
EDUCATION AND PLACE: A REVIEW ESSAY

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ABSTRACT. In this review essay, Jan Nesor uses three recent contributions to place-based education, Paul Theobald's *Teaching the Commons*, C.A. Bowers's *Revitalizing the Commons*, and David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith's edited volume *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, to examine some fundamental conceptual and practical issues in the area. One is how "place" is defined in place-based education theory, and in particular how moralizing idealizations of place woven into problematic distinctions (place/nonplace, urban/rural, local/global, and so on) may actually make it harder for us to understand education and place. A second is how class, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of difference are addressed — or not — in the field's theoretical formulations. Finally, Nesor explores problems of articulating the visions of place-based education in these texts with larger social or political movements to transform schooling and environmental practices.

The fair-trade coffee I drink as I write this comes from Mexico by way of a grocery store on the other side of town. My clothes got here from several continents over long commodity chains. The music playing on my computer was created in a lot of places but gets here over the Internet from a station in New Jersey. The computer itself was assembled in Malaysia and shipped from Texas. The energy running the computer comes from a distant power plant that burns coal from another state and dumps crap in the air that ends up who knows where. Alter any of these networks (a few of many) and the places — this room, this neighborhood, this city, and so on — change, parts of them slowly, parts quickly, in big and small ways. The point is probably familiar: Places are ongoing accomplishments produced through transactions and relations that cross their borders. These borders, in turn, are contingent outcomes of definitional strategies and struggles that produce places in different forms at varying scales.

It follows that something like "place-based education" — PBE for convenience — will necessarily be complex and broad in scope.¹ The projects described in a new anthology of PBE work, for example, deal with "places" that range from field-trip sites in the Midwest, to neighborhoods in Boston, to the city of Albuquerque, to the state of Alaska.² The theoretical perspectives developing around PBE are analogously broad and diverse. Although the three books to be discussed here, Paul Theobald's *Teaching the Commons*, C.A. Bowers's *Revitalizing the Commons*, and

1. "PBE" is my shorthand term and not that of the field, which sometimes goes by other names. See the lists in Clifford Knapp, "Place-Based Curricular and Pedagogical Models," in *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, eds. David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008), 6; and David Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003): 620. Similarly, the three books reviewed in this essay use different terminologies. C.A. Bowers and Paul Theobald, as I will discuss, talk in terms of "the commons" (though they mean different things by it). Even David Gruenewald in some works seems to prefer the term "place-conscious" to "place-based" education.

2. Gruenewald and Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*.

David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith's edited volume *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, have direct connections³ — Theobald is a contributor to the Gruenewald and Smith volume, and Gruenewald draws explicitly on Bowers's ideas — each approaches "place" by a distinct route.

Theobald situates it in an idiosyncratically drawn history of the critical junctures at which "the commons" — the term he uses for areas with strong borders controlled by dense networks of "intradependencies," that is, "necessary relations within a place" (*TC*, 7, 15) — have been undermined. By tracing the decline of the commons, he hopes to show how schools can reverse the process and "promote community." "The Greeks" (ancient) make a brief appearance as a kind of communal baseline, then the book describes the efforts of, and counterforces to, actors such as William Cobbett and Gerrard Winstanley, Thomas Jefferson and Daniel Shays, and movements like the Farmers Alliance. Although Theobald suggests that his ideas "apply to all types of schools in all kinds of locales" (*TC*, 1), his historical focus is on England and the United States, and his educational ideas are geared to rural schools in the U.S. Midwest (*TC*, 140, 166).

Bowers, by contrast, treats "place" as a theoretical object. Although his aim seems similar to Theobald's — to describe "the commons" and suggest ways that schools can help "resist their further destruction" (*RC*, vii) — there is little historical analysis here. Bowers focuses less on the workings of actual settings than on the definition of an ideal against which to measure them. This ideal turns out to be a bounded, autarchic realm operating outside market relations. This is what Bowers means by "the commons": "the environment...available for use by the entire community," encompassing "every aspect of the human/biotic community that had not been monetized or privatized" (*RC*, 2).⁴ The book is one of a series of critiques in which Bowers attacks the ways other educational theorists conceptualize schooling, place, the environment, and change. He revisits a number of topics from those earlier works, and reanimates (in order to dispatch again) many of his old foils (Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, E.O. Wilson, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, among others).⁵ The newest contribution here is a chapter (about a quarter of the

3. Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1997); C.A. Bowers, *Revitalizing the Commons* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006); and Gruenewald and Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*. These works will be cited in the text as *TC*, *RC*, and *PBEGA*, respectively, for all subsequent references.

