

On Membership, Humility, and Pedagogical Responsibilities: A Correspondence on the Work of Wendell Berry

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Wendell Berry is a novelist, essayist, conservation activist and farmer who has had a lot to say over the last half century about the impact of modern industrial society on small farm communities and the land especially since WWII. In this three-way conversation, the authors take up central aspects of Berry's work to think about how it has influenced their thinking as teacher educators focused on the intersections between social and ecological crises challenging our world. Themes of responsibility, leadership, community membership, friendship, "settler colonialism," racism, land use, and ecological sustainability are brought to bear on education for just and healthy communities.

August 7, 2012

Dear Jeff and Richard,

I so appreciate this opportunity for a public conversation with the two of you! You've both been friends and colleagues over many years now with lots of intersections and differences in both experiences and scholarly entry points in our interests around ecological crises and their educational implications. Thank you to Sandra Spickard Prettyman for offering us this opportunity.

Richard has suggested we begin via another recent conversation, that between Wendell Berry and Madhu Suri Prakash, in a series of letters they exchanged and published last year in *Yes! Magazine* (2011). Michael Foley and David Greenwood responded to that conversation in a subsequent issue (2011), and others (Rene Galindo and Dana Stuchul) also presented about Berry's work, that conversation, and its connections with the work of Ivan Illich last year at the 2012 annual American Educational Research Association conference. So, it seems particularly appropriate that we three should also enter the conversation, or at least let what's been talked about among others bubble up here. Madhu Prakash's (1994) longtime focus on Berry's *oeuvre* as inspiration for her own philosophy of education is an essential contribution I'd like to suggest as

a way of framing this discussion, that each of us offers a reflection on both the insights and limits of Berry's work on our own, dipping into the previous conversations as needed.

Jeff and I recently wrote a piece for an upcoming book, *Contemporary Studies in Environmental and Indigenous Pedagogies: A Curricula of Stories and Place* edited by Andrejs Kulnieks, Kelly Young, and Dan Longboat (forthcoming), that explores Berry's wisdom as it contributes to EcoJustice Education and in particular what we've called elsewhere "a pedagogy of responsibility" (Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005; Martusewicz Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011). Berry's sharp critique of the political, economic, and cultural forces within modern industrial cultures currently wreaking havoc on the world, in particular on small farming communities, includes an important recognition of the contribution of formal educational institutions to those destructive processes. His fiction and non-fiction explores both the material and psychological effects of policies and ideologies that undermined commitment to what he calls "membership" and its responsibilities to local relationships among people and with the land especially since WWII.

This part of his work falls in line with one strand of an EcoJustice framework that seeks to trace the deep cultural roots of social and ecological crises at play in the current colonizing forces of globalization. Here, we seek to understand both the material and social-psychological effects of a complex cultural, political and economic history that can be traced back to Plato through Bacon, Descartes and others in the so-called Scientific Revolution, and into current thinking suffusing our lives. The specifics of modernist discourses and their effects, as Berry makes so clear, are very complex. I think that's what he was getting at in his response to Madhu that he would not write a letter to President Obama suggesting he fund small farmers, both because the situation is far too complex to be adequately addressed with such a political response and because there are already others on the ground doing the work that government probably cannot (and will not) fully respond to (Berry & Prakash, 2011). Berry's focus on what people in local communities can and should do to counter the detrimental effects of mechanism, individualism and corporate greed falls in line with the second strand of EcoJustice work which is a focus on revitalizing those skills, traditions, and relationships that have historically contributed to more sustainable ways of being on the planet. Bowers has contributed a lot to this, calling for a "revitalization of the cultural and environmental commons." I think a lot of Berry's work details what Chet is calling for, while also tracing the deep contradictions at play in the spaces and relationships we might identify as the Commons. Madhu's (2010) work around what she calls "commons sense" draws from these parts of Berry's work as well. Her work calls us to loving appreciation for Berry's insistence on what we need to know about the soil as the basis for life, about being in relationship with one another in non-destructive ways, about the possibilities that circulate in staying close to the land, in particular the affection and love that such relationships induce and require. His work around "the local" and "place" is always about responsibility, affection, and mutuality. I love his use of Wallace Stegner's distinction between "stickers" and "boomers" in this regard. In his recent National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecture, Berry (2012) wrote:

We Americans, by inclination at least, have been divided into two kinds: "boomers" and "stickers." Boomers, [Stegnar] said, are "those who pillage and run," who want "to make a killing and end up on Easy Street," whereas stickers are "those who settle, and love the

life they have made and the place they have made it in.”² “Boomer” names a kind of person and a kind of ambition that is the major theme, so far, of the history of the European races in our country. “Sticker” names a kind of person and also a desire that is, so far, a minor theme of that history, but a theme persistent enough to remain significant and to offer, still, a significant hope. The boomer is motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power. . . . Stickers on the contrary are motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it. (pp. 10-11)

I also love Berry’s constant reminder that life is mysterious, and that while we have inherited a way of thinking and being in the world that assumes we can both know and control down to the last minute particle all of what makes up this world of ours, we cannot. I love his appreciation of the integrity of individual creatures, and his railing against scientists who homogenize, mechanize, and instrumentalize the living world in their quest to “know” and control (Berry, 2000a). This railing against what Jensen calls “human supremacy” is probably the most difficult, and for me the most important aspect of our work as educators.

I could go on and on. I feel like I’m skipping over the surface here. I want to delve deeper into how Berry’s work and others’ engagement with it can influence our understanding of what education should mean in the face of the devastating effects of “boomer” culture (to boil it down!), but first I want to hear from you two. I’m really looking forward to this conversation, both because I love Wendell Berry’s work and because I value your insights so much.

With affection,
Rebecca

August 10, 2012

Dear Rebecca and Richard,

It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to talk with the two of you. Let me pick up the strand from the end of Rebecca's contribution regarding "what education should mean." In a 2001 piece in *Orion*, Berry wrote that the purpose of education

is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible...A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first. (para. 26)

This statement resonates for me in several ways. First, to help students to "put their lives in order" means recognizing the chaos students face in their daily lives and our obligation to provide them a meaningful center. But it's not just any order. In calling for "putting first things first," Berry challenges the usual liberal notion of "let kids decide what's important to them." There are ways of living that are just and sustainable and there are ways that aren't. Yet of course we can't simply pronounce the "truth" to students and expect them to obediently follow it. This

raises the dilemma of how we navigate the reality of a culture where everything is relative and up to the individual—while we know that a sustainable culture is very different.

Next, "putting first things first" links necessarily to responsibility. In the past, we have talked about a language of responsibility in contrast to a language of rights. This framing highlights the need to teach about obligations that are due to other humans and other species. But Berry also teaches us to see responsibility as making difficult choices—and having the discernment to know what matters, and the will to do what matters when the culture invites, even demands that you do what feels good. I want to work more on how to have this conversation with students in a way that isn't preaching.

