THEORIZING PLACE
STUDENTS' NAVIGATION OF PLACE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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OUR LIVES, and those of our students, are filled with interactions with and in places. On any day, we spend time in many places—at home, work, shopping at a store, eating in restaurants, riding the bus, walking down the sidewalk, in cyberspace. We watch TV and movies that "take place" somewhere. The word "place" appears again and again in conjunction with our activities. This seemingly known concept has been disrupted in many academic disciplines. Geographers, philosophers, curriculum theorists, literary theorists, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, and others have stopped talking *about* places and started inquiring into place. They are thoughtful about place as a concept—how it acquires meanings and what these indicate for people who interact there. They pose questions about the way in which conceptual forms—democracy, for example—structure how places are organized and organize people in their thinking and movement. The inquiry draws attention to what it means for something to occur *in* a place.

The destabilization of place began with Marxist geographers attentive to the politics of global development (Harvey, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994). They sought to understand how the increased need of spaces for the consumption and production of capital changed the landscape within and between countries. While the rapid increase in development indicated to some that places had plateaued in their unique distinction (space no longer mattered), Marxist geographers claimed that increased global movement, interaction, competition, and cooperation made space matter more. They argued that places were increasingly complex, not less important, and set out to understand how the flow of capital reorganized places, their meanings, and their role in the production of inequality. This argument developed a line of inquiry regarding the social/human component in the production of place—a nation seeking entry to the global economy, the design of public space, or a small town working to retain its identity (Agnew, 1987; Entrikin, 1991; Gieryn, 2000). Central to this inquiry was assessing the *sense of place* people attached to places and posing questions about how this meaning arose, why, and for whom (Anderson, 1991; Duncan & Duncan, 2001; Harvey, 1996; Hoelscher, 2003). They based their inquiry on a social

and interactive understanding of place; that meaning of a place evolves and is contested by people who engage in a place not from its physical infrastructure. In this framework, understanding a place requires understanding the ways individuals or collective groups give or take meaning from their encounter with place and why places acquire and reproduce particular representations.

Curriculum writers use senses of places but rarely question its meaning or how it arose. Although places are prevalent across the disciplines, we largely speak of places as merely locations without much attention to the power of their meaning. Curriculum theorists draw attention to the complexity of place, both the place (school/community) in which the curriculum (and learning) is situated and the places students study. They focus predominantly on two aspects of curriculum and place. First, they attend to the way in which the architecture of a place (Ellsworth, 2005) or the dominant sense a place holds (Casemore, 2007; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Kitchens, 2009) affects the pedagogy of the place and the manner in which students are able to learn. Second, there is attention to the ways in which people bring different understandings of these places and how people's relationship with places affects their identities (Helfenbein, 2004; Ng-A-Fook, 2007; Zacher, 2009). These curriculum theorists recognize curriculum is not placeless and that the way in which students make meaning of the place called school, the community around the school, and the places in the curriculum affect their learning. While this research gives attention to the contested meanings students carry into and away from places, we still need more attention to how young people assign meaning to the landscapes they encounter.

Noting the difference in thought between curriculum writers and curriculum theorists, the possibility exists that young people have two different experiences with geography—one in the formal curriculum and one in the larger world (in and out of school). Making conscious the tactics students employ as they move through places serves as a means of merging planned curriculum and experience. This paper reports from experiences with six high school students who gave voice to their experience. The encounters propose a model for place-making that speaks back to a school curriculum and builds onto the theoretical framing of place in critical geography. To understand the model, the paper begins with an overview of the theorists whose ideas are centered in the model. The paper then describes the students and their experiences in developing a model of place-making.

Space for Agency in the Production of Place

The research described and analyzed in this paper draws heavily from the work of three geographers/social theorists whose ideas are central to the development and proliferation of critical geography. These theorists are selected because their ideas about the production of place set the stage for inquiry, but also because students' revealing of their meaning-making in place references these same ideas. Together these frameworks explain the difference between the constructed and lived experience of place central in the work of the curriculum theorizers cited above, give rise to the idea of tactics essential in making meaning-making conscious, and disrupt the notions of boundaries often used to confine place.

Much of the work in critical geography can be traced to Henri Lefebvre's inquiries into the production of space. Critical of capitalism, Lefebvre (1991) shifted the discourse of space from how things are produced in spaces to the production of space (see also Elden, 2004; McCann, 1999). He distinguishes between different dimensions of space—conceived, perceived, and lived.