4. For different definitions of "the commons" and different perspectives on monetization and privatization in relation to them, see Donald Nonini, "Introduction: The Global Idea of 'the Commons,'" 4; and Flora Lu, "'The Commons' in an Amazonian Context," 44–45, both in *The Global Idea of "the Commons,"* ed. Donald Nonini (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

5. For example, C.A. Bowers, *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1995); C.A. Bowers, *The Culture of Denial* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1997); and C.A. Bowers, *Educating for Eco-justice and Community* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

text) on Detroit (written with Rebecca Martusewicz), which offers a critique of the work of Manning Marable, Cornel West, bell hooks, and others.

Finally, Gruenewald, who has emerged in recent years as a major spokesperson for PBE, has coedited with Smith the anthology mentioned previously. Aside from the editors' contributions, most of the book's chapters detail the workings and assumptions of specific pedagogical, curricular, and organizing efforts. These include promoting outdoor activities and nature study for children (Robert Pyle); designing a single "sense of place" course for college students (James Cameron); creating a single course in which teacher education students reflect on field trips (Clifford Knapp), or a series of courses on how to teach children to conduct energy audits, redesign schoolyards, track mammals, and make maps (Matt Dubel and David Sobel); getting students to do service learning projects at an off-the-grid charter school on the edge of the Navajo reservation (Mark Sorensen); helping high school kids in Skowhegan, Maine, create a "community website," make Imovies, and compile oral histories (Julie Bartsch); working with the non-profit Rural Trust to promote schools as community assets and sites for the production of "social capital" (Rachel Tompkins); getting a science class in a community high school in Boston to do things like work on environmental awareness projects with the local neighborhood association (Elaine Senechal); collaborating with indigenous groups across Alaska to create, among other resources, a "Handbook for culturally responsive science curriculum," a related web-based clearinghouse, and CD-ROM collections (Ray Barnhardt); working with an "Institute for Educational and Community Leadership" to produce community leaders in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Michael Morris), and so on.

The relations of these projects to one another are not always clear, and Smith and Gruenewald do not attempt to trace their possible connections or the tensions that might keep them separate. Some of the projects have been ongoing for years without the "place-based" label and seem more closely related to work outside PBE — for example, research on "situated literacies," "funds of knowledge," ethnomathematics, participatory planning, teacher-research, and community organizing — than to the other projects described in the anthology.⁶ The degree to which the chapter authors would agree with the conceptual languages or arguments employed by Gruenewald, Bowers, or Theobald is also unclear. I emphasize these points because most of what follows will focus on

6. See Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola, *Children of Promise* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1991); David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle, "Relationship of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities," *Review of Research on Education* 24 (1999): 249–305; Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households and Classrooms* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005); Eva Gold, Elaine Simon, and Chris Brown, *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools: Successful Community Organizing for School Reform* (Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2002); Michiel Eijck and Wolff-Michael Roth, "Keeping the Local Local: Recalibrating the Status of Science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in Education," *Science Education* 91, no. 6 (2007): 926–947; Angela Barton, *Teaching Science for Social Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003); Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, eds., *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Helen Verran, *Science and an African Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

that conceptual framework, in particular three key issues it raises. The first is the definition of “place” in PBE theory; the second is the ways PBE theorists conceptualize difference and connect place to race, class, and gender; and the third issue is the conceptualizations these writers offer of PBE as an educational or social movement.

PLACE AND PLACE-MAKING

Defining a connotation-rich term like “place” is always going to be difficult. As Dolores Hayden suggests, “‘place’ is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid.”⁷ PBE theorists, however, do toss in some common ideas before trying to latch the cover. Although there are occasional acknowledgments that places are made,⁸ “place” in PBE theory usually refers at some level to a bounded areal setting independent of human activity — “‘the land,’ ‘the natural environment,’ and ‘the nonhuman world’” (PBEGA, 143) — sites that people need to listen and attend to:

Learning to listen to what places are telling us — and to respond as informed, engaged citizens — this is the pedagogical challenge of place-conscious education...What we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them.⁹

On top of this definition, PBE theorists plant another: place as “community.” As Gruenewald notes (without explanation): “place-based educators use the term ‘place’ synonymously with ‘community’” (PBEGA, 143) — or, as in Bowers’s construct of the “commons” cited previously (RC, 2), they employ “community” as an unproblematic term in their definitions. Although such uses might seem like efforts to dissolve the nature/culture dichotomy, the term “community” is employed uncritically and without attention to its conceptual complexities. Treating it as a synonym for place thus has mainly a rhetorical effect: it laminates the attractive connotations of “community” — boundedness, intimacy, connection, intergenerational stability, and lack of internal division¹⁰ — onto the commonsense notion of place-as-land. As Vered Amit points out, “the resonance of a term like *community* makes it a useful rhetorical adjunct to a wide variety of public appeals seeking to exploit the term’s generally positive connotations.”¹¹

Rather than forcing us to carefully distinguish among different historical, geographical, cultural, political, economic, and other dimensions of place construction, or to look at issues of strategy, power, cooperation, and exploitation in their uses, the connotations of “community” make it possible simply to orient PBE

7. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 16.

