

Encounter: The Educational Metamorphoses of Jane Roland Martin

An Interview by Leonard J. Waks

Although it is something of a cliché, it must be said: Jane Roland Martin needs no introduction to readers of *Education & Culture*. She has been a dominant figure in philosophy of education for almost half a century. Her work, marked by a rare combination of analytical precision, philosophical imagination, social responsibility and natural charm, has deservedly reached a wide audience and has influenced the selection and treatment of many topics taken up by others for further study.

Jane has always been a philosophical scout, peering beyond contemporary discourses, discovering new territories and new ways of exploring them. Younger readers may possibly think of Jane in terms of such recent contributions as the “cultural wealth” perspective on curriculum introduced in her 1995 DeGarmo Lecture, and further developed in her 1996 John Dewey Lecture, “Cultural Miseducation:



In Search of a Democratic Solution.”¹ Most will associate Jane with the introduction of hotly contested issues related to the education of women, and of feminist themes and methods, into philosophy of education during the 1980s.² Older readers, however, may still think of Jane as one of the pioneer analytical philosophers of education.³ While analytical philosophy of education may seem pretty “old hat” today, in the 1950s and early 1960s philosophical analysis was a radical innovation in philosophy of education, and one no more welcomed by the old guard than feminism was in the early 1980s.

Although I have been listening to Jane speak for more than forty years at various conferences and in one-to-one conversations, I still look forward to her talks, knowing that she will be provocative and will be breaking new ground. I

also love the way she presents her ideas. In approaching any topic she seems to fill a large box with illustrative cases and anecdotes, and she has an uncanny knack of pulling one of these out of the box and slipping it into her argument at just the right moment.

So I was very pleased to have the opportunity to talk with her about her new book, *Educational Metamorphoses*, where she once again opens up a large—and largely neglected—topic, the role of education in major “whole-person” transformations, and once again has a large collection of illustrative cases at hand. I visited Jane at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts on January 17, 2007. As we spoke I took notes, and after sending her a first draft of the interview, we communicated by email to clarify a few additional points. On behalf of the editors of *Education & Culture* I wish to thank Jane for accepting our invitation to be interviewed, and for being a gracious hostess and sparkling conversationalist.

I.

LJW: Jane, your new book is called Educational Metamorphoses,⁴ and if I could summarize the important themes, they are (1) that life is a series of metamorphoses, or as you also call them, “whole-person transformations,” (2) that education is essentially involved in these transformations, and (3) that these personal transformations (except for the first, the transformation from “creature of nature” to “creature of culture”) are also “culture-crossings,” that is, passages from one culture to another. So can we start with the key concepts? What do you mean by metamorphoses or whole-person transformations?

JRM: I mean “a total change of being.” I started out using the phrase “whole-person transformations,” But I saw that people could take this to mean that every single thing about a person changes, and I didn’t mean that. In these transformations some underlying traits may endure. Think of Dewey’s idea about “teaching the whole child,” where he meant teaching not just the mind, but also the body and the emotions. By “whole person” I have in mind a whole way of being—walking, talking, eating, dressing, and the like. So by “whole-person metamorphoses” I mean changes in just this sense.

LJW: And what do you take the role of education to be in these changes?

JRM: Well, it’s different in every case. And it can be for the good or for the bad. Education doesn’t always shape a person for the good. Take the case of Malcolm X. He was a well-behaved little boy in his Michigan all-white school, and the next thing we know he was, by his own admission, a drug addict pimp—all this before becoming a world leader. By the way, I conceive of “education” very broadly to include things that philosophers of education have tended to exclude: training, conditioning, the ways people acquire habits. And I take all institutions of society—not just school—to be educational agents.

LJW: And why do you call these changes “culture-crossings”? What notion of “culture” is involved here?

JRM: The idea of culture-crossing came to me about halfway through writing the book when I came across the case of the Inuit boy Minik. Brought to New York City by explorer Robert Peary, he was transformed from a child of the Polar North to an all-American boy. Like other immigrants, his personal transformation was also a culture-crossing. And I began to realize that in being transformed from a flower girl into a lady, Eliza Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* also moves from one culture, a social class culture, to another and in the process learns a new way of walking, talking, eating, dressing and the like. So my sense of “culture” is like the cultural anthropologist’s sense.

LJW: Thanks, Jane. Now that we understand these basic ideas, let’s explore some of your central themes. Despite your emphasis on a very broad notion of education, a surprising number of your cases turn out to be about learning the 3 Rs, about formal learning, learning words and language. The accounts of Malcolm in prison, Yentl in the Yeshiva, Mark Mathabane and Minik at school, Ildefonso learning sign language, Rita at the university—all of these and more are about learning in a sense specific to schools and colleges. Do you think that’s just an accident, or does it reflect something deeply human about longing specifically for language mastery?