These distinctions reflect his articulation of abstract concepts and intentions that affect how space is experienced in the material or lived world. Conceived space is abstract—"space represented by elite social groups as homogenous, instrumental, and ahistorical in order to facilitate the exercise of state power and the free flow of capital" (McCann, 1999, p. 164). It accounts for the political and economic concepts, values, and systems that guide the organization of lived spaces. Perceived spaces are also abstract but reside in the mind of the user. It accounts for how people acquire an understanding of the meaning of space through senses. These abstractions affect how people filter representations to interact in lived space (Elden, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; McCann, 1999). Lived spaces are concrete locations; the space where people interact with physical arrangements and other people. People encounter lived spaces variably. The ideas that organize space do not involve all people equally. Lefebvre, an economic geographer, examined the class system that divided social interactions in space. His argument shows that spaces are continuously being shaped, reshaped, and challenged by the practices of individuals and groups in the past and present.

Lefebvre theorized space and yet the attention today turns toward place. Lefebvre did not distinguish space and place and some critical geographers use space and place interchangeably. Many others equate Lefebvre's lived/concrete space to *place*—the experiences that give texture to place and make *place* a separate concept (Casey, 2001; Massey, 2005). Massey (2005) notes that a space can exist without a place, but that place must have a space. Locating Lefebvre within the current distinctions, space embraces his abstract space—the stage-setting arena. Where and how these conceptions are carried out (Lefebvre's lived space) is the place used by geographers and sociologists (Gieryn, 2000). In other words, as Ettlinger and Bosco (2004) argue, space is the arena of operation while "place refers to the constellation of behaviors, institutions, and structures in a locality over time" (p. 255). Place occurs when spaces have acquired particular meanings through the interactions of people with/in that space.

Michel deCerteau (1984) took geographic meaning-making out of the academic sphere and into the lived realm proposing that people use geography in their everyday experience to identify sites in movies, watch the news, read books, move to the other side of town, and meet people. Paralleling Lefebvre's (1991) conceived and lived space, deCerteau uses strategies and tactics to distinguish between how places are structured and experienced. Strategies are the processes undertaken by institutions and their conceivers to organize locations in certain ways. For example, planners lay out spaces to promote a particular experience. Asserting the agency of the individual, he describes tactics of participants as the intentional manner in which people utilize these places. The tactics used by people may be unconscious, but that they can undermine the way strategists organized space suggests that people are agents in constructing the meanings and uses of places. They help people interpret the scene represented on the movie screen or decide when and how to enter new locations. These tactics are the everyday practice of geography.

Achille Mbembe's (2000) writings on political affiliation are commentary about geographic boundaries that planners or conceivers have laid. His work is both historical—examining how boundaries have emerged—as well as theoretical—examining the concept of territory. Mbembe draws attention to the boundaries drawn in Africa to designate sovereignty. Rejecting the "myth" of the arbitrary divide of Africa by European nations, he notes the intentionality of this delineation. The boundaries locked in resources, access to the sea, and physical elements advantageous to European nations. Later, these boundaries would identify sovereign states; in the moment, the lines were not drawn with attention to the people already residing within them. The colonial boundaries remain. Their existence, albeit dissonant with local identities, draws attention to the

place locked in by these boundaries and the territories that emerge beneath and across them. Mbembe chooses territory because it lacks state identification and, he argues, much of the social and economic fabric of Africa exists outside of or on the margins of political states. The more marginalized a location, the more likely it is to belong to a territory that supersedes the state. Conflicts in Africa, for example, are largely devoid of land claims. Their source is economies beyond boundaries. The war in Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo is about ethnic claims to power across and between these countries. Consider the operations of mining companies or pirates whose trade routes transverse national boundaries. Mbembe's use of territory explains how people operate beneath and beyond boundaries.

Each of these theorists addresses some aspect of the lived or everyday experience of geography, a geography that looks quite different from the subject students study in school. They propose that experiencing place requires inquiry into meaning, explorations into power, and the ability to look beyond assumed boundaries. The study in this paper assumes that students have such daily experiences that they may or may not identity as geographic. This study seeks to give make conscious these practices and how they speak back to these theorists and curriculum theory.

