

The Importance of Maxine Greene's Public Place "In Between"

Virginia Worley
Oklahoma State University

Seeking to root Maxine Greene's pedagogy in Jean-Paul Sartre's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories, Shaireen Rasheed examines Sartre's concepts of freedom and moral life and Merleau-Ponty's concept of social imagination. Although one might conclude from Rasheed's examination that in Greene's work, all roads lead to freedom, I suggest that examining Greene's own definitions, relating them to each other, and illuminating their meanings and values within her pedagogy reveal that all roads lead to a public place "in between." Necessary to her concepts of freedom, moral life, and individual and social imaginations, this place is where one comes together with others to achieve freedom, live a moral life, see the possible for self and world, and achieve what *should* be. Since Greene's pedagogical aims include teaching students to do these things, this place "in between" also becomes necessary to her pedagogy, and itself becomes her ideal place of education.

This new public place "in between" the old dualisms—public-private, rational-imaginative, conscious-objective world, self-others, what is-what ought to be—is a place where one can realize the possible because freedom can "sit down."¹ Defining freedom as growth, Greene contends that one achieves/gains freedom together with others in lived social situations within this public place (*DF*, 27). Here individuals collaborate, engage in dialogue, and together discover a power to act (*DF*, 12).² Recognizing that human plurality is the backbone of this public sphere, Greene laments that many fail to perceive themselves questing for freedom with others who may have different beliefs and perspectives on the world, fail to connect creating such places and pursuing freedom, and fail to perceive how public places where persons can show "who they are and what they can do" might "throw light on human affairs" (*DF*, 116, 114).

While maintaining that one should teach students how to achieve freedom in this public place, give them practice doing it, and thereby teach them to participate in an ever-forming democratic society, Greene also contends that educators have neither discovered nor developed "a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary" for remaking such a society (*RI*, 6; *DF*, 126). She asks how in an individualist "society,...still lacking an 'in-between,' [one] can educate for freedom" and "in educating for freedom, how [one] can create and maintain a common world" (*DF*, 116). How does one teach students to see the possible, to reach the public space where they can achieve freedom? One awakens students by awakening their imaginations, reshaping their awakened imaginations into social imaginations, and inciting students to speak and act in light of these awakenings.

For Greene, imagination is the cognitive capacity through which one releases oneself from coercions, breaks "with the taken for granted," sets aside "familiar distinctions and definitions," gives "credence to alternative realities," and refuses merely to comply with existing structures (*RI*, 3).³ Through imagination, one reaches

beyond confining walls and crosses the empty spaces between oneself and those one perceives to be unlike oneself.⁴ By opening one to what might be, the imagination opens an “in between” where one empathizes and comes together with others, a public place of action where one may choose to repair, heal, and renew what “has been torn,” where one invites freedom to “sit down” (*RI*, 5).⁵ Social imagination means turning the imagination’s cognitive capacity from self to community, means inventing visions of what might be in one’s deficient society and of “more vibrant ways of being in the world” (*RI*, 5). Therefore, by activating dialogue among people from different cultures and modes of life, among those gathering to identify and solve problems, and among people undertaking shared tasks, teachers stir students to take their own initiatives; so as images of the possible arise, apathy and indifference give way, and students empower themselves to transform what is into what should be (*RI*, 5). By awakening students’ individual and social imaginations, teachers promote students’ coming together, creating a public place, a democratic community in the making (*DF*, 12, 27, 29; *RI*, 16).

Thus, before students can come together in a place “in between” where they can achieve/gain freedom, they must awaken, specifically, awaken their imaginations. Teachers promote that awakening by involving students in the arts, for the arts awaken people to find and express their own questions, senses of predicament, and longings for something better.⁶ Involvement in art means using imagination poetically since such involvement ushers one into art works’ social fabrics and events, exposes one to new perspectives on the lived world, brings one into the “as if” worlds artists create and into participating in those worlds, and consequently incites one to reconceive, revisualize, revise, and renew the terms of one’s life (*RI*, 4, 5). Understanding that art becomes a way to become wide-awake in the world, one must still identify Greene’s meaning and value for wide-awakeness and how wide-awakeness relates to freedom, educating for freedom, living a moral life, and creating a common world.

For Greene, being wide-awake means being moral.⁷ To live a moral life, one must throw off sleep, assess the demands of given situations, define particular situations as moral, identify possible alternatives, and ask “the why”: why do insufficiencies, inequities, and injustices exist in ordinary life?⁸ Awakening is of value because awakened, students can live moral lives in this public place infused with imaginative awareness (*RI*, 39). Here they achieve freedom together in community towards making democracy, for here freedom reigns (*DF*, 86). Since this place is necessary to and the place where one awakens to the possible, gains freedom, lives a moral life, and achieves what should be, this place “in between” is also necessary to Greene’s pedagogical aims, and itself becomes her ideal place of education.

As Greene’s ideal, this place of education is dialogical, safe, and public. Here, multiple perspectives play a part; diversity becomes strength, and contradictions find expression as people ask how they can live together and nourish each other, cope with nativism and rejection, and unite toward a common goal without compromising who they are and who they may become (*DF*, 320). In physical and intellectual

safety, those present tell, write, draw, and perform their own stories and as they express their own histories and life experiences, they begin to discover other voices from the past, emerging where there has been silence (*DF*, 320). Thus, social vision and action through disclosure emerge. Now, possibility turns to actions requiring a public place: mending torn networks, awakening and transforming society into an ever-evolving democracy, and achieving social justice (*DF*, 319).

Since in Greene's vision this place continues to be a welcoming one for all peoples and perspectives, those inside must influence the place itself. Since people begin to think about possibilities for self and world, move from action by disclosure to social action, and do these things together in this public place "in between," there must be something about the place itself that influences those within it. Having the power to influence means that place may have its own pedagogy, that educators may leave place and its pedagogy to chance or harness them for educational means and ends. It makes sense, then, that fashioning teaching to place and its pedagogy would magnify the educative power of place and teaching. I therefore urge educators to move beyond any apparent roots Greene's pedagogy may have in Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's theories to Greene's own concepts and pedagogical aims and to move beyond what Greene says to what she implies about place's potential educative power and about partnering teaching with place to magnify that power. Let us ask ourselves: What does place mean? What can place do? Why is place necessary to a conceptual understanding of education? More specific to Greene's vision, let us ask ourselves: How does place become art in the making, an interactive, ever-changing place for an ever-evolving democracy? What arts of teaching would Greene infuse into place? What would the pedagogy of this place be? How would teachers partner teaching with such a place and its pedagogy if wishing to accomplish Greene's aims and goals? Finally, how might Greene's ideal place of education, as embodying both art and pedagogy, throw an extraordinary light on human affairs?⁹

1. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 86. This book will be cited as *DF* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 6. This book will be cited as *RI* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. William Ayers, "Social Imagination: A Conversation with Maxine Greene," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 8, no. 4 (1995), 321-22.

4. *Ibid.*, 320.

5. *Ibid.*, 322.

6. *Ibid.*, 320.

7. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 42-52.

8. *Ibid.*, 42-44.

9. Maxine Greene, "Literature, Existentialism, and Education" in *Existentialism and Phenomenology in Education: Collected Essays*, ed. David E. Dentons (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1974), 82.