8. See, for example, Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place,” 627.

9. *Ibid.*, 645.

10. See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

11. Vered Amit, “An Anthropology Without Community?” in *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*, eds. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport (London: Pluto Press, 2002); also consult Michael P. Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001), 102.

theoretical discourse around an idealized image of “place” as a stable, bounded, self-sufficient communal realm. This image is then put to use as the starting point of a narrative in which Western, Northern, urban people’s ecological awareness and spiritual connection to the land, dependent on access to the “ancient commons,” has been desiccated by 200 years of “industrial culture” (*RC*, 39 and 48), the “modern worldview” (*TC*, 9, 15, 33 and 66), the “homogenizing culture of global capitalism” (*PBEGA*, 143), “the negative consequences of global forces on local communities everywhere” (*PBEGA*, 348), and similar vast, placeless, and place-eating forces. Bowers, for example, argues that

Today, the diversity of the commons and the cultural beliefs and practices that influence whether the life-supporting natural systems are exploited or nurtured are being threatened by the spread of the industrial culture that began in the Midlands of England just over two hundred years ago. (*RC*, 48)

In Theobald’s phrasing:

The ascendancy of the modern worldview during the seventeenth century has slowly eroded the communal dimensions of living to the point that we no longer know quite what they are or what they were; and indeed, it is common today to hear individuals claim that they are not sure there ever really was such a thing as a communal orientation to life. (*TC*, 15)

Such “universal declensionist narratives of ecological degradation or catastrophe” are common to the environmentalist literature,¹² and Raymond Williams suggests that “it is difficult to overestimate the importance” to “modern social thought” of such “myths” — “in which the transition from a rural to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder.”¹³

These myths play an important role in deflecting attention from things that need to be closely scrutinized. Framing issues in terms of big-box concepts like “industrial culture” and “community” distracts from the work of analyzing and developing theory in relation to, say, how changes in specific economic circuits or cultural processes are related to the ways groups work with or against different material and symbolic infrastructures to produce schools, homes, and neighborhoods as intertwined “places.”

In place of such analysis, the myth of a fall undergirds a simpler narrative of moral decline and peril. According to Gruenewald, “fundamentally significant knowledge is knowledge of the unique places that our lives inhabit; failure to know those places is to remain in a disturbing sort of ignorance” (*PBEGA*, 143). For Theobald such ignorance is an aspect of “the cultural decadence that currently pervades print and broadcast media in this country” and “the moral poverty of the current educational agenda,” both of which call for some sort of “cultural healing” (*TC*, 120, 122, and 1).

12. Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), x.

13. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 96.

Thus while Clifford Geertz's comment that "no one lives in the world in general" is quoted approvingly,¹⁴ Gruenewald and Smith nonetheless draw a sharp divide between people who do and people who do not:

For many people, the ability to earn a decent living means having to move great distances from their families, and to move again and again as directed by the job market. This pattern of uprooting means that many people simply do not live long enough in one place to develop intimate relationships to places. Instead of what Orr (1992) calls "inhabiting" a place, many people only "reside" where they live, and develop no particular connection to their human and non-human environments. This phenomenon of "placelessness" is associated with alienation from others and a lack of participation in the social and political life of communities. (PBEGA, xvi)

Instead of looking at different forms of mobility or migration, or the ways the movements of children and adults, men and women, or people from different economic classes and ethnic groups are differentially structured, or the ways that spatial divisions of labor affect people in different labor market segments, or thinking about how these things shape the ways children, parents, and teachers do school, or analyzing how they are related to the ways people live in and think about sites, Gruenewald and Smith work from what Linda Malkki calls a "sedentarist metaphysics" in which "territorial displacement" is treated as "an inner, pathological condition of the displaced" rather than as "a fact about sociopolitical context."¹⁵ People are "placeless" for them, not in the sense of being unhoused, but in the sense of failing to "stay put, dig in, and become long-term inhabitants of place" (PBEGA, xvi). Even schools, at least where teachers and children are mobile, can be "placeless" in this sense as well: "Place-conscious education, therefore, aims to work against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling."¹⁶

Redemption, it follows, can be found through emphasizing place, becoming more conscious of it, digging in, working and living on a more localized scale, and, in regards to schooling, grounding pedagogy and curriculum in the notion of place-as-community.

Most of this argument seems problematic if viewed against studies of people doing things in places. Instead of beginning as discrete, self-contained worlds (only later to be threatened by outside, placeless forces), actual settings — whether ecosystems, schools, towns, or states — are continually interacting with what is "outside" their recognized boundaries. Instead of stable, homogenous autarchies, places change even when we "stay put" and such continuities as they have are shaped by class, gender, and racial dynamics organized through extra-local relations of power.¹⁷

14. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 262.