The Place Theorizers

The voices in this paper come from six high school students with whom I wandered through place.[1] The study design evolves from the theoretical framework described above. The study involved discussing and observing 4 locations with each student. Students made sketch maps of each site to convey an initial representation of these places and then dialogued about the places to better explain the meaning they held, how that meaning came to exist, and how it affected their engagement. At two sites, we independently observed and notated the place prior to this dialogue. Three of the places we discussed or visited were familiar. The final observation—intended to understand how meaning was made in new places—was at a less familiar site. The unknown places were not unfamiliar. Students selected a location from a suggested list and generally chose a familiar type of place. Thus, students were rarely pushed outside their comfort zones.

The places observed and discussed in this study were not ones traditionally considered "places" in the curriculum. Students chose coffee shops, schools, diners, arcades, and athletic fields. While educators may not think of these as significant places (or places with significance), they were significant for the students. A coffee shop or arcade shares many characteristics with larger places. They all have physical features and house social interactions. In addition, their meaning and identities are mediated through the experiences of participants in that place. In this manner, a coffee shop is different from a town only in scale. Each holds meanings that need examination.

I sought participants who might bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences. While this occurred to some extent, the selection process relied on students who had the time, means, and interest in participating which narrowed the group. Regardless of the extent of diversity, the inquiry provides insight into the tactics young people have in their repertoire. The students—five girls and one boy—came from two suburban high schools and two urban high schools. Ethnically/racially, one student was African American (Anthony), one student was Latina (Rachel), one student had a Chinese American mother and White father (Liz), two students were White (Ste-

phanie and Kristen), and one student was born in Cameroon but was a U.S. citizen (Olivia). All of the students were seniors with plans to attend college after graduation. Liz, Olivia, Stephanie were musicians and friends at a suburban high school. Their participation in orchestra bound them in a close social group. Anthony attended a large urban high school where he was committed to being a good student and track athlete. He was highly involved in school-wide, local, and personal politics involving affirmative action and reparations for African Americans. Rachel attended a second suburban high school where she played soccer. She was also active in refereeing. Being an athlete gave her elevated status in her high school's social caste. Kristen attended an urban, Catholic high school where she was a soccer star. She volunteered as a youth coach for soccer and basketball and worked in an afterschool program for younger children. She was a shy individual who enjoyed the company of close friends in quiet spaces.

Students' Encounters with Place

In our first interview, Stephanie[2] described the horror of entering the cafeteria on the first day of 9th grade, "I remember my first day as a freshman, I remember thinking, oh my god, where do we sit because I didn't want to just sit down" (Stephanie, December 11, 2007). This amounted to a stressful decision, lest she choose incorrectly. Her decision required an understanding of the complex social networks and patterns that defined the cafeteria. Such decisions on the part of each student are indicative of the tactics students used to navigate place. Consistent with deCerteau (1984), students noted their agency in defining places, sometimes more consciously than others. Throughout the research process, students increased their ability to articulate conscious and unconscious decisions about how to act, where to go, and the observations and experiences that lie beneath. During visits to places, they demonstrated different ways of making sense of these places. After mapping their observations and conversations, patterns of interactions emerged such that the experiences encountering places can be summarized in four vignettes portrayed below. These vignettes are necessarily short. I quote students as much as possible, but have had to shorten their quotations significantly to exemplify the kinds of thinking students shared.

The Decision is in the Details

Stephanie indicated the deliberate attention to the human and physical environment in navigating place. Her vignette arises from the nuanced layers of choosing a coffee shop. According to Stephanie, a coffee shop was not merely a place to get coffee. A coffee shop was a place to meet friends, do schoolwork or be a haven away from home. Stephanie spent time in a variety of coffee shops and had to make decisions about where to go. Her decisions were not guided by the quality of coffee. Instead, her observations of the physical environment and other people alongside knowing what she needed informed her decisions.