But also essential to Berry's take on education is its conservatism. We have to continue to struggle to reframe the idea of "conservative" in the face of a culture that changes (undermines, destroys) everything it touches. Core to "true" conservatism is a focus on responsibility in the face of a culture that values irresponsibility. But just writing that last sentence highlights that there are many values we share with many of the so-called "social conservatives" (as opposed to the "free-market" conservatives, who Chet Bowers (2003) correctly labels "market liberals")—we both would like to conserve, for example, the values of hard work, honesty, and humility. We need to be able to articulate why we want to conserve those values, but not the repressive ideas of patriarchy, homophobia, and buying the latest LCD 3D television.

Let me close by noting that just in this first contribution I have developed my thinking a bit regarding what is necessary for a concept of a "pedagogy of responsibility," which adds to the pleasure of this discussion.

Best,
Jeff

August 22, 2012

Dear Rebecca and Jeff,

It is a happy opportunity to have this public space to share our thoughts concerning Wendell Berry, EcoJustice, ecopedagogy and other related educational research matters. It is amazing to me (and also just a little mortifying I must confess), that this conversation informally marks the approach of a decade since we first met at the University of Miami during the Eco-Justice and Teacher Education¹ conference held in February, 2003. It is interesting to think about how our theories and action plans have evolved since then or, by contrast, how many of our core principles may have held out against the profession's market demand for the ever new and cutting-edge in educational research.

We weren't talking much about Wendell Berry in 2003, as my memory has it, but it seems like a lot that was then on the agenda back in the earlier days of the EcoJustice workshops still has currency today—the themes have been conserved in the face of sustained global political threats

¹ The event, as much of the literature both then and even now, spoke of "Eco-justice" as hyphenated. Otherwise herein I follow what appears to be the preferred title of "EcoJustice."

and sociocultural aggravations. One aspect of the work that has progressed, I think, is that many contemporary social justice educators now understand that a major issue of their concern must be the social and cultural reproduction of a long structural history of environmental racism; and many are at least in tacit alliance with a variety of “Green agenda” conservationist and preservationist demands often seen as the purview of environmental education circles. From my perusal of research citations to this effect, EcoJustice has grown in influence by at least an order of magnitude since I first read *Educating for Eco-Justice and Community* in 2001, and the international conversations around ecopedagogy that have come to be especially highly influential in critical pedagogical research circles can additionally serve as further evidence that a transformed approach to social justice education methodologies has since been effected. It remains to be seen, to my mind, how the field of environmental education will itself move to seriously take up issues of social justice in the work done there—though, for sure, this turn has been made over the last decade in a new crop of critical environmental education researchers, often grouped together rather clumsily under the family crest of the “socio-ecological.”

What initially drew me to EcoJustice research was that it was, at least as a body of theory, situated in an advanced position on the borderline between the disciplinary contradictions that fields like critical pedagogy and environmental education often reproduced to the degree that they limited their approach merely to one or the other side of issues of social and environmental domination. It said a lot to me that, when as a doctoral student inquiring about whether work attempting to resolve these contradictions existed, I could be led to C. A. Bowers (and EcoJustice research generally) by scholars as different as Charlene Spretnak, on the one hand, and Peter McLaren, on the other. Meeting Chet for the first time, the two of you, and the rest of the EcoJustice group gathered in Miami was an important and foundational moment for me as a scholar and activist with related concerns. In preparation for that encounter I read Rebecca’s *Seeking Passage* (2001), with a deep appreciation of the ways in which the arts (and especially dance) were drawn upon therein to weave healing stories of relationship, illuminating how power unfolds discursively between self/Other, voice/silence, and teacher/student.²

Story was an important part of the EcoJustice platform in 2003.³ For instance, I remember learning from Jeff of a project that was then underway archiving people’s stories about the loss of their “cultural commons” (and I suppose, by turn, places in which they had been conversely reclaimed). To this end, I told a story about living in the Hungarian *puszta* in 1994 and ’95 in a rural farm village called Szabadszállás—and about how I witnessed American-styled consumer capitalism fundamentally transform a lot of well-rooted Hungarian traditions and cultural norms in an astoundingly short time period there. On the other hand, the most shocking changes I saw were arguably in the cities, like Budapest, and for sure if I were to return to the *puszta* today I would find many folks continuing to self-subsist in a relatively traditional and community-based manner...beyond the European Union, beyond McDonalds and Coca-Cola, beyond Hollywood. On the other hand, it is crucial to recognize that these same rural townships also serve as the stronghold for the neo-fascist Jobbik party that is Hungary’s particular shame.

² In my opinion, this text should be more widely consulted in the emerging educational literature of Human/Animal Relations that is currently much in vogue in Canada and the United States.

³ This was significantly before, and so a kind of seed bed for, the realization of a definitive collection like Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai and Bob Jickling’s *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment and Education* (2009).

I suppose this is an intellectual place, then, that Wendell Berry enters the discussion for me—as a representative for a real and oppositional alternative to something like the growth of Jobbik (or, in the context of the United States, the Tea Party and the various culturally reactionary militia groups, among others, that mix with and surround it). I first became aware of your interest in Berry last year when I had the chance to read your book (with John Lupinacci), *EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic and Sustainable Communities* (2011). I know that Berry’s work is a subject that you both are interested in highlighting more centrally generally these days as well, and I like very much this idea of a “pedagogy of responsibility.” And so, though it is only one point of our common interest, I think it is a particularly useful, friendly and topical place to conduct this dialogue together. Moreover, as Rebecca mentions, since mutual friends of ours like Madhu Suri Prakash and David Greenwood have also been championing Berry’s work for some time (in Madhu’s case: decades!), our collective consideration of Berry further allows us to constellate a larger host of synergistic and convivial connections as part of a growing trend in educational research.⁴ Hopefully, this will ultimately allow emergent differences in approach to be highlighted across the convergent positions that have been taken on Wendell Berry’s thought in educational scholarship.

At this early stage in such a dialogue, it is probably necessary for me to confess that (unlike some of those scholars I just mentioned) I neither consider myself a Berry-ite nor even a serious student of his work. This said, I do very much respect his achievement of having clearly become a great American literary figure, and through that lens, of his similar achievement in becoming a great representative of American citizenship...especially as a kind of neo-Jeffersonian, civic rural voice, which stands for human scale, humane stewardship, and progressive political values—this from a white male perspective (one that has intergenerational wisdom to shine on rural concerns from the seventies’ and eighties’ privatization and conglomeration of farms, to the sixties’ human rights struggles, to the fight to desegregate the South through the labor campaigns of the pre-WWII era). In this respect, over the last decade I examined Berry’s corpus as an exemplar of educational leadership for sustainable development, an approach that emphasizes the community development of sustainability as a type of critical place-based, agrarian humanism.