JRM: Ildefonso’s learning a first language is not actually an instance of school learning. But you are getting at the heart of a question I haven’t yet answered. Do all educational metamorphoses turn on language? I really fought that idea. Yet although the story I tell at the beginning of this book has a great deal to do with social class, it is nevertheless about a young man who quit college because he was becoming unable to *talk* to his friends. The strong emphasis in the book on language, the fact that so many of these stories *did* have to do with language, was a discovery I didn’t necessarily like. I don’t know if it is something of an accident, if these were the stories that spoke deeply to *me*, or if it is something more basic.

LJW: Turning to another theme, in asserting the great, life-shaping power of education, you are in effect denying the Romantic conception of education—the idea that everyone is born with a “true inner self” that presses for exteriorization regardless of circumstances. Yet this sort of Romantic language keeps coming up in your stories; at the end of their transformations, many of your subjects say something like “Now I am my true self!” So do you feel some sort of ambivalence about the Romantic conception?

JRM: Of course I am arguing against that part of the Romantic strain in educational thought, even though I also identify in some ways with that strain. I have great sympathy for Rousseau’s *pedagogy*, if not A.S. Neill’s. But theoretically I think it is most important to recognize that education *is* a powerful force in shaping lives—for the good and for the bad. Many Nazi leaders were highly educated. From a social policy perspective it is important to recognize that education can be

harmful, so that we are motivated to take some kind of preventive action. There is so much that is miseducative in the culture, even forgetting for the moment about bad schools, TV, the Internet, and computer games—these are educational agents that pass down cultural liabilities to children and people of all ages.

LJW: Can we stay with this for just a moment? There was a story a couple of years ago in The New Yorker about a Turkish rug dealer. Rug experts everywhere defer to him; a curator at one of the great museums said he had the visual and tactile equivalent of a musician's perfect pitch. The dealer himself says that the moment he saw his first oriental rug he knew that "this was it" for him. Do you think there may be people like this, whose natural gifts seem to determine the course of their lives, regardless of external educative influences?

JRM: Well, I guess when people say "this is it" you have to look at them twenty years later and see what they are doing then. It may be something quite different, and you have to ask yourself whether that is any "truer" to themselves than what they said was "it" or their "true self" twenty years earlier. I'm very skeptical of this Romantic notion of a "true self." But of course I'm not skeptical that people *feel* or *think* that they have a true self and that they have discovered it.

LJW: Well, are they just wrong? Or confused? Or could they be on to something?

JRM: Well, as I said earlier, people do have enduring traits. I am always asking myself what would have happened to Mozart if he had never heard music while he was young. I don't want to deny the power of genes but I don't believe that they by themselves equal destiny.

The problem with this Romantic talk is that our culture has latched onto the idea of each person having a "true self." This leads to a dualism of "true self/false self," and makes it hard to talk in other, more discriminating ways. Like other dualisms, it can be hard to work our way through this one.

While writing this book, some friends have been skeptical, saying that "people never change." Get this. One said to me, "I'm the same person I always was," and in the next breath his wife said, "What are you talking about—you've gone through three total transformations since I married you!" Another friend went through one of those "trainings" and said to me, "It totally transformed me." Her husband responded, "No, it didn't!" The moral of these stories is that you can't rely on first-person narrators. You want to honor their accounts, but they are sometimes very wrong and sometimes simply devious. If they've invested a lot in an experience, people want to believe that the changes brought about have been really large. And in such disagreements, the people may simply be focusing on different aspects of the self.

LJW: Let's explore the idea of a personal metamorphosis as a cultural crossing. Do you think of transformations like Minik's, which stranded him, so to speak, between two worlds, as incomplete metamorphoses—unfulfilled strivings after a new, synthetic

unity? Or do you think of even these as complete metamorphoses in themselves? To put this question another way, do you think that in some metamorphoses there simply is no way of getting to there from here—no synthesis to be achieved, so that the change is not a culture-crossing but a move from one culture into cultural disorganization of the self?

JRM: Well, Minik went back to the North not because of some theoretically impossible cultural synthesis, but because terrible things happened to him in New York. So let's think of this question in relation to academics from working-class backgrounds. They all undergo transformations as they learn to fit into the university culture. Some of them, nonetheless, still carry a lot of working-class culture with them, while others don't, and some even say they have *forgotten* their old selves. Some can't wait to get out of the working class. They go back home only for weddings and funerals. Others seem completely changed, but still say they want "the best of both worlds." Others succeed professionally but never quite fit in socially. So there is quite a range of cases, but they all involve both personal metamorphosis and culture-crossing.