15. Linda Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 30 and 33.

16. Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place," 620.

17. Hayden, *The Power of Place*. On Chicago, see Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). On rural Sudan, Cindi Katz, *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Instead of communal utopias, communities even in relatively nonindustrial, unmodern societies are internally stratified and often organized on the basis of brutal inequalities.¹⁸ Intensities of meaning and place attachment do not depend on long tenures in a particular site and need not be focused on a single contiguous area.¹⁹ Finally, although a lot of schools may be bad places, “speaking critically of bad places,” as Hayden points out, “is more effective than dismissing them as places.”²⁰ One might better ask, for example, how schools end up seeming like refuges to some students and purgatories to others.²¹

A division of the world into parallel binaries such as place and non-place, inhabitant and resident, commons and markets, or local and global, turns complex, changing relations into discrete states, chops gradients into well-bounded regions, and obscures the critical questions of how places are constituted and connected to one another. When Gruenewald suggests, for example, that “place-based education is frequently discussed at a distance from the urban, multicultural arena” (*PBEGA*, 3), the problem is not only the implication that the countryside is somehow culturally homogeneous,²² but the treatment of “rural” and “urban” as dichotomous categories rather than continuous, tightly connected spatial projects that “prosper or falter as a whole.”²³

Globalizing practices, similarly, do not destroy “place” or create “placelessness,” nor do the displacements of people make them placeless.²⁴ Rather, the creation of translocal networks implies an intensification or thickening of “interdependencies among places” and times.²⁵ As Linda McDowell puts it, “globalizing forces reconstruct rather than destroy localities.”²⁶ Or to use Donald Kalb and

18. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 37.

19. Roger Rouse, “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” in *Transnational Spaces*, eds. Peter Jackson, Philip Crang, and Claire Dwyer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

20. Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 18.

21. For the former, see Deborah Meier, *In Schools We Trust* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon, 2002); and for the latter, see Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin, “Learning for Anything Everyday,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 26, no. 5 (1995): 471–489.

22. See Jerry Johnson and Marty Strange, *Why Rural Matters 2007: The Realities of Rural Education Growth* (Arlington, Virginia: The Rural School and Community Trust, 2007).

23. Ronald Hayduk, “Race and Suburban Sprawl: Regionalism and Structural Racism,” in *Suburban Sprawl: Culture, Theory, Politics*, eds. Matthew Lindstrom and Hugh Bartling (Lanham, Maryland: Roman and Littlefield, 2003), 139 and 140. See, among many others, William Lucy and David Phillips, *Confronting Suburban Decline: Strategic Planning for Metropolitan Renewal* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001); Dorothy Holland et al., *Local Democracy Under Siege: Activism, Public Interests, and Private Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); and Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

24. Stuart Hall, “Culture, Community, Nation,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 3 (1993): 349–363; and Malkki, “National Geographic.”

25. Neil Brenner, “Global, Fragmented, Hierarchical: Henri Lefebvre’s Geographies of Globalization,” *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997): 144.

26. Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3 and 4. See also Gerald Sider, “Anthropology and History: Opening Points for a new Synthesis,” in *Critical Junctions: Anthropology and History Beyond the Cultural Turn*, eds. Donald Kalb and Herman Tak (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 170.

Herman Tak's formulation, "place making is never just a local event....[It] is as much based in the movements in and out, as it is in what moves those who do not move."²⁷

Indeed, a number of the chapters in Gruenewald and Smith illustrate just such movements. For example, Apple Computer contributed to the Skowhegan project; the multinational Levi Strauss corporation was a critical sponsor of the Albuquerque work;²⁸ Elaine Senechal's high school began as a demonstration project sponsored by the U.S. Labor Department, became part of the City of Boston Public School System, then acquired a looser affiliation with the Coalition for Essential Schools, and, through Senechal's science class, made connections with neighborhood associations, local environmental groups, and community colleges.

These kinds of networks and circuits organize education in relation to place and produce places in different forms. The careful, comparative analyses needed to tease out how the different strategies work and what kinds of "places" they presuppose and create is missing in PBE theory, however, and it does not seem likely to emerge as long as that theory stays wrapped around standard dichotomies and moralizing definitions of place.

DIFFERENCE

Coupling these dichotomies to the narrative of a modern world fallen from some ancient, communal state creates other problems for PBE. If we take as our basic moral and ontological division the supposedly growing distance between an ideal of people anchored in spatially bounded, long-inhabited communities, and the supposed reality of alienated people adrift in the placelessness of global capitalism, we end up defining cultural identity and differentiating groups according to what we judge to be their distance from the ideal. This has two consequences. One is a valorization of peoples thought to approximate the idea — usually indigenous groups. Thus Gruenewald explains that he is "increasingly...convinced that, despite problems of appropriation, Native, Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal educational processes and epistemologies need to be at the center of place-based, culturally responsive teaching" (*PBEGA*, 151).