As an American white man myself (growing of age in Generation X), one interested in the cultures of literature and sustainability, of democratic politics, and of liberation politics, I have found it useful to have a biographical life example like that provided by Wendell Berry—I like to use biographies as pedagogical models through which to assess my own (or others’) moral actuality and potential. Moreover, it is crucial to me that Berry is not just a man-for-himself but is additionally a man-for-others as a leading movement representative, for campaigns like 350.org, the recent Farm Bill, and mountaintop removal protests. As a movement leader, Wendell Berry draws my ecopedagogical interest because of my concern for sustainability education as the consultation and cultivation of the cognitive praxis produced by social movements as historical beings generating planetary aspirations for the politics of a totally liberated community-of-communities.

⁴ For instance, others within a degree or two of separation of us interested in Wendell Berry include: Daniel Grego, Dana Stuchul, Jason Lukasik, Douglas Davis, Margaret Somerville, Philip Payne, and David Orr.

I first taught Berry's work in 2005-06 when I worked as a Fellow in UCLA's General Education Cluster first-year program, for the Global Environment course sequence that was the interdisciplinary hallmark of the UCLA Institute of Environment and Sustainability. I developed and taught the Spring capstone module, a course called "American Environmental History: Pathways Through Environmentalism," and it was during this class that the students and I engaged with pieces like Berry's "Mad Farmer Manifesto" (Berry, 2012) and the essay *Compromise, Hell!* (Berry, 2004). Although I'm not sure that student response to this reading was a collective epiphany, it was clear that his words were received as powerful, and I can still feel the mood of fierce composure that came over the room as I gave voice to one of his passages, "How do we submit? By not being radical enough. Or by not being thorough enough, which is the same thing."

Then, at the University of North Dakota (UND), where I worked from 2007 through 2010, I had further cause to consider Berry's messages and his broader meaning for education. In the multigenerational farming communities of the Red River Valley, with their own recent histories of regional agrarian socialism, of largely Scandinavian cultural individualism, mixed with an ethos of Red State agribusiness-fed conservatism (in the style captured well by Jeff), I began to see a much more obvious analogue to Berry's Port William mythos. From this perspective, it seemed absolutely surprising that my former UCLA students and I had found vantage points within the urban sprawl of Los Angeles from which to read Berry meaningfully at all! Through life in Grand Forks and the surrounding region, then, I became increasingly sensitive to the unique and dynamically complex set of problems and potentials that my friend Kim Donehower has theorized under the moniker of "rural literacies" (Donehower, Hogg & Schell, 2007; 2011).

Berry's wisdom felt much more at home in this atmosphere and, accordingly, my ecoliteracy and multicultural education classes took up investigations of rural farms, not as places of cultural deficits, but rather as tactical locations from which to find resources to survive the 21st century in the United States with well-being and integrity. With this in mind, my UND students and I began examining why the tradition of critical pedagogy, which began as educational work in rural agrarian contexts in Latin America, had become dominantly identified with urban concerns over the last few decades. From this, we turned our attention to the need for critical pedagogies of the rural, and this research culminated with a close reading together of bell hooks' *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), in which she dialogues with Wendell Berry. Here we considered hooks' admiration for Berry as a visionary poet, as an eclectic radical, and as a fellow writer from Kentucky who helped her to better understand her region (and thus herself) through an examination of the many convergences-in-difference they found existing between them.

Still, despite a real and sustained curriculum of study of Wendell Berry in my classes, my publications, and in my personal life, I have to reiterate that I feel any commentary I offer is done so as an outsider critic. I hail from the suburbs of New York City, and while my childhood spent in the woodlands of Westchester County (and, during the summers, the more rural confines of the Lakes Region in New Hampshire) felt very much like Richard Louv's (2005) ideal, I never had a relationship to place like Berry's farm. In fact, I feel decidedly comfortable and at home in urban environments like Brooklyn and San Francisco. I like the pulse, the energy, the connectivity and cultural possibilities of such democratic geographies. Some of the most

powerful moments in my life have been alone, walking the Brooklyn Bridge at dawn, looking out over the Hudson River on my way into work in downtown Manhattan.

Moreover, to the degree that I do understand and value rural communities and lifespaces—and do see them as obviously crucial if sustainability and education are to achieve anything like a meaningful ground as we move headlong into a global future—I should relate that I have been undoubtedly more deeply influenced by a wide host of other rural and rustic intellectuals than I have by Wendell Berry. For me, amongst white male figures, people like Murray Bookchin, Gary Snyder, Myles Horton, Arne Naess, Douglas Peacock, Pentti Linkola, or Ken Kesey—maybe even the Baal Shem Tov and Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone—have been more inspiring and influential. Nor are my rural influences only White or men. The work and lives of figures like Winona LaDuke, Vandana Shiva, Wangari Maathai, Rigoberta Menchú, Corbin Harney, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chico Mendes, the membership of the Zapatista movement, Ramakrishna, Huichol mara'kame like Ramon Medina Silva, and so forth, have fed my imagination more than has Wendell Berry. I say this, not to denigrate or criticize Berry, but only to make a real accounting of where he is situated in relationship to my own undertakings.

Anyhow, I know I have opened with a Coltrane blast, and I pledge now to conserve my voice so as to be properly responsible to the spirit of communication between us. For me, “first things first” meant a digression into biography, which I hope you don’t mind. But I did so because (for me) this is a crucial element of Berry’s teaching—one I feel close to and seek here to mirror in some regard. That is, how is Wendell Berry at once didactic but not one-dimensionally preachy? I find it to be so because he presents a moral accounting, and a message of the need for moral accounting, as the *mundis imaginalis* (Corbin, 1972) of his own unfolding ecological awareness of being-in-the-world. As a writer, I feel he hears the world speak deeply and pluralistically, and that he seeks to answer these voices with his life in a variety of registers...thereby creating a dialectics of art and civics: the *paideia* of a community of individuals represented at once as (a) life as literature, (b) life and literature, and (c) literature as life. For me, then, Berry models (as I try also to do as a teacher, and teacher of teachers) Freire’s (2000) statement about “true words,” that “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p. 87). Isn’t Berry offering a complex and compelling version of Parker Palmer’s (1999) demand, “Let your life speak?” To speak with and for the world requires that we care for it and appreciate also its care for us as a partner in the conversation.

Of course, in a world beset by the “globalization of nothing” (Ritzer, 2003), in which cultural domination is an ever-present force bearing down upon the last vestiges of uncolonized common space across the planet, we live the history of this contestation and contradiction. It is possible to transcend, or undermine, but analysis of any given situation will always provoke its limitations. At least this is the teaching I have come to understand from the critical tradition and advance through my own advice.