II.

LJW: Jane, now let's discover how well this framework applies to you and your own metamorphoses. What personal transformations have you undergone? How has your education contributed to them? And how did they involve the crossing of cultures? Can we start at the beginning, with where you were born and raised?

JRM: I was raised on the West Side in Manhattan. In those days there was a real difference between the West and East Sides, and the East Side, or at least a part of it, was the wealthy side. My mother was a school teacher (homemaking) at the Elizabeth Barrett Browning Jr. High School in the Bronx. My father was a newspaperman, and over the years he worked on several papers, but during most of the time I was growing up he was on the *Journal American*.

LJW: Was there a culture of journalism and journalists in New York at that time?

JRM: My father never called himself a "journalist"—the word struck him as pretentious. He majored in English at the University of Wisconsin and never went to journalism school. Actually, I don't think there were any in his day. He called himself a "newspaperman" or "an old-time reporter." He reported on the gangster trials of the 1930s, the airplane hitting the Empire State Building, John Glenn's journey in space. He was madly in love with his life on the paper, and he always told me, "You have to do something you love."

LJW: Did he ever talk about his teachers?

JRM: One of his favorite teachers at Wisconsin was the philosopher Horace Kallen. Amazingly enough, when I was born, Horace Kallen started a savings account for

me. He wanted my father to go on in philosophy, but my father knew from an early age that he wanted to work on a newspaper and then write a great novel. After my father died I found a college paper he wrote for Kallen (he got an A).

Some of my parents' closest friends were writers, and the talk when they visited was often about writing and publishing—especially about how awful publishers were!

LJW: Sounds like a very verbal culture.

JRM: It was. My parents were also geniuses at word games, anagrams, crossword puzzles.

LJW: Were your parents also participants in the school teachers' culture?

JRM: Not really, although my mother had a lot of teacher friends and often complained about “110 Livingston Street” (the address of the New York Board of Education) and the corruption and meanness of the “system.”

LJW: Did they complain about the schools you attended?

JRM: Not at all. I went to The Little Red School House, a progressive private school in Greenwich Village that had Kilpatrick and Dewey on the board. It had started as an experiment in the public school system, but when it was slated to be closed (this was before I attended), the parents got together and saved it. One parent, a butcher with three kids, said he'd pay to keep it going, and then other parents joined in. They wanted it to be a model for public schools, with low tuition, large classes, a wide range of students, and an anti-racist curriculum. It was *heaven!*

LJW: Well, did going to this school prompt a metamorphosis? Wasn't the school just an extension of your home, rather than a new “culture” you had to move into?

JRM: It may not have been a new culture, but it was a very formative experience for me and everyone else who went there. And it was an experience I rejected for a long time afterwards.

LJW: What about it did you reject?

JRM: I went to both elementary school and high school at The Little Red Schoolhouse, and if it had had a college, I would have gone to that too. But it didn't, so I went to Radcliffe. And that was a culture shock! At The Little Red Schoolhouse we didn't even have tests. In the first week's orientation at Radcliffe we were just herded from one place to another like cattle. Nothing like that had ever happened to me. They gave us placement tests. So this was a new culture.

At one of these tests the person sitting next to me turned and asked, “Did you come out?” I didn't know what she meant, and it isn't what you might guess today, either. She meant, was I a debutante? had I come out into society? So there was that upper-class element, and that was a different culture, too.

But mostly it was the conservatism of the other students. The Little Red Schoolhouse was very politically attuned. In high school I hadn't been one of the political activists, but Radcliffe stimulated a more political side of me because I found this conservatism shocking!

But the exams, the grades, and the fact that my college friends worried about their grades—that was the most important change, and that's why I turned against my school. I had to take French because I didn't fulfill the high school language requirement. I didn't know how to write exams. I was very, very unprepared for college. I started to internalize Radcliffe's high academic standards and came to think "that's how school *should* be."

I majored in government. Three of us frequently studied together, and one of the others had gone to Girls' Latin. One day we were studying for finals by writing out answers to old essay exams, and when I showed her my answer she said, "Jane, this is terrible!" And then she showed me what you had to do to write a good essay exam. If I could learn overnight how to write an essay exam, then what is the point of spending so many years teaching students how to do it? But the irony is, it was years before I really grasped that point. I was still rejecting The Little Red Schoolhouse until the radical school reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s, yet I had learned so many valuable things there.

LJW: Things that really do take time to learn?

JRM: Right. For instance that thinking, that intellectual work, should be related to society!

