

## Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place

Claudia Ruitenberg  
*Simon Fraser University*

More than a decade ago, David Orr wrote that “other than as a collection of buildings where learning is supposed to occur, place has no particular standing in contemporary education.”<sup>1</sup> Michael Peters agreed that “modern educational theory has all but ignored questions of space, of geography, of architecture.”<sup>2</sup> Under the influence of a “renaissance” of space in social theory, however, space and place are no longer absent from educational theory, nor, increasingly, from educational practice. With the deconstruction of the mind/body binary, the precedence of temporality over spatiality has waned; the embodied mind undeniably exists in space as well as time. “Space is now more and more seen as having been under-theorised and marginalised in relation to the modernist emphasis on time and history” (*PSB*, 41). But with increased physical and virtual mobility, the concept of “space” itself has been reconfigured. Concepts such as cyberspace, nomadism, and hybridity have been introduced, and — to draw on the influential metaphor of the network — emphasis has shifted from the stable *nodes* (places) in the network to the *vectors* (flows) between shifting nodes.<sup>3</sup>

For some, however, this postmodern quicksand is too much to bear, resulting in “a loss of social meaning and disruption of established senses of community and identity,” and in a desire for rootedness and belonging, for connectedness to *place* (*PSB*, 48). Orr laments that “we are a displaced people for whom our immediate places are no longer sources of food, water, livelihood, energy, materials, friends, recreation, or sacred inspiration” (*EL*, 126). In response to such views, “place-based” (or “place-conscious”) education has been introduced into educational theory by authors such as Gregory Smith, Paul Theobald, and David Sobel, and into educational practice across North America.

In a general sense, place-based education is education that “adopts local environments — social, cultural, economic, political, and natural — as the context for a significant share of students’ educational experiences.”<sup>4</sup> But much of the literature on place-based education focuses on the natural and rural environment, and, at times, the desirability of connectedness to the natural environment and the local community is presented with more than a hint of nostalgia and romanticism.<sup>5</sup> Orr presents Thoreau’s *Walden* as a prime example of place-based education (*EL*, 125-126); Theobald lauds ancient Greek cities and medieval peasant villages as places in which people were rooted in locality and community.<sup>6</sup> The attention to the value of rural life and rural educational contexts is perhaps understandable as counterweight to dominant (media) discourse presenting the city as sophisticated, cultured, and desirable, and rural life as backward, dirty, and undesirable.<sup>7</sup> However, the uncritical celebration of rural over urban and nature over culture reinscribes old dichotomies and does nothing to help an examination of the role of place in

education. Moreover, Usher notes, “such understandings deeply embed ‘warm’ notions of local community whilst at the same time displacing the conflicts, oppressions and limitations of bounded places...” (PSB, 44).

Nevertheless, place-based education may offer interesting possibilities. For example, it offers ways of addressing student alienation by contextualizing knowledge and by resisting imperialist and homogenizing forces of globalized culture. Is there a way to get rid of the bath water without losing the baby? Would it be possible to develop a pedagogy of place from post-phenomenological and deconstructive perspectives? In this essay, I will examine three central concepts in place-based education — experience, locality and community — in order to arrive at a conception of place-based education that moves beyond the nostalgic desire for stable rootedness. In this new conception of place-based education, the lived experience of a local environment and community is a starting point for inquiry into the instability of meaning attributed to an always already mediated experience of the local.

#### CRITICAL AND RADICAL PEDAGOGIES OF PLACE

David Gruenewald has argued for a “critical pedagogy of place” as an educational theory and practice in which place-based education meets critical pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> Place-based education can spur critical pedagogy to consider the geographic and ecological aspects of “situationality.” Conversely, critical pedagogy can spur place-based education to consider urban situations and the political aspects of place. Gruenewald’s article offers many valuable insights and certainly indicates that place-based education can productively be brought into conversation with other traditions. Absent from his critical pedagogy of place, however, is a problematization of the construction of *meaning* of situationality, and of central concepts such as “experience” and “community”. Where Gruenewald speaks of a “critical pedagogy of place,” I will use the phrase “radical pedagogy of place” to distinguish between the theoretical perspectives in which the two pedagogies are rooted. In using the term “radical” I follow Shaun Gallagher’s distinction between critical hermeneutics “developed in the writings of critical theorists like Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel,” and radical hermeneutics, practiced by deconstructive theorists such as Jacques Derrida and John Caputo.<sup>9</sup>

