

Mapping a Terrain for Homeplace

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If the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history, the present epoch will perhaps be obsessed, above all, with spaces.

—Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”

As Claudia Ruitenberg points out in her essay “Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place,” there has been considerable recent interest in place-based education (PBE). She frames PBE as emerging in response to the postmodern condition characterized by rootlessness, instability, displacement, anonymity, and physical and virtual mobility. The dominant perspective of PBE, according to Ruitenberg, is “rooted in phenomenology: it honors and inquires into the lived experiences of embodied beings in particular places and times.” While she admits that PBE may have positive effects — contextualizing knowledge and countering student alienation — she argues that its phenomenological stance puts it at risk of essentializing and sentimentalizing existing localities, relations, and identities; of “re-inscribing notions of innocence and purity” of place, of aiding and abetting “discourses that claim our true selves are inextricably bound up with our homeland or ‘native soil’.”¹

To counter the risks she outlines, Ruitenberg advocates what she terms, following Shaun Gallagher, a radical (as distinguished from a critical) hermeneutics. By this she means that her analysis and prescriptions for PBE will draw on what she understands as the “radical” methodology of Jacques Derrida rather than the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas to deconstruct the focal components of PBE: experience, locality, and community. Within this hermeneutic, experience is found to be mediated rather than disconnected, immediate, and pristine; locality is revealed as connected and contingent; and the apparent “identity and coherence of the community” is shown to be “structurally incomplete and imperfect,” constructed in relation and legitimated through exclusion as well as inclusion.²

Ruitenberg’s radical pedagogy of place, “a pedagogy of place under deconstruction,” would understand locality as proximal, dynamic, and unstable; attend to the way discourse constructs both here and there; map what Foucault called the circulation of power and its instabilities; and acknowledge the contextuality, interdependences, and border zones within larger landscapes in which the idea of “a place” makes sense. Ruitenberg does not offer a developed description of what a radical pedagogy of place would look like in practice. Rather, she provides guidelines for the deconstructive stance that teachers and students should adopt toward curricula that would make the boundaries of localities permeable, and urges the cultivation of “hospitality and openness” characteristic of the postmodern nomad.³

In “Learning (and Leaving) the Comforts of Home: A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace,” Helen Anderson takes up Ruitenberg’s critique of PBE and call for a

“radical pedagogy of place” to advance an argument for “a shifting, polyvocal, radical pedagogy of *homeplace*, looking at how discourses of the “ideal” home and family contribute to the construction and maintenance of systems of oppression.” Her argument, as I understand it, is that the locality of “home” reconceptualized as “homeplace” might be a valuable focus for PBE and, further, that PBE’s pedagogy could be usefully framed by the postmodern practices of nomadism mentioned briefly by Ruitenberg and the world traveling and street-walker theorizing suggested by María Lugones.

It is not clear why Anderson has chosen to modify Ruitenberg’s title, substituting “homeplace” for place. The modifier “home,” as Anderson takes pains to demonstrate, is an ideologically loaded term with rich potential for succumbing to the risks enumerated by Ruitenberg. Is the substitution meant to be a comradely extension or application of Ruitenberg’s analysis? Does it serve to broaden or narrow the focus of PBE? Are all localities to be understood as potential homeplaces? Does homeplace connote some special quality or condition? How does the use of homeplace *in place of place* inform a radical pedagogy?

Anderson draws on Ruitenberg’s guidelines to deconstruct the home as it is idealized in dominant EurAm-ocentric discourses of control in order to “reconceptualize ‘home’ in a way that seeks to avoid reproducing systematic social oppression.” The title of Anderson’s paper — “Learning (and Leaving) the Comforts of Home: A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace” — implies that this reconceptualization will involve abandoning “home” for “homeplace;” that the term “homeplace” has the heuristic potential to signify a humanizing space that cherishes and nurtures multiplicity, inclusion, and equality. However, Anderson weakens her case by sometimes confounding home and homeplace or using them interchangeably. A fuller delineation of both the distinctions and connections between the terms and the qualities they represent would strengthen Anderson’s analysis and provide a ground for the elaboration of the discursive contours of her argument. It would also help her to address in greater detail why homeplace might be a useful object of inquiry, site for a radical pedagogy, or source for curricula. Is a homeplace to be found in voluntary association? In chosen communities? In ethnic, racial, gender, religious, or political affiliations? What are its temporal dimensions? Is homeplace always retrospective — a place of return? Or might it be prospective — a place one seeks? Does an individual have only one homeplace? Are homeplaces experienced as successive, interrelated, coequal, conflicting? How would a revised homeplace avoid the problems of reproducing the systematic oppression of the idealized home? Most important for a radical pedagogy, what could reconceptualized homeplaces teach that unreconstructed homes fail to teach? That is, what are the positive educative values of the homeplace?