Those "problems of appropriation" deserve more attention. PBE does a service in drawing attention to indigenous education and indigenous knowledge systems, but it reifies them as it moves from descriptions of specific groups to global theoretical statements about indigeneity. This is a rhetorical move with problematic precedents: Conservation groups have long "used native peoples to advance their agendas by using them as exemplars of cultures with a strong conservation ethic," objectifying and glossing over important differences among groups and opening the way for more pernicious appropriations. In the case of PBE theory, it is true that many indigenous peoples do "possess an extensive and

27. Don Kalb and Herman Tak, "Introduction: Critical Junctions — Recapturing Anthropology and History," in *Critical Junctions*, eds. Kalb and Tak, 18.

28. On Levi Strauss, see Karl Schoenberger, *Levi's Children: Coming to Terms with Human Rights in the Global Marketplace* (New York: Grove Press, 2001).

deep understanding of their local ecosystems."²⁹ It may even be that these "unique systems of knowledge...can serve as the basis for more successful development interventions" and perhaps become elements of an "effort to counter the dominant development discourse."³⁰ But the idea that the knowledge systems of one cultural group can be the "center" of "culturally-responsive teaching" for different cultural groups does not make sense, nor is it clear that the beliefs of indigenous groups could (let alone should) provide general philosophical guidance. Indeed, even if one accepted this goal, it is unclear that it could be put into practice. As Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz suggest, speaking of a Papua New Guinean context,

under contemporary sociopolitical circumstances, *simply to engage in the process* of setting common terms of cultural contrast and comparison, of setting the parameters of comparability, is likely to favour the more powerful...The cultural forms that constitute local knowledge may lose their compelling grounding as they become rendered understandable to, and by, others.³¹

The second consequence of defining difference as distance from "inhabitation," "intradependency," and the "ancient commons" is problematic in a different way: it deflects attention from other dimensions of difference — ethnicity, class, and gender, in particular — and ignores their roles in place-making and environmental politics.

This point has been made before, and Gruenewald is sensitive to it. In some of his earlier work, for example, he acknowledges race and ethnicity as forms of "marginality."³² In the chapter he contributes to the anthology, however, he seems to suggest that the problem is with others. He claims, for example, that "diversity" is a "code word" — a "safer substitute for the word race, although it also sometimes means class, gender, or sexual orientation" (*PBEGA*, 139). In their introduction, he and Smith criticize those who foreground such issues: "Place-conscious education challenges conventional notions of diversity in education, of multiculturalism or culturally responsive teaching, which too often take for granted the legitimacy and value of an education that disregards places in all their particularity and uniqueness" (*PBEGA*, xxi).

A careful critique of place in multicultural education theory and practices, and a discussion of how PBE might inform it, would probably be useful. But Gruenewald and Smith do not identify the "conventional notions" they complain

29. Raymond Hames, "The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36 (2007): 185 and 184.

30. Michael R. Dove, "Indigenous People and Environmental Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 195.

31. Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz, "On the Generification of Culture: From Blow Fish to Melanesian," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, no. 3 (2001): 509. On the difficulty of translating indigenous forms of "spirituality" and "cosmology" from the South to the North, see also Orlando Fals-Borda, "Peoples' Spacetimes in Global Processes: The Response of the Local," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 6, no. 3 (2000): 632; and Søren Hvalkof, "Progress of the Victims: Political Ecology in the Peruvian Amazon," in *Reimagining Political Ecology*, eds. Aletta Biersack and James Greenberg (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006).

32. Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place."

of, nor does Gruenewald explain how he would infuse those notions with place-consciousness. As mentioned earlier, Bowers includes a chapter on Detroit in *Revitalizing the Commons*, but he does not make much of an effort to situate the community-based efforts he describes in Detroit's complex racial dynamics.³³ After noting that "the revitalization of the commons requires that the long-standing discriminatory practices that characterize the history of Detroit politics [must] also be addressed," his first examples are of a community activist's efforts to maintain library funding, and her volunteer work "to teach special needs students basic horticultural skills" (*RC*, 55). Theobald gives us an account of the rural U.S. Midwest in which there are apparently no Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, or nonfarmers. He acknowledges oppression only in the most general fashion:

There were exclusionary dimensions to rural communities across the interior plains, as anyone who has moved as an outsider into one of these places can attest. The reasons for this exclusionary dimension go back to our feudal past, but all the same, it cannot be condoned by any reasonable person. (*TC*, 89–90)³⁴