#### EXPERIENCE

Much of the literature on locality and place-based education is rooted in phenomenology: it honors and inquires into the lived experience of embodied beings in particular places at particular times. Gregory Smith, for instance, writes that the aim of place-based education “is to ground learning in local phenomena and students’ lived experience.”<sup>10</sup> Place-based education, on this account, seeks to bring into the curriculum the “actual phenomena” students often only learn about second-hand through texts or other educational media. “In many other places, people experience the world directly; in school, that experience is mediated....”<sup>11</sup> But the notion of lived experience as direct, unmediated experience unequivocally available for inquiry has been coherently critiqued by Derrida, who argues that the concept of experience “belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure [*sous rature*]. ‘Experience’ has always designated the relationship with a

presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.”<sup>12</sup> Derrida contends that there is no such thing as direct, unmediated experience. No experience is fully present to the consciousness of the experiencing subject; each experience leaves traces in that warehouse of remnants called the Unconscious and is itself shaped by the conscious and unconscious discursive categories that have previously left their marks on the body and mind of the experiencing subject.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida makes the well-known and much debated claim “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” which is translated by Gayatri Spivak as “There is nothing outside of the text” and “there is no outside-text.”<sup>13</sup> Some believe that Derrida claims here that all there is is the world of language; this, however, is not the case. If Derrida claims that we can never separate experience from language, this does not mean that there is no experience at all, but rather that we do not have any non-discursive access to experience. Derrida himself also denies that his claim means that all there is is language:

Often my work is interpreted as the work of someone who says, in the end, everything is language, there is only language, there are no things, there is nothing beyond language; this is an absolute linguisticism. A very paradoxical reception of work that begins by doing the opposite. But I think that the two need to be done. One must constantly recall a certain irreducibility of the textual or discursive dimension of language, and, at the same time, recall that there is in the textual something that is not discursive, a trace that is not linguistic.<sup>14</sup>

Spivak’s translation “there is nothing outside of the text” may not dispel the “linguisticistic” interpretation of “il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” Alternative translations that address this issue might be “there is nothing that escapes text,” or “there is no extra-textual realm.” The lived experience of locality, for instance, is not an extra-textual realm and does not escape discursive mediation.

Derrida does not ignore or negate lived experience and its spatial qualities. He remembers having read Sartre’s *La Nausée* (*Nausea*) “in a certain ecstatic bedazzlement at seventeen, in Algiers, in philosophy class, sitting on a bench in Laferrière square, sometimes raising my eyes toward the roots, the bushes of flowers or the luxurious plants....”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Derrida does not remember only the text, but the local and sensory circumstances in which he read it. In *Circumfession*, Derrida reminisces about his mother walking him to nursery school in El Biar, Algeria:

[S]he was holding my hand, we were going by the route known as the little wood and I began to invent the simulacrum of an illness, as I have all my life long, to avoid going back to nursery school, a lie that I forgot to recall, whence the tears when later in the afternoon, from the playground, I caught sight of her through the fence, she must have been as beautiful as a photograph....<sup>16</sup>

In this memory, locality and spatiality are prominent: the young Derrida walks beside his mother, holding her hand, and he remembers the route they took, the space they traversed from the familiarity of the home to the unfamiliarity of the nursery school. Had Derrida believed that the spatiality and locality of experience were completely irrelevant, I surmise that he would not have bothered to write his memories the way he did. However, the place-based and sensory elements of an experience have no privileged status, and are no less mediated than other elements. *Where* we learn becomes part of *what* we learn, but not in any determinable way.

## SPACE, PLACE, LOCALITY

Much of the current writing about place-based education focuses on ecoliteracy and the natural environment. But “place” means much more — and much more unstably — than the natural environment alone. Each place has a history, often a contested history, of the people who inhabited it in past times. Each place has an aesthetics, offers a sensory environment of sound, movement and image that is open to multiple interpretations. And each (inhabited) place has a spatial configuration through which power and other socio-politico-cultural mechanisms are at play. Gruenewald discusses Stephen Haymes’s study of black urban experience as a pedagogy of place that is specifically concerned with the politics “inscribed in material spaces.”<sup>17</sup> He also more generally addresses the political potential of place-based education as ground for social transformation; what he does not do is provide a discussion of the very concept of place, of *topos*, of locality.

