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Mapping a Terrain for Homeplace

Susan D. Franzosa

Fairfield University, sfranzosa@fairfield.edu

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Susan Douglas Franzosa
Fairfield University
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Mapping a Terrain for Homeplace

A Response to Helen Anderson's "Learning (& Leaving) the Comforts of Home: A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace"

If the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history, the present epoch will perhaps be obsessed, above all, with spaces. Michel Foucault 1986

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).¹ 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" (213). 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' " (215).

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 Derrida rather than the critical theory of 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 (218).

Ruitenbergs radical pedagogy of place, “a pedagogy of place under deconstruction,” (218) 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.

Ruitenbergs doesn’t 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 (219).

In “Learning (& Leaving) the Comforts of Home: A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace,” Helen Anderson takes up Ruitenbergs 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.”ⁱⁱ 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 Ruitenbergh and the world traveling and street-walker theorizing suggested by Maria Lugones (xx).

It is not clear why Anderson has chosen to modify Ruitenbergh’s title, substituting ‘homeplace’ for place. The modifier ‘home,’ as she takes pains to demonstrate, is an ideologically loaded term with rich potential for succumbing to the risks enumerated by Ruitenbergh. Is the substitution meant to be a comradely extension or application of Ruitenbergh’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 Ruitenbergh’s guidelines to deconstruct the home as it is idealized in dominant EurAm-centric discourses of control in order to “re-conceptualize “home” in a way that seeks to avoid reproducing systematic social oppression” (xx). The title of Anderson’s paper - “Learning (& 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, chosen communities, 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 or many homeplaces? 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 re-conceptualized homeplaces teach that unreconstructed homes fail to teach? That is, what are the positive educational 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."ⁱⁱⁱ 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.^{iv}

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” (132).

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. For Anderson it means struggling 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, amongst, 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.”^v 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.^{vi} However, I don’t 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,’ revising ‘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 experience in locality. This *places* Anderson’s work in distinguished company.

I will end with a poem by Alice Walker that may illustrate the components of a radical pedagogy of homeplace.^{vii} 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.

Burial

They have fenced in the dirt road
that once led to Wards Chapel
A.M.E. church,
and cows graze
among the stones that
mark my family's graves.
The massive oak is gone
from out the church yard,
but the giant space is left
unfilled;
despite the tow-lane blacktop
that slides across
the old, unalterable
roots.

Today I bring my own child here;
to this place where my father's
grandmother rests undisturbed
beneath the Georgia sun,
above her the neatstepping hooves
of cattle.
Here the graves soon grow back to the land.
Have been known to sink. To drop open without
warning. To cover themselves with wild ivy,
blackberries. Bittersweet and sage.
When burning-Off Day comes, as it does
some years,
the graves are haphazardly cleared and snakes
hacked to death and burned sizzling
in the brush. . . . the odor of smoke, oak
leaves, honeysuckle.
Forgetful of geographic resolutions as birds,
the farflung young fly South to bury
the old dead.

The old women move quietly up
and touch Sis Rachel's face.
"Tell Jesus I'm coming," they say,
"Tell him I ain't goin' to be
long."

My grandfather turns his creaking head
Away from the lavender box.
He does not cry. But looks afraid.
For years he called her “Woman”;
shortened over the decades to
“Oman.”
On the cut stone for “Oman’s” grave
he did not notice
they had misspelled her name.
(The stone reads Racher Walker – not “Rachel” –
Loving Wife, Devoted Mother?)

As a young woman, who had known her? Tripping
eagerly, “loving wife,” to my grandfather’s
bed. Not pretty but serviceable. A hard
worker, with rough moist hands. Her own two
babies dead before she came.
Came to seven children.
To aprons and sweat.
Came to quiltmaking.
Came to canning and vegetable gardens
big as fields.
Came to fields to plow.
Cotton to chop.
Potatoes to dig.
Came to multiple measles, chickpox,
and croup.
Came to water from springs.
Came to leaning houses one story high.
Came to rivalries. Saturday night battles.
Came to straightened hair, Noxema, and
feet washing at the Hardsell Baptist Church.
Came to zinnias around the woodpile.
Came to grandchildren not of her blood
whom she taught to dip snuff without
sneezing.

Came to death blank, forgetful of it all.

When he called her “Oman” she no longer
listened. Or heard, or knew, or felt.

It is not until I see my first grade teacher
review her body that I cry.
Not for the dead, but for the gray in my
first grade teacher’s hair. For memories
of before I was born, when teacher and
grandmother loved each other; and later
over the ducks made of soap and orange-
legged chicks Miss Reynolds drew above

my own small hand
on paper with wide blue lines.

Not for the dead, but for memories. None of
them sad. But seen from the angle of her
death.

ⁱ Claudia Ruitenberg, “Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place,” *Philosophy of Education*, Philosophy of Education Society (2005): 212-220.

ⁱⁱ Helen Anderson, “Learning (&Leaving) the Comforts of Home: A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace,” *Philosophy of Education*, Philosophy of Education Society (2006): xx-xx.

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

^{iv} Stuart Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” in *New Times*, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991): 133.

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

^{vi} George Simmel, “The Stranger,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. And trns. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950): 402-208.

^{vii} Alice Walker, “Burial,” in *Earthling Poems 1965-1990: Her Blue Body, Everything, We Know* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991):169-174.