You both have helped me to situate one of the ways in which Berry’s account serves as a core problem for me: the imaginary of the “sticker” in the context of a need to truly reframe American conservatism within rural communities. Again, I unquestionably encountered this during my time in North Dakota, and found—as with Berry—that it was a potentially progressive place from which to advance critical sustainability education work, educing it from the relatively deep

roots to land and community that existed in such a locale. On the other hand, to listen to the stories that emerged from such work I recognized that there was all-too-often an occlusion of the historical damage wrought by the culture of the “settler,” or a romanticization of its relationship to the indigenous. The White students (who comprised the majority) often had family plots of land that went back hundreds of years in some cases, lived in communities where everyone knew and helped everyone, cared for their land and lived in ways that approached sustainable “best practice.” However, when it came time to talk about their relationships with the Sioux tribes in the area, about whether their traditions conserved stories about how their ancestors drove the tribes off the land and appropriated it for themselves, or even whether or not they at least had a responsibility to become active on issues like the university’s moniker (“the Fightin’ Sioux”) or spend time actively courting and listening to indigenous voices on campus—there was a massive erasure present. For the record, I find that this erasure pervades a great deal of the environmental educational and social justice research in education, with such research (no matter how important or well-meaning otherwise) itself arguably constituting a type of settlement. Although I did not have such a tool at my disposal at the time, I have come to understand this problem through the lens of “settler colonialism” (Veracini, 2010). It appears to be as devious and resilient a formation as the global capitalism that is its macro-imperialist shape. I worry deeply about this, both in the context of Berry’s own life and work, as well as in the academic reception of such work.

“Enough is enough!” as the saying has it. Thank you again for the opportunity to converse with you about some of these matters. Rather than further dominate the curriculum of our talk by asking you both pointed questions now, let me instead simply invite your own responses to anything we have thus far discussed, or to provide further clarifications of points that to your thinking may have become misarticulated or left unproductively abandoned.

Alors!
Richard

August 30, 2012

Dear Richard and Jeff,

Thanks so much for this Richard! I am so touched by the story that you tell. It makes me nostalgic about my own path and the ways it has crossed yours. But this goes beyond nostalgia doesn’t it? In the spirit of Wendell Berry’s imploring that we pay attention to “membership” as an important part of this EcoJustice work, I want to tell my own part of this story. I too remember that first meeting in Miami. You and I shared time on a panel, and I was so impressed by your work and the way you used narrative and theory to unpack your analysis. We didn’t have time to talk afterwards as you needed to go, and we all got caught up in the plans for the rest of the conference. But, yes, that first meeting meant a lot to me too. I recognized you as a potential “brother” in this work. I was a relative newcomer to these questions about the inseparability of social and ecological degradation, trying to make sense of how to apply my post-structuralist interests in language and culture to the development of an EcoJustice

framework. I remember stumbling through an attempt to bring into conversation the works of Gregory Bateson and Gilles Deleuze on the essential operation of “difference” in both ecological and cultural relationships and systems. I also recognized that you were coming at similar questions about these intersections from your own specific experiences and, in part, as a response both to the possibilities and to what was/is lacking among the social justice oriented critical pedagogy folks. I loved your presentation and was disappointed then not to have more time with you. As chance would have it, I had the pleasure again a few years later in Toronto when Chet and I attended Ed O’Sullivan’s conference at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I remember Chet making a fairly pointed comment in one of the sessions that you were in. He put you on the spot in public, and you handled it with great poise and even joviality. That could not have been easy! But afterwards as we stood around chatting, you laughed and sort of gave it back to him. I liked you immediately for that! It was a very clear sign to me that you would be a strong ally, and despite the intellectual battles among our key colleagues/mentors and the stakes they had planted, you were going to be a friend.

I recall this here because it relates directly to the importance of conviviality, of friendship in the face of immense challenges wreaking social and ecological havoc, a commitment to similar values and the necessary political, ethical, and pedagogical responses, even when we may disagree about some of the finer analytical details, or press each other to see limits in our thinking. Not that these differences are unimportant but we need to treat them as something to be explored together, learned from, debated, and taught. They should not become elements of academic warfare, a clear reproduction of our socialization to hierarchized relationships, competition, and violence as normal. Again, Wendell Berry and others like Ivan Illich have made this point very clear: It is far more sustainable and effective to work together in conviviality and “membership” around particular goals than to battle those who are our closest allies. I have learned this first hand, as you may have too. Not that there’s not a time and place to do battle! Ha! I agree with Derrick Jensen (2006) whole-heartedly on that score, but it’s important that we think carefully about where to put that energy and against whom, and when to pay attention to friendship.

Anyway, about my particular intellectual relationship with Wendell Berry: Like you, I can’t claim to be a scholar of his work, at least not like Madhu Prakash, and others you mention certainly are. I was actually introduced to his essays through Chet, and read the collection *Another Turn of the Crank* (1995) practically in one sitting back in 2002, I think. I was so drawn in by his attention to community as including the land, the farmers, their families, the forests, the streams and all the creatures. And I was moved by his blunt description of transnational corporate power and its broad destruction. Opening that book now, I read an underlined passage:

We are now pretty obviously facing the possibility of a world that the supranational corporations, and the governments and educational systems that serve them, will control entirely for their own enrichment—and, incidentally and inescapably, for the impoverishment of all the rest of us. This will be a world in which the cultures that preserve nature and rural life will simply be disallowed. It will be, as our experience already suggests, a postagricultural world. ...you cannot have a postagricultural world that is not also postdemocratic, postreligious, postnatural—in other words, it will be posthuman, contrary to the best we have meant by “humanity.” ...They believe that a

farm or a forest is or ought to be the same as a factory; that care is only minimally necessary in the use of the land; that affection is not necessary at all; that for all practical purposes a machine is as good as a human...that the topsoil is lifeless and inert; that soil biology is safely replaceable by soil chemistry; that nature or ecology of an given place is irrelevant to the use of it; that there is no value in human community or neighborhood... (p. 13)

I remember being so touched by his inclusion of direct language about the need for care and affection both among humans and in our relationship to soil! His focus on building human-scaled, local economies that pay attention to a particular biosphere struck me as practical and visionary, and grounded in common sense. So, I have spent the last ten years or so teaching pieces of his work—novels, short stories, and essays—in a variety of educational contexts. I'll talk about that in a minute. Although I've drawn on his work to support various aspects of EcoJustice theory and pedagogy, this turn lately to a focus on Berry as the subject of study is new for me, and I must admit a total pleasure.

Some of that pleasure comes from my own childhood history, growing up in rural Northern New York in St. Lawrence County, the poorest, least populated, and largest county in the state. I am the granddaughter of a small dairy farmer who spent 70 plus years on the same piece of land, raising Holsteins, and providing milk to the region. We lived just over a mile from where my mother grew up, and my siblings and I were raised in the fields, streams, and back roads that connected our house to the farm. My family was far from wealthy in the monetary sense but I lived a charmed childhood so I never thought about that at all. I rode horseback from the time I was three or four, played in the woods and fields around our house all year round, and made relationships with all sorts of animals and people old and young. Of course I didn't understand this then, but I was given a powerful education in what it means be responsible to a community where the members included were human and "more than human." My mother saw to that!

