

McCarty, Teresa L. (2002). *A Place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the struggle for self-determination in indigenous schooling.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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**Reviewed by Walter E. Shepherd
Arizona State University, Tempe**

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This book springs from a remarkable event of the turbulent 1960s. A small group of Navajos in the high desert of Northeastern Arizona set out to run their own school. Anyone who does not already know why that is remarkable must read this book. And, of course, those who do know will want to read it as well. The author, Teresa L. McCarty, who is at this moment acting dean of the College of Education at the University of Arizona in Tucson, calls it a "critical life history" (p. xv) in which she intends to raise "issues of Indigenous identity, voice, and community empowerment." And she does not stop at that sort of discovery, but hopes also "to apply principles of social justice to build a more just social world." (p. xviii)

The life in question is not that of an individual but of a community, a community that is firmly rooted in a particular place, a shared history, and a common language. That place—from the microscopic to the panoramic—has enchanted photographers and artists for generations (The photos by Fred Bia, as well as the historic snapshots sprinkled throughout the text, almost certainly have suffered greatly in the printing process rendering many important features indiscernible.) Clearly the Navajos, living in small and isolated family camps are people of this immense and beautiful place. As to their history, McCarty touches only briefly on the pre-Anglo years; choosing to begin this modern narrative in earnest with the surrender to U.S. troops at Fort Defiance and the subsequent long walk to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, 300 miles away. From that beginning, she highlights abuses of early government agents, BIA schooling, an outrageous—and probably illegal—Federal livestock reduction program, and a government bureaucracy that may be unparalleled in the free world.

The Navajo language is given special attention by the author, a feature of the book that some readers may find rather tedious or at least unnecessary. But interviews were conducted in Navajo and laboriously translated, checked, and

re-checked by Navajo linguists. While there are no linguistic discussions in the text, there are many tantalizing hints at a wonderful world that lies just out of reach for the reader who does not know Navajo. For example, early child development in Navajo offers two different expressions translated "becoming aware" (p. 22) one for speaking of surroundings and another for speaking of self. It seems that the transition from child to adult is marked by a point "when one's thought begins existing." (p. 35) There is also the little summary that seems—to this non-Navajo—to complete a short narrative, phrases like: "And that is how we lived with them." (p. 26), or "Those things I became aware of." (p. 27), or "That is how it is." (p. 35)

In chapter two, "People, Place, and Ethnographic Texts," McCarty clarifies her own reasoning as she wrestles with the ethnographer's craft. She makes no apology for her personal involvement:

In the course of this long-term work, my family and I established lifelong friendships with many people at Rough Rock. I long ago stepped "over the line" between researcher—writer and friend—a line that is, I believe, artificial and obstructive to long-term ethnographic and applied research and that, at any rate, would have been impossible to sustain with this small, kin-centered community. (p. 3)

Throughout the book, the friendship and trust between the researchers and the interviewees is apparent. And it seems clear that that trust has resulted in narratives that are more complete representations of "how it was" than would otherwise have been possible. In reading this book, it is important to bear that in mind since the climax which comes in chapter 8, "The Problems and Politics of Program Evaluation," offers a dramatic contrast between McCarty's work and the work of a professional evaluator, Donald Erickson, hired in 1968 to do a six month study. (p. 101)

Ernest House (1980 p. 250) described the "triple validity demands" that face the evaluator of "a public program for an external audience." where a "failure in any one of the three areas invalidates the evaluation." McCarty argues that Erickson's evaluation failed in all three; it was neither true, nor credible, nor right. She challenges the tone in which it was written and its claim of objectivity. It must be noted, however, that her interest in the evaluation incident lies not with the evaluator but in its effect on the Navajo Demonstration School. Similarity to other abuses of 150 years is hard to miss: Anglo evaluation of a new, and effective program created for Navajos, by Navajos is like livestock reduction, where distant bureaucrats decide that we have too many sheep so they slaughter them and leave our children to starve. It validates Navajo perceptions that go all the way back to the long walk to Fort Sumner.

By the end of the 1960s, when the Rough Rock experiment had earned acclaim all the way to Washington, D.C., the true hegemonic nature of

bureaucracy began to reveal itself. Responding to the remarkable early success, the Rough Rock school board approached the BIA for funds to build a high school. The BIA responded—as school bureaucracies tend to do—that a neighboring school had empty seats and that Rough Rock should send students there for the time being. The Rough Rock school board, convinced that they were doing something quite different from other schools, refused and set about finding funds on their own. For the next twenty-some years the financial entanglements, showed very clearly how "The rhetoric of self-determination was and is betrayed by a Federal bureaucracy tethered to a colonial system of patronage and control." (p. 128)

The next section of the book brings the Rough Rock Community School up to the present day. There are still important issues centering on bilingual education, curriculum, and accreditation, not to mention self-determination. The forces of conformity are subtle, and funding, evaluation, and accreditation which are all from outside the Navajo community, all make it very difficult to do schooling in creative, new ways.

One of McCarty's Navajo friends said:

Education should be 'based on experience' with the development of children's language embedded in Navajo culture—'like a weaving, where everything is interwoven and forms a pattern.'
(p. 75 Ruth Wheeler Roessel)

That simile could be applied as well to this book. The principal color is self-determination, the contrasting threads from one direction are Navajo culture, language and history, from the other, the Anglos, bureaucrats and other outside forces such as modern transportation and communication. The pattern that emerges is an image of a Navajo people that are very different from their ancestors. That seems inevitable. It also seems unnecessary to point out that that is true of all of us.

There's something deeply troubling about this book. McCarty did make it clear that she intended to raise "issues of Indigenous identity, voice, and community empowerment," and that she hoped also "to apply principles of social justice to build a more just social world." Let's consider just the notion of justice.

If we teach Anglo children in middle-class suburban schools about life on the Navajo reservation, and if we discover the means to turn them into benevolent, compassionate adults, will the Navajos whose voices speak with such clarity throughout this book have any reason to expect justice? Certainly not. If the earliest Commissioners of Indian Affairs sought to "break down the *prejudices* of tribe among the Indians," (p. 40, emphasis added.) their intention, however wrong-headed, would have been to bring peace and prosperity by fitting the Indians for some rôle in Anglo society. Consider this. A family, descended from many generations of Navajos, lives quietly in the old way, in the ancestral home. They tend their sheep, and mark the milestones in their lives

with the ancient ceremonies. If they appear at all in the Anglo data banks—e.g., the census—they are impoverished, deprived, uneducated, Limited English Proficient, etc., in short, a problem to be solved. The deliberations of Anglos who wonder what to do about them mean, *ipso facto*, that justice cannot be done. As long as society's benefits are defined someplace else, and then measured out as an after-thought—crumbs from the banquet table—they cannot be just. Even benevolence and compassion that come to you at the discretion of someone else may be little more than a reminder of power that is theirs and not yours.

A family that awakens one morning to discover that the world has changed around them must wrestle with unforeseen, even terribly sad, problems. Benevolent outsiders can offer encouragement, patience, and material aid, but the *decisions* must be theirs alone. The most shameful feature of "A Place to be Navajo" is revealed in the subtitle: "...the Struggle for Self-Determination..." Americans, of all people, should know about self-determination; why must some of us still struggle?

Reference

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About the Reviewer

Walter E. Shepherd
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

Email: shepherd@asu.edu

Walter E. Shepherd, a teacher of French and German who retired as a high school assistant principal, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Education Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University.