Stephanie was attentive to the details of the places we visited and discussed. Consider this condensed observation of a coffee shop we visited:

Well, the obnoxious Christmas music that they started playing at the end of November. The paintings. This Peet's[3] has a very distinctive smell. It smells like coffee and smoke

and it's nasty. I don't notice it so much when I'm here but I'll smell it on my backpack when I get home. All the chairs are made of, except for the suede ones in the booths over there, are the same style. Like the ones by the counter are obviously taller. All the tables are the same size and the same wood. There's only one garbage can. There's three baristas. What else? The ceiling is different textures. There are three green walls, one purple wall. The ceiling is a slightly lighter color than the walls. It's fairly well lit. There are lots of electrical outlets. I can count 4 from where we're sitting. (Stephanie, December 18, 2007)

The level of detail about the physical environment is quite remarkable—the ceiling, the commonality of the furniture, the surfaces of the tables, the number of outlets, and the noise levels. There is significant detail in these notes but also an intentionality. A different observer (such as myself) notices different things in the environment. For Stephanie, she was drawn to features that helped her imagine whether this was a workspace or social space. For example, the presence of outlets indicated that this might be a good place for studying. The choice of colors indicated who was more likely to enter the space. As she noted, "I think it tries to be more edgy. Peet's tries to cater to, not necessarily people my age but maybe like young working people" (Stephanie, December 18, 2007). While there were outlets and good working tables and familiarity in this space that might suggest Peet's was a good place for studying, the noise and other human characteristics undermined this.

Stephanie was also attentive to the other people in a place and how they gave meaning to the place. At Peet's, usually "half the people are trying to work and half the people are just talking" (Stephanie, December 18, 2007). The working half were usually college students and the talking or talking while working crowd is usually high school students. Other people didn't stay. She referenced younger children who came with a parent and ordered drinks to go and an older woman who sat only for a few moments to consume her drink. The student crowd stayed for hours. On the other hand, at Café la Taza, older people sat for hours enjoying an early supper. People came in pairs or groups, spoke quietly while eating, and enjoyed the relaxed environment. Stephanie's observations of people set up an understanding of the social environment and a range of possible interactions. She was forced to consider this alongside her sense of self.

The final decision about places required understanding the environment that was established and how to locate oneself in that place. Stephanie described two strong personal identities—her academic side and her social side. When examining place, she sought places where she could be studious and productive but balanced this with what her decisions told others about her social status. Even though other people went to Peet's to study, even alone, she was less likely to work there and highly unlikely to go there alone.

I don't like coming by myself. If I see a group of people that I know from school but that I'm not friends with who are having fun with friends and you don't have any friends. Like when you are at the mall by yourself and you see a bunch of people. I'm a little more nervous about that. (Stephanie, December 18, 2007)

Because other high school students visited Peet's, she was attentive to the social climate that carried itself out of school and into the coffee shop. Other students chose the coffee shop because of its proximity to campus, its music, the friendliness and age of the baristas, the colors, and the possibilities for social time and study time. The invitation this layout made to other

students created an environment that Stephanie identified and responded to. On the other hand, Stephanie felt comfortable studying at Café la Taza because she felt older couples would be less likely to judge her solitude and studiousness. At a quiet café, one could hide more easily. It invited this even if it lacked outlets and young people. Her decisions may be inconsistent with the actions of others, but this is made possible because her tactics involve observation of people and physical environment judged through what she is seeking and then renegotiated through how she interprets her observations alongside her sense of self.

Following Stephanie into place highlights her tactics. Stephanie argued that within the category or group called "coffee shop," there was significant variation based upon people's interaction with and in the physical environment. She noted that physical and human features affected the meaning she made of the place. She filtered this meaning through her needs and identity to make decisions about how and why to enter particular coffee shops. She was not only aware of the social interaction that gave meaning to a place but how her own social needs added to this meaning. Stephanie illustrates that places are not understood by merely citing their physical and human attributes and that it is the deeper meanings that these features represent that allow us to distinguish between places.

Places Have Multiple Meanings

Anthony's encounter with place indicates the complex interaction of individual identities and places. For Anthony, this meant being able to find solace as an African American male in a White space. Anthony made clear that being African American in a society that oppressed Blacks required being conscientious and political. He noticed race in the world—its presence in our interactions, the different kinds of knowledge we held and brought into our conversations, the way race determined the geography of our city. He assessed my political values and discussed his work on a campaign to defeat a ballot measure to overturn affirmative action. While there were other identities that were important, his racial identity stood above the others.

