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Youth, Space, Cities: Toward the Concrete

Robert J. Helfenbein & Gabriel Huddleston

The expression “urban society” meets a theoretical need. It is more than simply a literary or pedagogical device, or even the expression of some form of acquired knowledge; it is an elaboration, a search, a conceptual formulation. A movement of thought toward a certain *concrete*, and perhaps toward the concrete, assumes shape and detail. This movement, if it proves to be true, will lead to a practice, *urban practice*, that is finally or newly comprehended. (Lefebvre, 1970/2003, p. 5, authors emphasis)

A theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (Hall, 1996, pp. 141-142)

The articles for this special issue on “youth, space, cities” represent a collection of scholarship that works the intersection of cultural studies, critical geography, and critical approaches to educational theorizing. In thinking of these articles together, as a collection of work while not necessarily in parallel but sharing a trajectory, one quickly sees an undergirding notion: Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation. Hall (1996) notes that articulation presents a valuable term for cultural studies work because of its double meaning within the British context. To articulate does mean

to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. (p. 141)

Those within critical geography (Harvey, 2001; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996) and those who have sought to apply it to educational and curriculum theorizing (Allen, 1999; Helfenbein, 2010; Taylor & Helfenbein, 2009) have identified space as a frame that can be articulated with other elements in a way that offers illumination

within inquiry in/around educative contexts. Indeed, such an articulation moves this theoretical work toward the material because working the links between the ideological, social, cultural, and the lived experience forces the scholar to discuss what is materially happening to students and teachers within schools, classrooms, and other spaces.

The marriage between cultural studies of education and critical geography seems to be a natural fit due to the insistence of both to problematize the world's taken-for-grantedness allowing for deeper examination beyond the usual, tired solutions that are often presented. This is even more apparent in the discussion of neoliberal education reforms that present solutions, which mask themselves as common sense thereby making the likelihood of success seemingly inevitable. The only effective way to take on such reforms is to question the very framework upon which they rest. One such way is through articulation because it:

Asks how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it; it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position. (Hall, 1996, p. 142)

The addition of Critical Geography to this type of cultural studies analysis provides a rebalanced ontological and epistemological triad via what Soja (2010) suggests as the historical, the social, and spatial frame for the examination of ideological elements. The effectiveness of academic work within a neoliberal society that encompasses the social, the political and the economic to the extent that education is left utterly transformed in its wake, depends on its ability to not only identify the ideological elements themselves, but how they are or are not articulated within that neoliberal discourse. The identification of such elements is a prelude to the more difficult task of articulation as it must pay attention to the material examples of how such ideological elements work in a myriad of ways.

To take up the task of presenting a collection of scholarship that revolves around the intersection of youth, space, and cities requires some foundational work on the ways in which our own terms are articulated and understood across the work. Certainly, each of the three might be seen as fluid, perhaps even as floating signifiers of complex social forces that involve the nexus of power/knowledge and identity. Even as meaning isn't fixed for these concepts, we might attempt to delineate what we mean, or, in the very least, present the different ways in which we inscribe these terms for the task at hand. That task notwithstanding, the effort of fusing Critical Geography with educational theorizing involves an intentionality that focuses our attention on what Pinar (2007) refers to, building on Ted Aoki as "the lived experience, this place where we hear the call of teaching" (p. 42), or, said another way, points us toward the concrete.

Youth

The learning spaces and pedagogical possibilities often were where the teachers were not. (Roy, 2003, p. 5)

Youth, as a category, is more than a little problematic. We know that to think of youth as outside of the social and historical forces at work in its representation is insufficient. From both sides—child or adult perspective—youth is most likely reducible to “not-adult” in its usage. But certainly, the field of education implies an interaction with youth in some form in the majority of its work; when we say education we typically mean the education of youth. However, to dig deeper into issues of power and identity, the subject position of youth itself needs to be seen as one of negotiation, of struggle. It is important for us to remember,

There is no universal child...Child identity is always plural and there are a multiplicity of ways to know childhood. Although childhoods are variable they are also intentional, predicated upon social, political, historical, geographical and moral contexts. (Aitken, 2001, p. 57)

Geographies of youth, greatly influenced by feminist and poststructural thought, focus attention on the simultaneous process by which young people are embedded and embodied within spaces and in the ways in which they embark in place-making both as strategies of resilience and resistance. A critical geography of youth turns our eye to “the ways young people are placed, at what scale they operate and in which ways their identities are fixed” (Aitken, 2001, p.19). In moving toward the concrete of youth experience we are cautioned to remember that spaces are not experienced in the same way, place is not made in the same ways for youth and adult alike.

