

## Quandaries of Place (-Based Education)

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Perplexity is the state I inhabit as I offer this response to Claudia Ruitenberg's analysis of place-based education (PBE). I sympathize completely with her efforts to open the possibility for a more radical view. I am on-side, as well, with the idea that explorations of *instabilities* of place will contribute usefully to pedagogical discourse. Nonetheless, I wonder whether the philosophical tool she uses, namely, deconstruction, might be too blunt for the task its called upon to complete; must it be used in conjunction with processes that identify and ground normative decisions? I consider three quandaries: First, is the PBE "baby" Ruitenberg saves the same as David Orr, David Gruenewald, Paul Theobald, and Gregory Smith's, or is something important lost? Second, is deconstruction a process that establishes its own limits? If not, how might one negotiate the boundaries of its useful appropriation? Third, what are some of the political implications of embarking upon a radical pedagogy of place centered on deconstruction?

### FIRST QUANDARY: WHICH BABY DOES RUITENBERG SAVE?

Ruitenberg uses a baby in the bathwater metaphor to characterize her project as one of resistance rather than outright opposition. Her deconstruction of the concepts of place, community, experience, and locality distances her position from a tendency to romanticize nature, "the local," and lived experience; from naturalization of the relation between *topos* and significance; and from the desire for, and investment of normative authority (and innocence) in, stability. She astutely anticipates the possibility that deconstruction's focus on text might be read errantly as, in Derrida's word, "linguisticistic." Spatiality, locality, and sensory elements of experience retain some measure of effect for Ruitenberg but they are neither afforded decisive epistemic authority nor read as unmediated sources of signification.

Ruitenberg identifies the normative value of PBE with its capacity to address "student alienation by contextualizing knowledge and by resisting imperialist and homogenizing forces of globalized culture." A radical PBE would pay attention to lived experiences of local environments and communities as the starting point of inquiry "into the instability of meaning attributed to an always already mediated experience of the local."

What gets the radical model of PBE to "place" in the first instance? The Orr-Gruenewald-Theobald critical PBE model has a definite starting point, namely, an indictment of the dominant political theory of North American society and schools, which Theobald writes, "is fundamentally destructive of communities." Theobald contends that schools are the places that have "the last best shot at restoring a sense of intradependence."<sup>1</sup> Ruitenberg's problematization of critical PBE dismantles more than the means of acting on its indictment. It problematizes the indictment itself. But as I read Ruitenberg, a number of normative investments are associated with her radical PBE. Following her deconstruction of the concept of locality, for

instance, she refers to the value of showing students “how all that seems familiar carries traces of the unfamiliar, and vice versa.” In the concluding section of the essay, she returns to the concepts of locality and community, re-situating their normative appeal in such qualities as multiplicity and openness to future interpretation. She concludes, “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.” The work that remains, however, is to articulate the processes by which normative contents can be articulated with the tool of deconstruction.

#### SECOND QUANDARY: LIMITS OF DECONSTRUCTION

In her discussion of “community,” Ruitenbergh calls upon Derrida’s explication of deconstruction. “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.” Ruitenbergh continues, “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....” But how dependent on specific representations of community in a particular discourse is the deconstruction of the conception of community? How does the analysis change if varying accounts of community are considered?<sup>2</sup>

Jeannette Armstrong, for example, writes of community as an integral part of the development of eco-literacy. She describes community as follows:

A community is the living process that interacts with the vast and ancient body of intricately connected patterns operating in perfect unison called the land. The land sustains all life and must be protected from depletion in order to insure its health and ability to provide sustenance across generations.

It is imperative that community — through the family and the individual — be seen as a whole system engaged in maintaining the principles that insure its well-being.<sup>3</sup>

I am not suggesting that Ruitenbergh ought to anticipate all possible accounts of community. I offer this example to press the question of how deconstruction establishes itself with respect to the multiplicity of the narratives of community and the normative and metaphysical constellations of thought represented in those narratives?

I have attempted to make sense of this quandary about limits by examining efforts that parallel Ruitenbergh’s. Daunted by deconstruction, I turned to what I have long considered one of the better attempts within feminist theory to articulate an analysis of the complex ways in which our lived experiences of place and/or community are constituted by history, social relations, semiotic processes, and political effects. Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin’s essay “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with it?” offers a multilayered appraisal of another essay written by Minnie Bruce Pratt, titled “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart.”

Mohanty and Martin write:

What we have tried to draw out of this text is the way in which it unsettled not only any notion of feminism as an all-encompassing home but also the assumption that there are discrete, coherent, and absolutely separable identities — homes within feminism, so to speak — based

on absolute divisions between various sexual, racial or ethnic identities ... The "unity" of the individual subject; as well as the unity of feminism, is situated and specified as the product of the interpretation of personal histories; personal histories are themselves situated in relation to the development within feminism of particular questions and critiques.<sup>4</sup>

There is not time in this short response to do more than gesture towards the richness of analyses in both Pratt's essay and the Mohanty and Martin piece that mines it. I offer them as an example of an analytic that parallels the deconstruction Ruitenberg offers. It, too, attempts to make palpable the processes of construction by which categories of identity, community, and locality or social positionality are normalized by, and within, narratives of lived experience. Pratt, Mohanty, and Martin rely on a form of serial problematization to cast historical frames of reference against metaphorical frames, against life history narratives. They draw upon the tensions between these accounts in order to illustrate the multiplicity and instability of the representations. Like Ruitenberg, the explorations of multiplicity and referential instability seem designed to press those of us who would narrate, as well as read, to attend to the ongoing performativity (and openness) of those activities.

Mohanty and Martin are clear that they do not associate their interpretive analytic with self-transparency. The limits of this analytic are set within the political activities of feminist community. There is no pretence of innocence; rather, the analytic is established as thoroughly political and normatively partial. In contrast, I wonder how Ruitenberg's narratives of deconstruction address the normative and political limits of their mode of address?

#### THIRD QUANDARY: CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

Finally, I want to invite consideration of the ways Ruitenberg's project and my commentary affect the politico-epistemological climate at PES. Some feminist theorists have indicted some forms of postmodern analysis. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, worries that the incitement to deconstruction potentially undermines the legitimacy of epistemological projects of self-definition and group empowerment undertaken by historically marginalized people.<sup>5</sup> In the face of Collins's worry, I wonder how philosophers of education consider the political implications of the processes of legitimation constituted by our patterns of reference, contestation, and evocation. What effects on the conditions of possibility are generated as we, two Euro-Canadian, tenure-seeking philosophers, speak to questions of a radical pedagogy of place to a largely white, tenured or tenure-seeking North American audience at the Philosophy of Education Society in 2005 in this luxurious hotel in downtown San Francisco? In Foucault's words, what are the current dangers here as we, two presenters, ally ourselves with a normative framework characterized by its emphasis on multiplicity, instability, and political salience. I scarcely know where to begin to consider this final question but I suspect that asking it matters.

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1. Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), 160–161.

2. Deconstruction is not an innocent tool analytically or politically. Representations of particular communities as "constructed in character" might well be perceived as distorted or undermining by members of certain faith or cultural communities.

3. Jeannette Armstrong, "Let Us Begin With Courage," (Center for Ecoliteracy, 1999), [http://www.ecoliteracy.org/pdf/jarmstrong\\_letusbeginwithcourage.pdf](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/pdf/jarmstrong_letusbeginwithcourage.pdf).
4. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Therese de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 192.
5. Patricia Hill Collins, "How Much Difference Is Too Much? Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Postmodern Social Theory," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 17 (1997): 3–13.