So for me, what Wendell Berry writes about in his novels especially is not far at all from what we just took for granted as children. It was just the way things were done on the farm to not raise more than was needed to feed the cows and the family, to always be attending to the health of the soil by spreading manure regularly, rotating corn and grass crops field to field, year to year. My grandfather was, by the time I knew him, semi-retired; he knew the best trout holes and rabbit hunting woods, and smelled perpetually of cow manure! And, as time went by, I saw my uncle and cousin (who took over the farm in succession from Grandpa) struggle as big farms were given priority in the form of government subsidies and small farmers could not afford the low prices that their milk brought, many going under as a result. The North Country is now dotted with decrepit farmsteads. People there suffered a kind of economic stranglehold as a few huge Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) took over the dairy business in the area the people in the area were taught to see that as "progress." So, my family lived the story that Wendell Berry tells of the post World War II farm policies, and especially Regan's "get big or get out" contribution to agricultural policy and the "Green Revolution." Again, I did not understand all this as it was happening, and actually Wendell Berry has shed incredible light on my own homeland and people's experiences there.

So I guess my relationship to his work is personal and extra meaningful in that way. But, I live now in metro Detroit where severe impoverishment created through a history of racist social, economic, and educational policies has led to a powerful community movement and revitalization of commons-based relationships and practices. There are currently over 2000 urban gardens and small vegetable farms in Detroit. A loosely organized network of citizens and non-profits has created gardens and community farms to address serious food insecurities created in the wake of about 60 years of forced subsistence as white families and big industry fled the city. In this post-industrial urban context, Wendell Berry's critique of corporate excesses based in ideologies of individualism, "progress," and a mechanized view of the natural world combined with a vision of the value of local economies, what it means to be born somewhere, put down roots, and "stick" there is highly relevant. And although Detroit is still defined as a "shrinking city," more and more people are working to convince young people to fall in love with their city, to stay and work with others to make something very different than the Detroit of the 20th century. The specific context may be different but what's going on in Detroit is basically a revitalization of a strong agricultural commons. Here the resistance discourse focuses on African centered self-determination with a strong critique of white supremacist policies that have historically led to horrendous public health, housing, and educational crises.

Moreover, this region was part of the "Great Migration" north and so home to many former southern whites and blacks whose families were once primarily farmers (often share croppers ironically looking for a better life in the factories), some from Berry's homeland of Kentucky. Ypsilanti, the city where I live, is affectionately referred to as Ypsi-tucky because of the large influx of white and black Appalachian families who came here to work in the Willow Run bomber plant during World War II, leaving racist and class-based discriminations in search of a better life. If you haven't read *The Dollmaker*, a novel by Harriette Arnow (1954), read it. It's the most powerful rendering of this historical migration and its effects, specifically in Detroit, that I've ever read. Arnow documents the way the "war effort" was used to draw people off the land in the South, to help grow a hyper-consumerist and debt-ridden culture addicted to machines and "convenience" that ultimately dislocated them and future generations from their relationships to and knowledge of the land. Attempting to escape poverty and racism, they found themselves stuck in crowded and violent living conditions where ethnic and racial brutality was a way of life.

For me, the connections between Arnow's fiction and Berry's work are astounding. I'm hoping to use them together in an upcoming EcoJustice Education course. Berry (1989) basically takes us deeply into what those place-based familial and community relationships were like, and how communities, though small, not wealthy, and yes, dominated by poor white settlers, created and exchanged the care necessary to attend to each other's needs and the needs of the land. His work in the *Hidden Wound* and many of his fictional Port William stories trace the complicated racist history of these communities, including his own family. He attends so carefully to the intricacies of both friendship and white power among the people in these stories, the white landowners and their children, and the black hired help who shared in the labor and membership necessary to survive there. And, he acknowledges that the "wound" of racism is not one isolated in the black community, but a social disorder devastating to the entire society. Here he struggles with such a recognition: That violence done to one, and rationalized, is violence done to the whole community.

If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.

This wound is in me, as complex and deep in my flesh as blood and nerves. I have borne it all my life, with varying degrees of consciousness... I want to know as fully and exactly as I can, what the wound is and how much I am suffering from it...I do not want to pass it on to my children. Perhaps this is wishful thinking; perhaps such a thing is not to be done by one man, or in one generation. Surely a man would have to be dangerously proud to think himself capable of it. ...I know that if I fail to make at least the attempt I forfeit any right to hope that the world will become better than it is now. (Berry, 1989, p. 4)

Berry goes on to share the deep shame carried by members of his family and himself related to their ancestral participation in slavery, as well as his memories of what he can only share as love that he had for the elder black men and women he grew up with and learned from. His prose belies his clear pain in these remembrances, as he confronts

the tension between the candor and openness of a child's view of things and the contrivances of the society we lived in...there were times when I was inescapably aware of the conflict between what I felt about them, in response to what I knew of them, and the feelings that were prescribed to me the society's general prejudice against their race. (p. 50)

So although I do understand your sense of Berry's work as romanticizing a white settler culture, I think if we read through the breadth of his work, we see that his thought is more complicated than that. He does not shy away from looking at the underside of this culture, even while he focuses on the deep love and kindnesses therein. In an upcoming piece of writing, I'll be taking a look at the operation of "eros" as the intimate and embodied experiences of connection, care, and love as necessary to ethics and education in Berry's work.

You are, however, so right Richard about his lack of attention to the Indigenous peoples whose relationships with this land predated the white settlers, or the violence that displaced or eradicated whole cultures. I appreciate the critique you pose through the analytic lens of "settler colonialism." You write about the "erasure [that] pervades a great deal of the environmental education and social justice research in education, with such research itself arguably constituting a type of settlement." Yes, I see that very clearly. I think this is one of the most important contributions that Chet Bowers' work makes to this field, as he constantly exposes the ways that Indigenous peoples' knowledge, practices, traditions and spiritual relationships have been trampled on, demeaned, and destroyed by western industrial cultures. Your statement throws my own childhood into a different light, making me think in new ways about the particular ways that settler culture imbedded itself in my family and in me. There are rumors in my family of "Indian blood" in my ancestry, and I wonder about the implied shame of what

appear to be well kept secrets. Perhaps I need to stop avoiding finding out the truth behind the rumors. Your insight definitely calls our attention to gaps in Berry's work for all its beauty and power. I wonder if there will come a moment when he admits to this lack of attention as he does in the beginning of *The Hidden Wound*. Perhaps I'm overlooking it, but I am not aware of any of his writing that confronts those particular atrocities. I suspect however, given the sensitivity he expresses throughout his writing, that this absence is not for lack of care or even lack of awareness. But, like I said, I too have felt the absence of attention to what happened to those who lived and cared for that land before colonization. I thank you for taking this conversation there, even as I value what he offers us and our students as we explore what EcoJustice might mean.