Space

Place is place only if accompanied by a history. (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 8)

In the introduction to *Curriculum as Social Psychoanalysis: The Significance of Place*, Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) argue for a curriculum theory that takes place seriously. As part of the project to continue thinking about the lived experience of curriculum they argue that “the relationship between place and feeling is central to curriculum theory’s study of place...indeed, place particularizes and conveys embedded social forces” (p. 4). In this way it seems essential to consider place’s significance when the autobiographical and the unconscious aspects of understanding curriculum are in process. Using “social psychoanalysis” as a marker of their approach, they note that this work “attempts to subvert the given facts by interrogating them historically. They remind us that Herbert Marcuse argued that the tendency to make existing social arrangements appear rational and natural (i.e. the process of reification) is “the project of forgetting” (p. 3). Kincheloe and Pinar, the other authors of their 1991 collection, and the scholars presented here argue against this

ahistorical, uncritical look at youth and cities in/of spaces and the relational ways in which it both is and comes to be. But important too in this project is to not only look backward but to turn our attention to the future, to what may be emergent or imminent. Ellsworth (2005) points to “places of learning [that] struggle to remain, themselves, things in the making” (p. 10) and, following Massumi seeks out the possibilities in spaces that “scatter thoughts and images into difference linkages or new alignments without destroying them” (Massumi in Ellsworth, p. 13). This willingness to be open to uncertainty roots this approach in a language of possibility. As argued elsewhere, one could think of this desire as a geography of getting lost (Helfenbein, 2004), one open to new subjectivities, new forms of meaning-making, new forms of resistance.

The City: Toward the Concrete

Curriculum theory, likewise, must possess a particularistic social theory, a grounded view of the world in which education takes place. Without such a perspective, curriculum theory operates in isolation, serving to trivialize knowledge, fragmenting it into bits and pieces of memorizable waste, while obscuring the political effects of such a process. (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 5)

Although not a curriculum theory collection per se, this special issue takes the call from Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) seriously and notes, in particular, the work of critical geographers as useful to scholars in education who seek to take “a grounded view of the world,” to move toward the concrete. Soja (1985) points to a critical social theory in which “being, consciousness, and action...[exist] not simply ‘in’ space but ‘of’ space as well. To be alive intrinsically and inescapably involves participation in the social production of space, shaping and being shaped by a constantly evolving spatiality” (Soja, 1985, p. 177). Here may be an opportunity to think about place and subjectivity, curriculum as lived experience, and theory in education as looking to foster spaces of possibility.

Nowhere are the processes of shaping and constantly being shaped by the spatial more evident than in the city. As the epigraph of this introduction notes, “urban” as a term refers to more than category or conceptual organization, it is “an elaboration, a search...a practice, *urban practice*” (Lefebvre, 1970/2003, p. 5). The implications are not only theoretical but also methodological for scholars as we consider an educative project within the changing formations of the global city. While not suggesting that this terrain is new, the collection of work here represents a more explicit staking of that claim. However, just because the spatial component of social relations seems to be apparent does not mean that it is connected at all times to everything. We cannot say space is everything or worse, the *only* thing, but at the same time one should be extremely careful as to where and when we say it matters—we must work the articulation and be precise with the ideological elements that come into play. This is to say that we have to work the link, not just focusing on the ideological elements.

The interactions, or the friction between those elements, are as important, if not more so, than the examination of the elements themselves. The danger lies in getting hung up on the elements at the detriment of not examining how they are linked, keeping in mind these linkages are not fixed or permanent; there are no guarantees. The point of working the link is not to fix in place, but to explore how and why those linkages come together in the first place.

Articulation's strength as an analytic resides in the ability to describe but, at the same time, not foreclose description upon understanding. While a scholar can use articulation as a means to describe her area of study, it also forces that scholar to return again and again to the concrete. In other words, using articulation does not cap scholarly inquiry with a label of understanding, but instead insists on a continued examination of how ideological forces evolve within an ever-changing context. Articulation is not the only example of such a process. In a recent example of critical ethnography, Tsing (2005) uses the term friction as both a metaphor to describe and a call to examine the concrete of social relations with a spatial context. Indeed, Tsing's work embraces the nuance and ambivalence to such a degree that it questions notions of both a romanticized local versus the all-powerful evil (and/or unquestioned good) forces of so-called development and globalization. Tsing's insistence on describing the complexity of both the local and the global exposes complete understanding as a mirage that contains a pool of ideology disguised as "common-sense." This described complexity allows a multidirectional plane in which to explore commonalty and, eventually, solutions. We believe the articles within this issue offer their own examples in the spirit of articulation and friction all within a trajectory of spatial analysis. Jason G. Irizarry and René Antrop-Gonzalez articulate place, space, youth, and culture to highlight the experiences of Puerto Rican youth in urban school contexts and, by doing so, privilege race and identity in seeking out school spaces that provide for student agency and ways of knowing. G. Sue Kasun examines how one teacher's practices within the classroom create a unique place that runs counter to the effects of accountability and standardization. While her work seeks to describe the classroom itself, it also brings to bear the complicated way it runs counter to policies that are detrimental to the underserved students within that classroom. Aslam Fataar's use of the word 'carving' to describe students' movements and effect on the post-apartheid city in which they live is an attempt to describe by continuously returning to the lives of the young people at the center of his work. Additionally, Kaoru Miyazawa presents the lives of first-generation immigrants as in constant flux between dreams and survival in the discourse of the American Dream. Sophia Rodriguez calls into question traditional notions of space and place by positing alternative spaces instead of the traditional classroom. Thinking about the sensual in the curriculum and spaces where the identity work of youth take place, Walter S. Gershon uses sound as a way of mapping that brings into focus the challenges of educational research and the complexity of meaning-making within the interplay of self and world.

All of these authors not only take space seriously but also represent a type of scholarship that focuses on the materiality of social forces in the lives of people, youth and adult. Throughout the work presented here, the intersections of space, place, power, and identity provide the frame they which their work is taken up and provide yet another way of thinking through a cultural studies of education—a project we would suggest has always had at its center, a move toward the concrete.

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