One of Anderson’s concerns is to understand how identities are taught and learned within a homeplace. For the most part, like Ruitenberg, she focuses on the coercive normalization practiced in unreconstructed homes, on what Jane Roland Martin might call the “miseducative.”²⁴ However, Anderson, unlike Ruitenberg, explores the possibility that identities associated with a place of belonging may have

some positive value — she notes especially the experiences, needs, and desires of marginalized and disenfranchised groups — that could be relevant to a radical pedagogy.

Stuart Hall has written,

All those points of attachment which give the individual some sense of “place” and position in the world, whether these be in relation to particular communities, localities, territories, religions, or cultures... provide people with coordinates which are especially important in the face of the enormous globalization and transnational character of many of the processes which now shape their lives.⁵

Hall cautions that “positioning” and “that moment of identity and identification” should not be seen as “permanent, fixed or essential.” Nevertheless he acknowledges that “Everybody comes from someplace — even if it is only an ‘imagined community’ — and needs some sense of identity and belonging.”⁶

While Hall was addressing an audience in cultural studies and Anderson is addressing an audience of educational philosophers (different academic homeplaces?), it seems to me that they are grappling with similar issues. Anderson struggles with how to craft a radical pedagogy that would not simply deconstruct the interdependencies of homeplaces but also attend to and honor an individual’s need to belong, identify, and position a self in location.

I want to turn now to some brief comments on Anderson’s critical appropriation of nomadism, world traveling, and streetwalker theorizing. Anderson’s interest is to provide a way in which a radical pedagogy of homeplace could foster an individual’s mobility — leaving the comforts of home — to travel between, among, and within sites of learning. Although she sees possibilities in adopting a nomadic stance, I think she is correct to point out its limitations. “Nomadology,” both as a description of the postmodern individual and as a metaphor for social inquiry, has been critiqued by theorists in cultural studies as a discriminatory “postmodern primitivism” that romanticizes “the figure of travel, hybridity, and movement, in a generalizing manner, which is as inadequate...as contemporary ideologies of tradition and nostalgia.”⁷ As Anderson implies, world traveling and streetwalker theorizing may be more apt metaphors for the standpoint of a radical pedagogy of homeplace. They resemble Georg Simmel’s metaphor of the anthropologist as stranger, both near and distant, in an intermediary position, finding the strange familiar while in another culture and the familiar strange upon returning home.⁸ However, I do not think any of these metaphors are really necessary to her argument for an education that counters oppression and values border crossings, flexibility, humility, and openness to others.

While Anderson’s argument needs more development, it seems to me that it makes a valuable contribution to current debates in PBE by introducing a consideration of “home,” revisioning “home” as “homeplace,” and linking homeplace to a radical pedagogy. Taking the educational significance of homeplace seriously connects her project to a long line of radical departures from repressive and standardizing educational practices. The works of Friedrich Froebel, Elizabeth Peabody, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Leonard Covello, Jane Roland Martin, for

example, have each in different ways reflected an out-of-the-mainstream interest in home places, in framing pedagogy and curricula in relation to students' lived experiences in locality. This *places* Anderson's work in distinguished company.

I want to end by commending to you Alice Walker's "Burial," a poem that illustrates the affective and political components of identity-in-place suitable to a radical pedagogy of homeplace.⁹ In "Burial," Walker has left her adopted home in New York City to join the voter registration campaign in Mississippi. In the midst of her activism, she travels with her daughter back to her hometown in Georgia to attend her grandmother's funeral. Her rich description of that experience, "seen from the angle of [her grandmother's] death," provides concrete answers to the questions about homeplace that Anderson — and I — have raised today.

1. Claudia Ruitenberg, "Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 213 and 215.

2. *Ibid.*, 218.

3. *Ibid.*, 219.

4. Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

5. Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *New Times*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 133.

6. *Ibid.*, 132.

7. David Morley, "EurAm, Modernity, Reason and Alterity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 332.

8. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 402–8.

9. Alice Walker, "Burial," in *Earthling Poems 1965–1990: Her Blue Body, Everything, We Know* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991): 169–74.