Aware of race, Anthony's default lens when observing place was through his racial identity. When driving to our first destination, Muddy's Café (his choice), he labeled the houses/neighborhoods as Black, White, or Latino by examining physical characteristics, a tactic he claimed to use regularly. Once inside Muddy's, he quickly described it as a "White" place. He described ways the physical features appealed to White and not Black people.

> Some reasons why I wouldn't come here with my friends is they don't have the kind of food that we'd eat. They have pizza and stuff, but we can get a Little Caesar's pizza for $5. And the other thing that would kind of turn me off, there's burgers and stuff that I like but a lot of food is pick it up and go to keep yourself going. And it's really quiet too. And most of my friends aren't that quiet. They'd get told to be quiet a couple of times and they'd just leave. Plus, you have to pay to use the computers. (Anthony, June 4, 2007)

Anthony's racial identity was written across the meaning he made of the place and the boundaries he drew. He did not assess Muddy's as a particular type of coffee shop, but instead used the lens of race to categorize it with raced places.

Anthony's characterization of Muddy's as "White" had an impact on what he observed. He indicated that he was the only African American in the coffee shop. This was striking since we

spoke to three African Americans on the way to our table and he was approached by an African American woman he knew. Looking more closely we saw six other African Americans upstairs, almost a third of the people in that area. But this space was, in Anthony's view, so imprinted as a White space, other Black people were not part of his conscious observation.

Despite its identity as a White space, Anthony felt comfortable at Muddy's. First, he had other identities that were important to him. Second, while his first indication was the racial identity of the place, he also noticed its diversity. Anthony offered a detailed description of the place that highlighted its diverse appeal.

> Then there's this lounge area which is a really nice, cool area. It's usually dark back there and they have really big comfortable couches...There's a lot of cool paintings and stuff in there. And there's always the water thing where there's always a pitcher and cups to get water. There's a lot of cool drawings. That's the fish tank and there's a couple of fish in there…there's usually a lot of people in line for coffee. And there's a ton of games in there to play with. There's lots of personal space. There's food to buy and clothes. Lots of stuff to read and stuff to look at. (Anthony, June 4, 2007)

Anthony's observations of Muddy's Cafe did not merely provide a laundry list of details without significance and meaning. Each physical descriptor communicated a different way to use that space. Some spaces were designed for talking while others were specifically for studying. The upstairs tables were for quieter work than the computer area frequented by high school students on myspace. The physical environment invited a diversity of people to use the space in different ways at different times. He concluded that this was, "a sociable place, a place to study, a place to get away" (Anthony, June 4, 2007). It is the multiple ways in which the space can be used that allows Anthony to feel invited into a White place. This example demonstrates the various ways in places are categorized that invite and exclude certain people. It shows flexibility in the labeling and construction of the meaning of place.

Disidentifying with a Place

Olivia chose to take me to a place she rarely visited. She chose Crossroads Café and Bookstore because it was familiar, but she generally disassociated with it. This process of disassociation or exclusion is equally important in understanding meaning-making. Her rejection of Crossroads fell on the intersection of the physical space and the kind of people it invited and her inability to locate herself in that intersection. Olivia explained that while she could identify with some of the activities at Crossroads, she could not identify with the environment that was created. Olivia and I noticed that we made different sense of this place. While I regularly visited this café to work, she argued that the place did not invite people to study.

Olivia noted the physical layout, the activities of people, and the different kinds of people sharing the space. In assessing this, she concluded that this was generally not a comfortable space for her.

> There's so many old people. Everything's spread out. It just has more of a restaurant feel to it than a café or like Peet's [where there are] mostly kids and even then, everyone there is studying rather than just eating. This place just seems like a place where I'd go if I had

a business lunch or something. It's really professional…Like the way they decorate it. With the photos on the wall and the mats, the color scheme and even the people. The food's expensive too. It's cold, everything's spread out. At Peet's everything is pretty close together and near the fire, they've got these big couches where you want to just lounge around and study. I feel like it's much more of a comfortable atmosphere. Even the workers…they're way more outgoing than the people who work here. (Oliva, January 17, 2008)

Olivia's rejection of this coffee shop relies on the synthesis of her observations. Descriptions were framed by their meaning. She was drawn to the stern décor that "kind of gives it an old feeling," the classical music, and the prices of the artwork, coffee paraphernalia and food prices that she felt invited an older, wealthier, and more professional crowd. Given this initial percep-tion, she predominantly noticed the older people even though there were three tables of students from her school nearby. Her initial assessment filtered her observations—what she noticed and what it indicated. The spacing of the tables and lack of comfortable chairs detracted from its overall comfort and signaled to her the purpose and people here. Even though people were studying, those without books dominated her landscape. She saw the expensive food and paint-ings, the unfriendly waitstaff, and the lengthy menu and was drawn more to people having business meetings than those who were studying or tutoring.