Place-based education risks falling into the trap of topological essentialism, of discourses that claim our true selves are inextricably bound up with our “homeland” or “native soil.” Derrida speaks of “*ontotopology*” as that which connects ontology with *topos* as “an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [*on*] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general.”<sup>18</sup> No *topos* has a single, clear, and determinable meaning. Neither the place where one finds oneself in the present, nor one’s native soil, nor any other place for that matter, are necessary conditions for the development of a “true” or “authentic” identity. However, one’s subjectivity and identity at any particular moment in time cannot be understood outside one’s local context and history of local contexts. I am undeniably influenced by my geographic location as well as by the traces of the geographic locations in which I have found myself in the past. The nature and meaning of those influences, however, escapes any determination or closure.

Some believe that frequent relocation decontextualizes people and that stability in one’s geographic location is a condition for responsible citizenship. Consider, for example, the distinction Orr makes between a resident and an inhabitant:

A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify.... The inhabitant, in contrast, “dwells”...in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place....A resident can reside almost anywhere that provides an income. Inhabitants bear the marks of their places, whether rural or urban, in patterns of speech, through dress and behavior. (*EL*, 130)

This distinction is neither useful nor tenable. All people bear the marks of the places where they have lived, no matter how long or short a time they have lived there. The young gay man who leaves his conservative small hometown for the anonymity and gay community of a large city may be relieved to have escaped the judgment of a small community, but — for better or worse — he is marked by his hometown as well as his new home in the city. The Sudanese refugee who is driven from her village to a refugee camp and perhaps leaves the camp for a western destination may not be able to return to her Sudanese village for many years. She may be torn between relief

and regret, but she is undeniably marked by the place where she grew up, as well as by the refugee camp, as well as by any western place that may offer her asylum.

Thomas van der Dunk draws a parallel between the current cosmopolitan elite “who exchanges Munich for Milan, Moscow or Miami without any difficulty and can manage on all office floors with the same conference English” and the European royalty and nobility towards the end of the *ancien régime*. Under Louis XIV the French court moved “from the Louvre in the heart of Paris to the new ‘gated community’ of Versailles outside the city gates;” with this move the king expressed geographically the distance he already felt from his people with their everyday problems.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the current cosmopolitan elite have mentally already removed themselves from those with fewer options. Rather than contributing to solving social or ecological problems in the places where they live, the cosmopolitan elite packs up and leaves. Their physical nomadism, however, is not the cause but rather a symptom, an expression of a pre-existing hedonism and lack of commitment to the other more generally. Orr sketches a gloomy picture of “lives...lived amidst the architectural expressions of displacement: the shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and homogenized development” (*EL*, 127). But as Bryan Turner argues, “it is important for any sociology which wants to avoid nostalgia and fin-de-siecle nihilism to look at the opportunity side of rootlessness, complexity, and diversity” (*PSB*, 46). Orr’s critique seems class-specific: aimed at the same cosmopolitan elite Van der Dunk describes. For the many involuntarily displaced people in this world it adds insult to injury to tell them they are now deficient, lacking a physical connection to the *topos* of their youth.

Deconstructively speaking, the “hereness” of the local is intelligible only by virtue of the “thereness” of the non-local. But there is no “hereness” that is uncontaminated by “thereness,” not only because in these technological times there is no locality that is uncontaminated by globality, but because, structurally, the otherness of elsewhere cannot be excluded without it leaving a trace. Locality cannot be understood other than in a permanent dynamic relationship with globality, a relationship of the proximal to the distal. All my actions, including linguistic actions, have consequences far beyond those I can foresee. In other words, my actions have what Derrida calls “destinerrancy:” I may intend for my actions to have a certain destination but in fact they have multiple destinations that are errant: they wander.<sup>20</sup> The results and consequences of my actions are unstopably trans-local and nomadic. And vice-versa: what I call the local, *my locality*, is in fact a collection of destinerrant traces of actions initiated elsewhere, beyond the local. Theobald rightly critiques the myth of individual independence and autonomy that drives American society. But although the obvious conclusion would be to emphasize dependence (and indebtedness) in general, Theobald claims that it is *intradependence*, existing “by virtue of necessary relations within a place,” that ought to be emphasized.<sup>21</sup> The fact of the matter, however, is that I am as dependent on the trans-local as I am upon the local, and since my actions affect the trans-local as they do the local, so my responsibility transcends whatever boundaries I wish to draw around my “place.”

