particular, the pull and push factors at work within complex rural communities – it offers many suggestions for further research and analysis in this challenging (and often neglected) area of educational research. In particular, we might further explore how competing identities and truth regimes play out within school themselves as sites of contestation and systemic struggle. Such a genealogy of rural resistance identities may also require coming to terms with the concrete forms of organization and intervention that rural resistance has historically taken as well as the current forms that offer promise for the formulation and expression of collective, localized, resistance movements. Finally, such a broad- ranged approach may also necessitate examining the positioning of other postsecondary institutions, and indeed rural scholars themselves in relation to the complex intersecting currents, of neo Marxism, progressivism, liberalism, post-modernism and the recurrent themes of class, race and gender.

While these questions and many more stem from the difficult issues confronted by Corbett, this is an important book which clears the way for future collaborative educative projects. Corbett takes a much needed turn away from contemporary mobility based approaches given that, as Conrad wryly notes, “out migration hasn’t served the region well as a development strategy” (13) Rather than seeing the challenges facing rural communities as emblematic of individual ignorance, moral failure or apathy, Corbett clears the way for a place- based pedagogy which is open to taking its direction from rural residents themselves in a manner consistent with a more egalitarian and dialogical educational vision. Remarkably, Corbett’s work has opened a window into a border land where suffering and promise exist side by side as a veritable point of confluence for modern and rural cultures wherein critical educators can find novel directions for counter hegemonic struggle against authoritarian pedagogical practices.