As I said earlier, I've used pieces of Berry's work in my undergrad and grad classes over the last ten years or so. But no doubt, the most powerful experience I've had teaching was when I was on sabbatical working in a suburban New Hampshire high school. I joined three other teachers to create and teach a senior seminar called Food Systems and Sustainability. As part of this course—an incredible experience that I can't begin to describe here—we read Berry's (200b) *Jayber Crow*, a novel that is a memoir written from the point of view of a barber who sets up his business in Berry's fictional small farming town, Port William, Kentucky. Again, typical of Berry's work, the story weaves together a tale of the complications of love and friendship, economic hardship and ordinary wealth defined by day-to-day relationships and intergenerational wisdom, along with a strong critique of war and post-war farm policy. Our students, primarily suburban white kids, were otherwise a very heterogeneous group both in terms of socioeconomic background and academic success. They were totally enthralled by the ways Berry captures a sense of place, the complexity of relationships, and the larger political and economic context as it affected the lives of the people in his story and the larger food systems we now live with. Berry does a brilliant job in this novel of capturing the transition to “get big or get out” and the effects on families, the land, and the overall community. It's a tragic story at its core, but also funny and endearing. The students were able to interact with and respond to the text on a variety of intellectual and emotional levels. It sparked their historical imaginations and drew them into a multi-faceted narrative about the value of community, local economic systems, and a deep understanding of the land.

We used the novel as an introduction to an oral history project that got these primarily suburban students to investigate the history of their community—Amherst, NH—as a former farming community. They worked in groups, each assigned a particular farming family to research, and they interviewed family members, some long since separated from the farms. This project was undertaken as part of a year-long interdisciplinary study of food systems and sustainability taught by an English teacher, a social studies teacher and a biology teacher. After finishing the novel, students created multi-genre projects responding to the story in any way that was meaningful to them. There were paintings, poems, short stories, and critical essays. We packaged them all up and sent them to Wendell Berry along with an invitation to attend the student-organized Sustainability Forum scheduled for the spring. He wrote them a lovely note in response, declining the invitation but thanking them for offering him new and insightful interpretations of *Jayber Crow*.

In the case of this class we did not avoid a discussion of those who lived on this land before the white farm families that they studied. We read a book by John Hanson Mitchell (1984) called *Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile* to open up that conversation, and invited a local tribal leader to share origin stories and talk with the students about what indigenous knowledge of this region entails, what it meant for her people and how it might offer them important insights into their community. Like you, at the time I didn't have the conceptual tools to ask them to interrogate Berry's work fully enough or even enrich Hanson Mitchell's work. I appreciate your fairly gentle but direct insistence that we not overlook these gaps. What else should a pedagogy of responsibility be, if not pressing for these difficult but critical openings in our understanding and relationships?

OK, I have gone on long enough! Well, maybe one more addition: Our friend Steven Mackie has invited me to join him at Prairie Fest, a small gathering at Wes Jackson's Land Institute in Kansas at the end of September. Wendell Berry will be there with his daughter Mary, along with a host of others including David Orr. It couldn't be better timing to meet Wendell Berry. I hope I have the courage to tell him what his work has meant to me, and maybe pose a few difficult questions.

My best to you both! Enjoy the cooling temps as fall arrives.
Rebecca

September 8, 2012

Dear Richard and Rebecca,

Unlike the two of you, I don't have a long history of appreciating Berry's work. Oh, I had read parts of *The Unsettling of America* (1977) and the occasional essay (and Madhu Prakash's 1994 appreciation of Berry), but it was only last year that I started reading his fiction. In *Jayber Crow* (2000b), *Hannah Coulter* (2004) and *Remembering* (2008), I discovered the depth of his attachment to the land, his understanding of the value of "membership" in communities both human and more-than-human, and particularly his humility. I haven't taught any of Berry's work beyond a few choice quotes—though I intend to correct that. Perhaps as a result, I am not at all inclined to be an "outsider critic", in Richard's words, but simply to try to evoke the ways that Berry helps me see EcoJustice in fresh ways.

So let me focus here on the concept of humility as we can learn it from Berry. One place a sense of humility shows up is in Rebecca's quotes from *The Hidden Wound* regarding race. Berry's (1989) work for me has always been characterized by his understanding that he doesn't know it all, and that he can't "transform" or wish away his own complicity in such things as racism, as when he says "Perhaps this is wishful thinking; perhaps such a thing is not to be done by one man, or in one generation. Surely a man would have to be dangerously proud to think himself capable of it" (p. 4).

I think that helps us understand in part his relative lack of attention to the indigenous history on the land. He does mention indigenous peoples in his work, if fleetingly and if largely only in

reference to the distant past. But unlike the lives of African-Americans, those of Native peoples have likely not been part of the world of his interactions, and thus perhaps not something he feels qualified to speak about. I would guess that he would be—or has been—more than willing to acknowledge that limit to his work. But I appreciate Richard’s reminder that the settler mentality is as deeply rooted in rural communities as other, more positive traditions. One small way of challenging that mentality that I have begun is to start classes and other events with an acknowledgement that we are meeting on the unceded land of local Native peoples—in my case the Kalapooya people.

At any rate, this humility is at the heart of so much of his work. When he challenges the arrogance of mainstream science in *Life is a Miracle* (2000a), much of what he is questioning is the assumption that we can understand the complexity of nature enough to control it. We all know the consequences of that dangerous pride.

And his characters, with few exceptions, represent that value of humility. The exceptions, like the expansion-minded farmer Troy Chatham in *Jayber Crow* (2000b) are those who have bought into the “get big or get out” mentality: Grow or die.

Humility is essential to the true conservatism I wrote of before. A true conservatism doesn’t adopt discoveries such as pesticides and fluorocarbons with flagrant disregard for the long-term consequences. A true conservatism doesn’t assume that a society can grow forever. And especially, neither does our conservatism disregard our responsibility to be mindful of the needs of other peoples and other species.

Thinking conservatively, I put “transform” in quotes above because I want to make sure we problematize that word. Chet Bowers has noted that the language of “transformation” is usually part of the deeper discourses of progress and change (Bowers, 1993; 2001; 2006). But here I want to highlight that it hides the fact that changed language doesn’t instantly transform us, let alone our students. Think about how hard it has been for each of us to challenge the discourses of anthropocentrism, individualism and progress in our daily lives and teaching. It’s a long, slow struggle. And it’s a social process—we ourselves have only made the steps we have as a result of engaging with each other in a long-standing conversation. As Berry notes, it’s “dangerously proud” to think we can change things in one generation.

So what does it mean to say that the language of EcoJustice needs to be infused with humility? We need to avoid not just arrogance, but also certainty about things of which we know only a little.

Clearly it suggests that we need to have a sense of patience that is difficult for those of us caught up in this world of on-demand information. I deeply admire Berry’s resistance to computers and email, though I will not be able to give them up anytime soon.

And a humble EcoJustice would insist on gentleness of spirit and of interaction. In contrast, for example, to some “dialogues” between critical pedagogy and EcoJustice that have been characterized by the usual academic bomb-throwing, our dialogues—as exemplified, I believe, by the one here—need to be based on respect. I suspect Berry doesn’t get much worked up about

the limits of critical pedagogy. Neither should we. I hope what we are trying to do here is talk about what's important for the planet and its inhabitants rather than who's got the correct position.