Place-based education risks reinscribing notions of innocence and purity that have not held up very well under deconstructive scrutiny. That many North Americans seek such places, places that remind them of a hometown with mom and apple pie, is demonstrated by the numbers of people who visit Disney's theme parks every year.<sup>22</sup> But this nostalgia is a longing for a purity and innocence *that never existed*. As Elspeth Probyn notes, nostalgia is a longing for something by definition out of reach. In its most direct, etymological sense, nostalgia is "'a painful yearning to return home' ...but again, you can never go home. Or rather, once returned, you realize the cliché that home is never what it was."<sup>23</sup> There are no innocent places, places uncontaminated by language, places that offer themselves up for unmediated experience. All places are always already marked by

the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing it with a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute...: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.<sup>24</sup>

The only reason I perceive my locality as local is because it is *not* fully present to and in itself, because it is marked by a discourse which comes from more distant places. Rather than teaching students to value the familiarity of the local and fear the unfamiliarity of whatever lies beyond, I believe it of more value to show students how all that seems familiar carries traces of the unfamiliar, and vice versa.

#### PLACE AND COMMUNITY

In much of the literature on place-based education there is an emphasis on community. Smith, for example, writes that "place-based education holds out the potential of resituating learning within the context of communities,"<sup>25</sup> and "the promise that [students] can become valued members of a community."<sup>26</sup> Gruenewald identifies "community-based education" as one of the approaches closely connected to place-based education. In educational writing, and especially in writing about place-based education, the concept of "community" is often taken as self-evident, and as self-evidently desirable. Gruenewald notes that "human communities, or places, are politicized, social constructions that often marginalize individuals, groups, as well as ecosystems," but he does not further problematize the concept.<sup>27</sup> Derrida has, on several occasions, taken deliberate distance from the concept of community as well as from concrete communities. When Derrida uses the word "community," he adds to it, "a word I never much liked, because of its connotation of participation, indeed fusion, identification: I see in it as many threats as promises."<sup>28</sup> Caputo adds,

After all, *communio* is a word for a military formation and a kissing cousin of the word "munitions"; to have a *communio* is to be fortified on all sides, to build a 'common' (*com*) "defense" (*munis*), as when a wall is put up around the city to keep the stranger or the foreigner out.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these critiques, Drucilla Cornell argues that Derrida does "not totally reject the *aspiration* to the ideal of community."<sup>30</sup> She summarizes Derrida's argument that there is no innocent community unspoiled by discursive practices, and

that the supposed unitary self-identity of the community (as well as of the individual subjects of whom the community is composed) is/are *always already* disrupted by difference. However, argues Cornell, Derrida “hesitantly recognizes the dream of communicative freedom, the ideal of community or communalism understood as belonging together without violence, because he understands so clearly the horror of the distortion of that dream.”<sup>31</sup> This interpretation seems in line with Derrida’s own characterizations of deconstruction. In deconstructing notions such as “community,” Derrida explains,

it is not a question of “rejecting” these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them... Since these concepts are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong, we should be even less prone to renounce them.<sup>32</sup>

He adds that “the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures.”<sup>33</sup> A deconstruction of the concept of community does not deny the existence of community, nor does it seek to destroy community, but rather it “makes the constructed character [of community] appear as such.”<sup>34</sup> One central feature of the constructed character of community, as I have previously mentioned, is that the identity and coherence of the community are structurally incomplete and imperfect. A second central feature is the community’s reliance on those who are excluded from it. The sense of community shared by members of a community, the sense of belonging together, is possibly only because there are others who do not belong, who are outside of the community.