This inattention to racism, classism, ableism, and gender-based discrimination is puzzling. Environmentalism, the discourse at the center of several versions of PBE, has a long history of racism that needs to be interrogated,³⁵ and there is an extensive literature on ethnicity, race, and place that could be brought to bear on educational issues.³⁶ Place has been a key topic for researchers of African American life in the United States since W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*³⁷ — hardly surprising given the prominence of segregation-by-place as a strategy of racial domination. And it is difficult to see how Latino studies researchers studying the education of immigrant, transnational, or long-settled communities, or feminist geographers studying the gendering of public space, or disability studies scholars preoccupied with place-focused concepts like "inclusion," can be said to hide

33. On Detroit, see, for example, John Hartigan, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999); William Neill, *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Leith Mullings, "Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 681. Bowers mentions "environmentally racist practices" in passing (for example, *RC*, 80), but is more interested in critiquing Cornel West, bell hooks, Manning Marable, and Paulo Freire than in working through the particularities of the Detroit case.

34. For the fundamental role of racism in much of the Midwest (and elsewhere), see James Lowen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

35. Kosek, *Understories*, 142–227.

36. For example, Alastair Bonnett, "Constructions of Race, Place, and Discipline: Geographies of Racial Identity and Racism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 4 (1996): 864–883; David Delaney, "The Space That Race Makes," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 6–14; and Mindy Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2005).

37. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Lippincott, 1899). For more recent work, see Steven Gregory, *Black Corona* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Jeff Maskovsky, "Governing the 'New Hometowns': Race, Power, and Neighborhood Participation in the New Inner City," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 13, no. 1 (2006): 73–99. Gruenewald and Bowers both seem aware of one empirical study — the same one — on race and urban education: Stephen Haymes, *Race, Culture and the City: A Pedagogy for the Black Urban Struggle* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1995).

behind code words or ignore place. The use of “diversity” as a substitute for engaging issues of race, class, and gender seems to be mainly a deficiency in Gruenewald’s work.

At base, however, it is not clear that engagement is an aim. For PBE theorists, the problem seems less to create strategic alliances than to convince educators and educational theorists that they too should give primacy to place in analyzing schools and communities. This raises a broader question of the logic behind PBE as a social or educational movement.

PRACTICE AND POLITICS

Gruenewald and Smith describe the chapters in their anthology as “instructive and inspiring stories” to help in an effort to “reclaim the significance of the local” and define a movement (*PBEGA*, xiii). The chapters are interesting, some seem instructive, but it is not clear how the movement they are part of is supposed to work.

As noted earlier, on a practical level much of the work (with the exception of the Alaskan project described by Ray Barnhardt) is continuous with (or could be folded into) already-established reform efforts. Theobald explicitly acknowledges this, noting that his recommendations — on classroom management, teaching with novels, using “inquiry-based learning,” and the like — “have all been around for some time” (*TC*, 128, 122, 126–130, 138). Bowers recommends solutions ranging from small-scale farming, training the unemployed in crafts like woodworking, introducing local currency systems, supporting community gardening and agriculture (one “ecologically informed approach” he endorses apparently involves using two and a half square miles near downtown Detroit to raise corn for ethanol), and reforming the university by sending out an e-mail inviting faculty to a meeting to discuss his ideas (*RC*, 68, 88, 98–104, and 158–167). Gruenewald and Smith advocate “professional development activities” and lots of “leadership” (*PBEGA*, 350–355). Gruenewald recommends

increasing the range of opportunities for human perception and experience, examining the interrelationships between culture and place, understanding how spatial forms are embedded with ideologies and reproduce relationships of power, appreciating the diversity of life on the margins, attending to the health of nonhuman beings and ecosystems, and participating in the process of place making for living well.³⁸

Such ideas may be inspiring to someone, but it is not clear what kinds of social or educational movement they point to.

One response might be that a “movement” is not necessary, that the focus should be on the bounded locale — to each his or her own commons or bioregion. Some of the PBE literature can be read, for example, as an argument for reorienting economic (and one would assume educational) activity to this localized scale (see *Revitalizing the Commons* in particular). One problem with such a strategy, however, is that there is often a “disjuncture between the geographic scale(s) at

38. Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place,” 646.

which a problem is experienced, and the scale(s) at which it can politically be addressed³⁹ — between “scales of meaning” and “scales of regulation,”⁴⁰ or “spaces of dependence” and “spaces of engagement.”⁴¹ Whatever the terminology, the point is that to act “locally” we have to “build linkages between grievance events at one scale and possibilities for recourse at another.”⁴² When a teacher gets a new standardized test to administer, a new set of state curriculum guidelines, or an extra ten students in the class, these generate immediate, local problems, but the tests, curricula, and movements of population themselves have been generated by processes that begin and end outside the classroom and ultimately have to be engaged at that larger scale. If industries move out of a neighborhood and leave behind waste sites, or farmland surrounding the town gets sucked up by big box retailers, these are local issues, yes, but they have to be engaged at both local and extra-local scales.