LJW: Would you say that in your Radcliffe years you underwent a metamorphosis, a whole-person transformation? I take it that you did not become a debutante. Most of the other changes you mention are intellectual.

JRM: I'm not sure how much really happened at Radcliffe and how much happened in graduate school. The main thing is, I didn't find anything I loved at Radcliffe but did in graduate school.

After college I taught first at a private, then at a public school, for a total of three years. While teaching I enrolled for a master's degree at the Harvard School of Education, because if you had your master's you got more money. I went part-time while teaching and when I had one course left to go, a good friend told me to take a course with Israel Scheffler, because "analytic philosophy is the key to everything!"

So I went to Israel Scheffler and he put me into a reading course, along with three other students. He assigned me book 6 of John Stuart Mill's *Logic* and a biography of Mill. That's all I remember reading. And on that basis I decided to go back to school to get my doctorate. At the time I was teaching fifth grade and I was totally disillusioned with the school situation. My complaints were not like my mother's; they were not about the administration. My complaint was the curriculum, the "lock step" public school curriculum. I wasn't allowed to teach the smarter

kids more. I would go home and try to revise the curriculum but I realized that I needed to know more in order to do so in any meaningful way.

But before I knew it, I had been sufficiently transformed into an analytical philosopher that I couldn't even remember that I had ever wanted to reform the curriculum. My "new self" only wanted to understand the logic of historical explanation!

At about that time Scheffler's *The Language of Education* came out. And there it was: *A teaches B to C*. I had "found" myself.

While Scheffler was teaching analytical philosophy of education at Harvard, B. O. Smith was teaching analytical philosophy of education at Illinois. I was on the board of the *Harvard Educational Review* and one day a paper by Robert Ennis arrived about whether schools could be neutral. The other board members read it and said, "This is ridiculous!" But I spent an entire meeting explaining to them why it wasn't, and they finally accepted it, maybe just to appease me. Then I got a letter from Ennis, inviting me to contribute to a book he was editing with B. O. Smith.⁵ He had seen the paper in the *Philosophical Review* on "knowing how and knowing that" that I had written for one of Scheffler's classes and he asked me to revise it for their book so as to show the educational significance of my analysis. I didn't have a *clue* about how it could have any educational significance and he had to help me out.

The next thing that happened was that Scheffler told me to go to the PES meeting being held at Ohio State to find a job. There was at that time a small group of analytical philosophers, just about everyone in the Smith and Ennis volume, and they had a hard time getting on the PES program, so they read papers to one another in someone's room. Ennis introduced me to them all and I remember sitting on the floor in a hotel or possibly a dorm room while someone read a paper. Analytical philosophy of education was at that time a real "counterculture," and because of my contacts with Ennis, I was welcomed into the group.

But there was one important difference. There was only one other woman in that group. So long as I could "pass" as an analytical philosopher I was "one of the boys." But I wasn't really one of the boys. The fact that I was a woman made it a whole different ball game. I didn't realize any of this at the time. If I had been told that it had anything to do with my being a woman, I would have rejected the idea. But analytical philosophy of education, like philosophy itself, was a male culture. Almost all the individuals were men. The men invited one another to their campuses to give seminars and lectures, but they never invited me. I wondered why not and whether there was something wrong with me. And the work itself, the subject matter discussed, was gendered, although I didn't realize this either. There were many topics you just didn't talk about, like those related to domestic life.

LJW: Well, what was your culture-crossing in this situation? You didn't become a boy!

*JRM: No, feminism came along. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published around the time my son Tim was born, in 1963. We were living in Boulder, Colorado,*

in faculty housing. That book attacked the popular idea that women could only find fulfillment through childbearing and homemaking. And it spoke to me *so* strongly. I told my husband, Mike, how I felt, and he responded by using analytical philosophy on what I was saying, and I started to cry. That was the last time he ever did so!

In 1971 I went to the Radcliffe Institute as a scholar and that year my transformation into a feminist began. But philosophy of education and feminism remained two separate, parallel worlds for me. I was a feminist and a philosopher, but not a feminist philosopher.

I joined the philosophy department at the University of Massachusetts, Boston in 1972. Not too many years later a colleague in another department asked me to do research on women. For several years I resisted. True, I helped develop a course in our department on philosophy and feminism, but someone else taught it. Interestingly enough, Mike was teaching an adult extension course in the philosophy of education and had already used some feminist literature in it. So he got there first!

What finally happened is that one semester in the late 1970s I was scheduled to teach philosophy of history but the course did not have enough students. And so I said, “Okay, I’ll teach the philosophy and feminism course.” And I never looked back.