Finally, I need to acknowledge that advocates of humility need to be humble enough to know the limits of humility. Maybe we need a humility of the spirit with a demandingness of the will...sometimes we have to be pushy. Berry himself certainly knows this, as evidenced by his putting himself on the front lines of demonstrations against mountaintop removal.

This has been a much different entry than your previous two, but this is where it went.

Best,
Jeff

September 25, 2012

Dear Jeff and Rebecca,

In closing, let me emphasize that I hope this will be but a beginning for the “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2003) that might emerge on some of the important pedagogical themes that I have heard annunciated in this conversation: The nature of humility, responsibility, and decolonization, of white supremacy as an historical structure and hidden curriculum, the role of storytelling as a convivial tool, the diverse pathways forward for EcoJustice educators in the 21st century and so forth. Thank you again for inviting me to participate in this way. I've really enjoyed this opportunity to raise some matters for the record together with you both, and as I believe is a phrase in Lakota communities: *Na GXee oh wa key tay* (I am looking for my spirit)...something analogical to that is true here.

In the space remaining to me, I would like to pick up especially on this notion of “humility with demands” that Jeff provocatively—and I think right-mindedly—raises for our consideration as an educational virtue. As a social movement theorist and participant, I think of Occupy Wall Street and the streets around the world filled again with a clarion call of voices chanting things like, “Be realistic: Demand the impossible!” I have defended, even urged those voices— additionally within the confines of formal education, which increasingly strikes me as a one-dimensional, instrumental and alienated space that is predicated upon controlling (and not caring for) people. Of course, moments of protest maintain their own rich array of contexts as much as do those of the status quo. Still, the overtly powerful rhetoric of protest often works to push its no less crucial contextual meanings into the background as a kind of avoided curriculum. This can turn movements-as-teachers into a type of hidden curricular force and so creates problems for learning from the social movements as conservators of cognitive praxis, even when the students of the movements are their very own participants! In this way, when read out of context, many protest movements appear to suggest that they act within a salvationist schema and authoritarian logic in which the complex, polysemous and dynamically democratic multiliteracies they in fact maintain become hermeneutically reduced to the static univocity of promethean sloganeering and personality cult mantras.

Movement leaders do not have to be salvationist just because they are charismatic, though. For example, I think of another culture hero of mine that Rebecca mentioned earlier, Ivan Illich. Akin to Berry, Illich was not averse to public demonstrations of pedagogical protest—such as his marching against nuclear weapons. But it was also Illich’s wise lesson that those who would seek meaningful change in society learn, axiomatically as a primary principle even, to self-interrogate their acts as teaching cultural workers. Famously, when running a language institute for missionaries during the 1960s, he told his students, “To hell with good intentions!” (Illich, 1968). He did so because Illich perceived a colonialist mentality in the Eurocentric progressive ethos that would claim its identity through service work for positive change in Latin America and other parts of the “oppressed” world—whether done through the Church, the Peace Corps, or by radical self-styled popular educators all. In contrast, Illich counseled that democratic educators should assume the low position of humbly learning from the people they seek to serve first and foremost—that this is the methodology for community-based change consonant with demands for justice and peace (or what we today have come to call “sustainability”).

Importantly, for me as a teacher and student within the tradition of critical pedagogy, the virtue of humility outlined by Illich is to be found in no less of an iconic text than Paulo Freire’s (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—a book I recognize that has been portrayed by some critics as itself a salvationist work. However, it should be remembered in this context that Illich himself not only helped Freire to publish the book, but that its ideas were born (in part anyhow) of the very community that Illich had helped to gather around him in Cuernavaca, Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s. That is, Freire was specifically a member of this conversational community and we know him in America only because of and through it. Thus, it is not surprising to see Freire (2000) say something like, “Dialogue also hinges upon humility...How could I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own” (p. 90). When Freire says this, I hear Illich in the background, and the contextual cultural politics of anti-imperialist decolonization movements further back still.

My point here is not to argue with Freire’s critics. I bring all this up now only to elucidate my own critical pedagogical theories of ecopedagogy. In my work, I have attempted to argue that academics and other elites need to recognize that it is often inaccurate to portray social movements as ideological vanguard agents. Rather, they should generally be perceived to be working iconically as *the people speaking*. As such, social movements for sustainability deserve to be listened to with humility. On the other hand, though, I also believe that those in the movements themselves (as well as their intellectual supporters) must equally remember that under our present political conditions—which I analyze as what Freire termed a manufactured “culture of silence” (Shor & Freire, 1987)—movements do in fact often take a relatively advanced political position in speaking out before/for others. In this way, they can easily position themselves as alienated beyond the people with whom they are supposedly in conversation. This radically democratic leadership contradiction can only be resolved to the degree that, in speaking, social movements remain vigilantly and humbly aware of those not in the space with them, of those in the space who are silent, or of those who despite their attempts to speak are ironically outcompeted by fellow activists due to the achieved volume or amplitude of their particular voices.

This is the reason that earlier in our exchange, despite my great esteem for Wendell Berry, I chose to articulate my concern about the ways in which his work potentially contributes to a settler colonialist imaginary. I don't think that any of the three of us have a problem reminding ourselves that we are privileged white voices in a white supremacist academic industrial complex. Further, I think you two have also done a fine job here in pointing out that, whatever limitations Berry's writings may reveal about the place of Indigenous peoples in the history of this society and land, he is decidedly far from insensitive to the problems of race or of his being a white Southerner in his writing or practical activities. Still, by responsibly demonstrating that we undertake pedagogical work that is committed to being decolonial and antiracist, I think we best perform the kind of humility that is presently necessary. Now, in the case of white academics and other legitimated literati, this performed humility I see as largely symbolic and not sufficient in itself, yet necessary all the same. In other words, the presentation of humbling one's racially hegemonic and related cultural privilege isn't itself a solution of anything, but its absence (when such occurs) may significantly represent irresponsible forms of leadership at work.

I wish, then, that Wendell Berry had—akin to Sartre's Nobel performance—refused the honor of receiving the 2010 National Humanities Medal, or had been more overt about Indigenous histories as part of his (to my mind, very welcome) social diatribe in the 2012 Jefferson Lecture that he gave for the National Endowment for the Humanities. If only he would reconsider and take up Madhu Prakash's challenge of writing an open letter to President Obama demanding \$5 billion in support of the small-scale farmers, or even the \$50 million that could serve as the economic basis of the 50-year Farm Bill that he helped to draft with Wes Jackson and Fred Kirschenmann (Berry & Prakash, 2011), instead of simply saying that as a progressive he will unquestioningly vote for Obama again! (Miller, 2012). But I respect also Berry's choice to be inclusively honored by the establishment as a maverick voice—and not just this, but as we have already noted, that he has a long history of engaging in direct action protests. This is a protest writer who walks his talk. Additionally, I respect and value that Berry's identity is not in being a leader who seeks to be measured by his acts of protest and the demands for reform on behalf of the people and land. Rather, Berry's work has to be seen as congruent with a radical pedagogical tradition of humility that suggests leadership is democratically omnipresent, and everywhere to be related to in delightful community. I think what I am calling leadership, then, he simply calls "health:"

Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health. And what our society does its best to disguise from us is how ordinary, how commonly attainable, health is. We lose our health—and create profitable diseases and dependencies—by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. In gardening, for instance, one works with the body to feed the body. The work, if is knowledgeable, makes for excellent food. And it makes one hungry. The work makes eating both nourishing and joyful, not consumptive, and keeps the eater from getting fat and weak. This health, wholeness, is a source of delight (as cited in hooks, 2008, p. 40).