Indeed, an insistence on the primacy of “the local” is a tool corporations and states use to subvert social and environmental justice efforts. Agribusinesses challenged on issues such as pesticide drift can argue that pesticides are the problem of the suffering locale and not of the distant polluter.⁴³ “Objections to federal environmental regulations,” as Doug Henwood points out, are often made “in the name of local autonomy.”⁴⁴ Steven Gregory describes how “place-based identities” are used and encouraged by extra-local organizations (in his study, the New York Port Authority) to forestall deliberation and debate on key questions.⁴⁵ The volunteerism advocated in some of the PBE works considered here — the privileging of “community” and the enthusiasm for “social capital” — similarly echo the efforts of states and corporations to wither the social commons by shedding social welfare responsibilities and shifting them to the locales their policies have helped impoverish.⁴⁶ Thus Jeff Maskovsky describes “community” itself as “the sublime ideal and enabling condition of neoliberal governance.”⁴⁷

39. Hilda Kurtz, “Scale Frames and Counter-Scale Frames: Constructing the Problem of Environmental Injustice,” *Political Geography* 22, no. 8 (2003): 891.

40. George Towers, “Applying the Political Geography of Scale: Grassroots Strategies and Environmental Justice,” *The Professional Geographer* 52, no. 1 (2000): 26.

41. Kevin Cox, “Spaces of Dependence, Spaces of Engagement and the Politics of Scale, Or: Looking for Local Politics,” *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (1998): 2.

42. Kurtz, “Scale Frames and Counter-Scale Frames,” 891.

43. Jill Harrison, “Accidents and Invisibilities: Scaled Discourse and the Naturalization of Regulatory Neglect in California’s Pesticide Drift Conflict,” *Political Geography* 25, no. 5 (2006): 506–529.

44. Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 163.

45. Gregory, *Black Corona*, 213.

46. Susan Hyatt, “From Citizen to Volunteer: Neoliberal Governance and the Erasure of Poverty,” in *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics and Impoverished People in the United States*, eds. Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky (New York: New York University Press, 2001). See also Nikolas Rose, Pat O’Malley, and Mariana Valverde, “Governmentality,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2 (2006): 83–104; and Margaret Somers, “Let Them Eat Social Capital,” *Thesis Eleven* 81, no. 1 (2005): 5–19.

47. Maskovsky, “Governing the ‘New Hometowns,’” 93.

If cultivating one's localized garden is problematic, a second response might be to think of PBE as principally about changing individual beliefs and dispositions. This idea runs through many of the chapters in the Gruenewald and Smith collection: teach teachers and then children through pedagogies that make them "place-conscious" by "examining," "understanding," "appreciating," and "attending to" place. Show them how to inhabit and care for the places they live, and this will aggregate into a general solution. One of the two major aims of what Gruenewald labels "a critical pedagogy of place" is thus to "identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)" (PBEGA, 9).⁴⁸

Although formulating the problem in these terms could be taken as another example of the valorization of individual initiative and effort popular with corporate and right-wing ideologues, there is a more interesting interpretation. Instead of following a PBE narrative that constructs people as unconscious of their immediate environments, we could give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that all of us think and care about the places we stand, but that most of us have trouble understanding how these places have come to be or might be changed. This is not because we are inattentive to them or do not have good roots, but because the *other* places to which they are connected, and in relation to which they are constituted, are hidden from our view, segregated from our everyday concerns, by circuits of communication, representation, and education. The question, then, is not whether or not we are place-conscious, it is the places of which we are conscious. Focusing people on their immediate settings, in this view, would not necessarily be a good way to focus them on their immediate settings.

Instead, invoking John Berger's oft-quoted observation that "it is space not time that hides consequences from us," Cindi Katz speaks of the necessity of a "broader project of 'unhiding' the consequences of globalized capitalist production by showing people 'throughout the whole world in their inequality':"⁴⁹

"Corporate environmentalism" has tended to overemphasize individual, consumption-side "solutions" like recycling and "buying green," while leaving destructive transnational production processes largely intact. There is a certain abstraction from creative environmental engagement, therefore, when children in the urban industrial centers argue righteously — in electrically lit and fossil-fuel-heated rooms — that extreme environmental measures are needed.⁵⁰

One way to pursue this unhiding might be to organize pedagogical projects not around "place" but around "the commons," understanding the term, a bit differently than Theobald or Bowers, to refer to the "assemblages and ensembles of resources

48. The second aim of a critical pedagogy of place is to "identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation)." The more I read this, the more ambiguous it seems. How can we identify places that teach us how to live well with our total environments if we do not already know how to live well with the total environment? Who decides what counts as "living well"? What is the "total" environment? How are "material places" that teach us related to other pedagogical and political efforts? Why separate place and treat it independently from such efforts?