Then when I was president-elect of PES in 1980, I knew I wanted my presidential address to be about women and the state of the discipline: not women in the philosophy profession, but the status of women in the intellectual content of the field. Fortunately for me, the Bunting Institute (formerly the Radcliffe Institute) was giving fellowships for basic research on women and education and I received one. My object was to write my presidential address but in that one year I actually wrote four papers on the place of women in educational thought. I also met many scholars doing research on women and gender and found that I had more in common with them than with anyone else. And I was invited, for the first time, to visit campuses to speak—women started inviting me.

LJW: So Jane goes through a metamorphosis, crosses from culture A to culture B. I don’t imagine the folks in culture A really liked that.

JRM: No, some leading analytic philosophers said that what I was doing was not real philosophy of education. Others said it was just very bad philosophy, that in writing about women I was essentializing, even harming, them. Taking Plato’s position that sex or gender is a difference that doesn’t make a difference, and that to draw attention to it is dangerous to women, some even presented themselves as the *real* feminists. At first it was men who said these things and then some women joined in and attacked my work as essentialist and classist and even racist!

III.

LJW: Jane, where is your work taking you now? What is the next metamorphosis we can expect?

JRM: I am writing a new book, and I couldn't have taken it on without first having written *Educational Metamorphoses*. My work seems to follow a spiral path based on previous work.

After writing *Reclaiming the Conversation*⁶ some people asked me what I meant when I said we have to give what I there called “the reproductive processes of society” their due. *The Schoolhome*⁷ was my answer and it took me seven years to write. After *The Schoolhome* was published people asked why I attended to home and school, and not also to church and other cultural institutions. So *Cultural Miseducation*⁸ was my answer to the questions that *The Schoolhome* left hanging. But before I finished *Cultural Miseducation* I wrote *Coming of Age in Academe*.⁹ I had gathered the materials on women in higher education and written two essays on feminist scholarship, so at some point I stopped what I was doing and wrote that book. At the time I thought it was just a distraction, but I don't see it that way any more.

So then I finished *Cultural Miseducation*, where I developed a cultural wealth perspective on education as opposed to an individual perspective. And then I thought, can I combine the two, is there a synthesis? That had to be my next book.

But I had been gathering the case studies I use in *Educational Metamorphoses* for almost 30 years and I decided to see if I could first write these up. Before I knew it, I was writing a serious book on education. I saw this as my second big distraction, but I felt compelled. But instead, it actually prevented *Coming of Age* from being a distraction, because I had used “the immigrant” as a metaphor in *Coming of Age*, and now I could build upon that in *Educational Metamorphoses*.

And now, because of *Educational Metamorphoses*, I have figured out how to combine the two perspectives, and that is the topic of my next book, tentatively called *Education as Change*. The questions left hanging in *Cultural Miseducation* will be addressed in the new book. Because *Educational Metamorphoses* focuses on individuals who undergo transformational change, it leaves open the question of how, exactly, to combine individual and cultural perspectives but it also points toward the answer.

My thesis in *Education as Change* will be that both the individual and the culture are involved in every educational interaction, and in every educational interaction, both the individual and the culture change.

LJW: Jane, thank you so much for a fascinating conversation.

Notes

1. The 1995 DeGarmo Lecture was published as “There's too much to teach: Cultural wealth in an age of scarcity,” *Educational Researcher* 25, 2, 1996, 4–10, 16. The 1996 Dewey Lecture was incorporated in *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution* (Teachers College Press, 2002).

2. See such works as Jane Roland Martin, Bringing women into educational thought, *Educational Theory*, 34(4) (December 1984), 341–353, and Jane Roland

Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: Ideal of the Educated Woman* (Yale University Press, 1987).

3. See, for example, Jane Roland, On knowing how and knowing that, *Philosophical Review*, 67(3) (1958), 379–388; On the reduction of “knowing that” to “knowing how,” in *Language and concepts in education*, Bunnie Othanel Smith and Robert H. Ennis (Eds.) (Rand McNally, 1961); Jane Roland Martin, *Explaining, understanding and teaching* (McGraw Hill, 1970).

4. *Educational metamorphoses: Philosophical reflections on identity and culture*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

5. Smith, B. O. and Ennis, R. H., (Eds.), *Language and concepts in education* (Rand McNally, 1961).

6. *Reclaiming the conversation: The ideal of the educated woman* (Yale University Press, 1985).

7. *The schoolhome: Rethinking schools for changing families* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

8. *Cultural miseducation: In search of a democratic solution* (Teachers College Press, 2002).

9. *Coming of age in academe: Rekindling women’s hopes and reforming the academy* (Routledge, 2000).

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