With this in mind, those interested in sustainability education might learn from someone like Wendell Berry that it does not entail a curriculum fashioned and regulated by experts

on high. Nor does it require the governmentality of compulsory institutionalization by standardizing authorities. Such initiatives represent a biopolitical division of the Earth's labor force. Alternatively, what I have called the "New Science of the Multitude" (Fassbinder, Nocella & Kahn, 2012; Kahn, 2010) has instead to do with learning that a decolonial historical slogan such as "All power to the people" speaks really to the mysterious wellspring of health readily available across all facets of the planetary community. The people's power is rooted in and belongs to our earthly communities—and when we respond to it in this way, I think we find that such community power is characterized almost unfailingly by a resilient, revitalizing, and gracious nature. Therefore, I think the last thing we need in dark times such as we now inhabit is a Deficit Theory of Everything...especially one that functions in the name of "sustainable development." Rather, we should look everywhere for (and be) candles in the dark: foxfires.

I look forward to your closing thoughts and ongoing conversations.

Shanti,
Richard

September 30, 2012

Dear Richard and Jeff,

Well, we are coming to the close of our conversation, at least as far as this publication goes. I hope it's just the beginning. Richard, you've offered a very complex set of analyses here, a lot to chew on, and certainly more than we can do at this point, given the word count limits. I want to offer just a thought or two as we wrap this up, mostly by offering more from Wendell Berry. I invited you both into this discussion and I'd like to thank you for bringing your friendship, care, and thoughtfulness to this exchange.

If I had more space I would want to dig into this discussion on humility that Jeff raises, and the dangers of a "salvationist" or rescuer mentality that Richard mentions. I don't have much space so I will just say this. For me, leadership in a movement like the one in which we three share membership comes from the willingness to work on *ourselves* first, as an ongoing, complicated cultural, material, and psychological process. I believe that we are products of a deep and ongoing cultural crisis. As soon as we begin to imagine that we are in "the vanguard," or somehow out in front of the response, we probably need to stop short and rethink what historically embedded metaphors and socio-symbolic system creates such an identity or desire. I'm writing to you on the way home from the Land Institute's Prairie Festival. In the last talk of the weekend, Wes Jackson articulated a powerful historical analysis of the cultural underpinnings of the Green Revolution, referring to the idea of "manifest destiny" that first rationalized the violent removal of the Native peoples from the land they had inhabited for centuries, and then, by turn, devastated the small farmers who resettled it, and eventually led to the sense of "progress" that has driven the current production model of conventional agriculture.

Talking about this underlying system and its historical legacy, he looked up, opened his arms and said, “Folks, we are IN IT.”

Thinking back to our earlier exchange in this conversation about Berry’s capture in a settler colonialism and then hearing Jackson’s talk, I decided to go back to Berry’s early work, *The Unsettling of America* first published in 1977, and reprinted in *The Art of the Commonplace* (2001). What I find there is an important analysis of a discursive process that has saturated our relationships and words, and assumptions and actions. Naming it a “cultural crisis,” he writes,

...in general [the Indians’] relation to place was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, veneration. The land was their homeland. The first and greatest American revolution, which has never been superseded, was the coming of people who did not look upon the land as their homeland. ...Time after time, place after place, these conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities. . . . They have always said that what they destroyed was outdated, provincial and contemptible...

If there is any law that has been consistently operative in American history, it is that the members of any *established* people or group or community sooner or later become "redskins"—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation. The colonists who drove off the Indians came to be intolerably exploited by their imperial governments. And that alien imperialism was thrown off only to be succeeded by a domestic version of the same thing; the class of independent small farmers who fought the war of independence has been exploited by, and recruited into, the industrial society until by now it is almost extinct. . . .
(Berry, 2001, p. 36)

Although he does not go into a lot of detail of what happened to native peoples, I really appreciate that he sees an underlying cultural problem at the heart of that violence, and a whole series of subsequent exploitations rationalized by the reproduction of the same discursive and material history. True, the focus of his work is primarily on small farmers and the crisis for communities, agriculture, and the land that has resulted. But, he sees it as one piece of a much larger cultural problem, and that’s what I think is so powerful in his work. He goes on:

The only escape from this destiny of victimization has been to "succeed"—that is, to "make it" into the class of exploiters, and then to remain so specialized and so "mobile" *as to be unconscious of the effects of one's life or livelihood*. This escape is, of course, illusory, for one man's producer is another's consumer, and even the richest and most mobile will soon find it hard to escape the noxious effluents and fumes of their various public services. (Berry, 2001, p. 36; emphasis added)

Like both of you, I worry about our particular academic version of “making it” via our personal successes in these movements, especially what it means if we believe ourselves to be “speaking for the people.” Jeff’s discussion of humility and Richard’s mention of how Illich, in particular, turned that idea of on its head by insisting that we learn from the people we may assume to be

“serving” are important reminders. And, it seems to me that that is the other part of our work: opening ourselves to ideas and visions—often from the least expected places—that could help us to shift the perilous situation we are facing, and asking or inviting our students to do the same. This really means opening our imaginations out past the stuck spots of the discourses that we live in.

On this point, I want to close with one last quote from Wendell Berry’s (2012) Jefferson Lecture, *It All Turns on Affection*. I apologize for the length, but I think the whole thing is important for what we’ve been discussing here:

The term “imagination” in what I take to be its truest sense refers to a mental faculty that some people have used and thought about with the utmost seriousness. The sense of the verb “to imagine” contains the full richness of the verb “to see.” To imagine is to see most clearly, familiarly, and understandingly with the eyes, but also to see inwardly, with “the mind’s eye.” It is to see, not passively, but with a force of vision and even with visionary force. To take it seriously we must give up at once any notion that imagination is disconnected from reality or truth or knowledge. It has nothing to do either with clever imitation of appearances or with “dreaming up.” It does not depend upon one’s attitude or point of view, but grasps securely the qualities of things seen or envisioned.

I will say, from my own belief and experience, that imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place. By that local experience we see the need to grant a sort of preemptive sympathy to all the fellow members, the neighbors, with whom we share the world. As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy. (p. 14)

I will leave it there, with the hope and security that our affection continues to deepen, and with it the possibilities for more conversations toward “delightful” and flourishing friendship and community.

All my best,
Rebecca

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