49. John Berger, *The Look of Things* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 40; quoted in Katz, *Growing Up Global*, 179.

50. Katz, *Growing Up Global*, 126.

that human beings hold in common or in trust to use on behalf of themselves, other living human beings, and past and future generations of human beings, and which are essential to their biological, cultural, and social reproduction."⁵¹

Treating the commons not as "romanticized relics of the past but rather dynamic contemporary institutions that act and react to current challenges and opportunities"⁵² might allow us to give curricular and pedagogical attention to "unhiding" the ways people in different locations are linked by translocal (indeed, global) "natural-resource commons" (for example, water, air), "social commons" (such as education), "intellectual and cultural commons" (ideas, arts, and the like), and "species commons" (gene sequences, bodies).⁵³

Or it might not. Consciousness of where the places we are in the world are in the world is necessarily a contingent, relational accomplishment. Our awareness of distant events, however integral their connections to our immediate situations, depends upon our ties with people elsewhere and on the intermediaries that link us. The problem of forging and maintaining such links and networks brings us, finally, to politics and specifically to questions of association and joint action on local and extra-local issues with distant others whose fates are entangled with ours.

This might be a place where the work of particular indigenous groups can provide useful illustrations of organizing across translocal or transnational scales.⁵⁴ The U'Wa in Colombia, for example, have worked with northern non-governmental organizations; the Asheninka in Peru have co-opted the World Bank to protect their lands; the Kayapo in Brazil make videos for the world stage; the Zapatistas (and many others) use the Internet to communicate with others around the world; and so on. Ray Barnhardt's work provides an example from the PBE literature of a related kind of linking that inventively combines distributed curriculum development with site-specific retreats and workshops.⁵⁵ Perhaps by carefully

51. Nonini, "Introduction," 1. See also David Bollier, "Reclaiming the Commons," *Boston Review* 27, nos. 3-4 (2002), <http://bostonreview.net/BR27.3/bollier.html>; and Michael Goldman, ed. *Privatizing Nature: Political Struggles for the Global Commons* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

52. Lu, "'The Commons' in an Amazonian Context," 45.

53. Nonini, "Introduction," 5-7.

54. For discussion of such work, see, for example, Arun Agrawal, *Environmentalities: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006); Hvalkof, "Progress of the Victims;" Fals-Borda, "Peoples' Spacetimes in Global Processes;" and Daniel Jaffee, *Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability, and Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

55. Ray Barnhardt, "Creating a Place for Indigenous Knowledge in Education: The Alaska Native Knowledge Network," in *PBEGA*, 121; and Ray Barnhardt, "Domestication of the Ivory Tower: Institutional Adaptation to Cultural Distance," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2002): 247. Although the Alaskan context is unique in a number of ways, Mary Romero shows that similar efforts can work elsewhere in her essay "Nurturing and Validating Indigenous Epistemologies in Higher Education: Comment on 'Domestication of the Ivory Tower,'" *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2002): 250-254. For an example that does not involve indigenous groups, see Sidney Tarrow and Douglas McAdam, "Scale Shift in Transnational Contention," in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, eds. Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 146.

analyzing such efforts and others we could develop analogous strategies for changing the kinds of places schools are by crafting associations that stretch across cities, bioregions, and policy spaces — none of which would diminish the local grounding or place-based nature of the work. The choice, in other words, is not between localization and a small-scale world, on the one hand, and the current corporate-state construction of a broader world, on the other.

How would PBE fit into such efforts? Some of the contributions to the Gruenewald and Smith anthology, and some of the projects described in Bowers's chapter on Detroit, suggest that vital work is going on around the country. But as Dorothy Holland and her colleagues note in their study of democracy and activism in North Carolina, efforts are necessary but "insufficient in themselves." They point, in addition, to "locally based but nationally active citizens' organizations" such as labor unions and environmental groups as examples of the kinds of organizational forms necessary for broad, sustained political — and, one can infer, educational — change.⁵⁶ Whether PBE theory can serve as the broker for such networks, and what it would look like if it did, is unclear.

The separatist dichotomies and moralizing narratives of PBE theory may attract fervent adherents to the area, especially people worried about the environment, but it could also keep away potential allies who like their stories less simple. And although the philosophical and conceptual range of works like Gruenewald's and Bowers's is impressive, there is as yet relatively little engagement with programs of empirical research in the various fields concerned with the complexities of place and place-making. Finally, the peculiar dance around issues of "difference" — and the failure of PBE theory to address the ways education and place are woven in part out of racism, classism, gender, and ability discrimination — leaves it in a position of being able to say little about fundamental place-making processes. This marginalizes the program in relation to key political and educational debates of the day and, in the end, may undermine efforts to make place central to educational theory and practice.

56. Holland et al., *Local Democracy Under Siege*, 244.

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