However transitory it may be, no community can *identify itself* without exclusion. But it is always better to bring the modalities, the mechanisms, and, each time, the singularities of this exclusion to light. What evaluations explain them and justify them? What implicit discourse? From where does it draw its authority and legitimacy?<sup>35</sup>

Caputo agrees with Cornell that despite Derrida’s declared antipathy for the word “community,” it is possible to conceive of “‘community’ in deconstruction.”<sup>36</sup> Such a “community-to-come” will be aware of the exclusions that are structurally required for a community to have common identity, and it

will have slackened its defense (*munitio*), diminished its communal store of munitions, against the other, become, let us say, a “weak community.”... Such a weak community, of course, demands considerable strength, for it would be required to maintain a sense of certain community even while welcoming the stranger, to remain master of the house while making the other feel at home.<sup>37</sup>

#### A RADICAL PEDAGOGY OF PLACE

A radical pedagogy of place is a pedagogy of “place” under deconstruction, a pedagogy that understands experience as mediated, that understands the “local” as producing and being produced by the trans-local, and that understands “community” as community-to-come, as a call of hospitality to those outside the *com-munis*. In a radical pedagogy of place, students are taught to see the multiplicity of and conflicts between interpretations of a place, the traces of meanings carried by the place in the past, the openness to future interpretation and meaning-construction. A radical pedagogy of place does not pretend to offer answers to or “correct” interpretations of hotly contested places. A forest is a site of economic benefit to the logging and

tourism industry, as well as an ecosystem, as well as land formerly inhabited by Indigenous people. An inner city neighborhood is a crime statistic, as well as an architectural site, as well as a social system held together by resilience and solidarity. A radical pedagogy of place acknowledges the local contextuality of discourse and experience, but it examines this locality for trans-local traces, for the liminal border-zones, for the exclusions on which its communal identity relies. It encourages not entrenchment in one's locality and community but rather hospitality and openness.

It is ironic that one of the strengths of place-based education, touted by Orr and others, is that it forces educators and students alike to think and work in interdisciplinary ways: to leave the home of their discipline, to wander and engage in relationships with other disciplines. The hybridity of interdisciplinary approaches needed for place-based education is not possible without a certain nomadism. It might be objected that successful interdisciplinary work is possible only if the theorist is sufficiently rooted in the "home" discipline not to get lost in the wandering. This only underscores, however, that a home is not a home until one can leave it and open it to the other — otherwise, it is a prison.

If one wishes to educate students to have a commitment to their social and ecological environment, one needs to start with an emphasis on commitment rather than on locality or community. Despite the commonly used metaphor, human beings do not grow actual roots on which they depend for their physical, intellectual, or ethical nourishment. Instead, nomads who have learned the ethical gestures of hospitality and openness to a community-to-come will bring nourishment to any place in which they land.

---

1. David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 126. This work will be cited as *EL* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Quoted in Robin Usher, "Putting Space Back on the Map: Globalisation, Place and Identity," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34, no. 1 (2002): 53. This work will be cited as *PSB* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. McKenzie Wark, *The Virtual Republic* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997), quoted in *PSB*, 50.

4. Gregory Smith, "Going Local," *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 1 (2002): 30.

5. See also Janice Woodhouse and Clifford Knapp, "Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches" (Charleston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2000).

6. Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

7. The television series *Sex and the City* and *The Simple Life* are two prime examples of such discourse.

8. David Gruenewald, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3–12.

9. Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 11.

10. Gregory Smith, "Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 8 (2002): 586.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 60.

13. *Ibid.*, 158.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, ed. and trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 33.
15. *Ibid.*, 264.
16. Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in *Jacques Derrida*, Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 271–272.
17. Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds,” 5.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 82.
19. Thomas van der Dunk, “The Flimsy World-Citizen” [De Wereldburger van Niets], *Vrij Nederland* 65, no. 40 (2004): 49–51.
20. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 215.
21. Theobald, *Teaching the Commons*, 7.
22. See Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).
23. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 114.
24. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 112.
25. Smith, “Place-Based Education,” 594.
26. Smith, “Going Local,” 33.
27. Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds,” 3, 7.
28. Jacques Derrida, “Sauf le Nom,” trans. J. Leavey, Jr., in *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 46.
29. John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 107–108.
30. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 40.
31. *Ibid.*, 60.
32. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13–14.
33. *Ibid.*, 24.
34. Derrida, *Negotiations*, 16.
35. *Ibid.*, 57.
36. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 124.
37. *Ibid.*