Again, the sense of self arises as an important mediator. From our conversations, Olivia appeared to come from a solid middle class background, yet her assessment of Crossroads had class underpinnings, especially when placed alongside other observations. She felt far more comfortable at a diner and Peet's, places she described as having cheap food and décor. She indicated that she would be far more likely to return to the diner in a multiracial urban area than her friends would be. She made no reference to race, but that she was an American of African birth meant her Black skin may complicate this intersection with class issues. She did not attend to the race of people at Crossroads, but she may not have brought some of her observations to my attention. Something distinguished her from her friends (one White and one Asian American) who regularly chose to study at Crossroads. Even without pinpointing the source of her discom-fort, we can understand that exclusion arises from discomfort with/in place. Olivia did not feel invited to this place and that individual perception and identity affected the individual reading she made of the place. Olivia felt that her identity did not mesh with the identity of the place and set herself aside.

Reshaping the Meaning of Place

There were examples of students who actively resisted the meanings they encountered and tried to change the way other people were affected by places. Kristen found that by changing the appearance of a place, she could affect the kinds of experiences people had there and who felt comfortable being there. Kristen's experience was at the gymnasium of the middle school she had attended and where she now coached. As with other small schools, the gymnasium doubled as an auditorium, indoor recess location, and space for community events. But as her class hung sports' banners on the walls, the competitive character of the gymnasium overtook its identity as a community space.

It is insufficient to suggest that the gymnasium, even with a dominant meaning, held only one meaning. Kristen noted that this place had numerous and sometimes competing meanings. The gym held the conflicting messages of competition and peace. "Maybe how we kept the Peace on Earth sign here because I think it shows that we're still Catholic and we're good people but you get on our court and we're still intense about playing" (Kristen, August 30, 2007). While another class left behind the Peace on Earth sign, her class left behind numerous championship banners that displayed their accomplishments. They positioned competition against peace in the gym.

> I always look at the banners because my class put three of them up there…The first 6, the 6 hanging in the back are my class alone. 3 girls and 3 boys…Our whole class is the most athletic team that's come through this school, ever. (Kristen, August 30, 2007)

Through the banners and accompanying athletic logos and messages painted on the walls to intimidate opponents, her class left a legacy on the school. The physical décor impressed upon current students and competitors regardless of their level of athleticism. She acknowledged that the gym was used for plays, concerts, banquets, a food drive, and bingo but that amongst all of these one could not avoid the presence of basketball.

> I think that it does [impact the other activities]. You're automatically drawn to the banners to you know that it's very important here. And all the hoops all around and the eagle basketball. So it is kind of distracting, especially if your eyes start to wander. It's very distracting to be in this gym and not think about basketball. (Kristen, August 30, 2007)

Kristen was proud of this shift, this awareness, this legacy. When she saw the prowess of basketball in the school today, she was proud of what she contributed to that environment. She liked that the Peace poster and the materials for other events were hidden in corners while basketball artwork and banners were on display to remind all visitors of where they were.

Kristen provides an example of adding a small, but noticeable change to a physical environment. That change had a significant impact on the meaning of the environment. People who came for bingo or a play could not ignore the competitive environment around them. According to Kristen's observations as a tutor at the school, during indoor recess, kids who didn't like basketball were forced to the perimeter because they didn't fit with the place Kristen and her peers helped construct. Basketball was dominant; other activities were secondary. Peace existed, but competition prevailed. This was the legacy. The gym contained a basketball court before Kristen's class arrived, but their competitive spirit and success transformed the meaning and value of that court. The slight shift in the physical environment alongside a sense of competition built into those banners privileged certain kinds of experiences and marginalized others.


Revealing the Tactics, Developing a Model

Stephanie developed a schema to distinguish between coffee shops based on the meaning she assigned. Anthony exposed raced and variant meaning of place. Olivia drew lines that affected participation in a place. Kristen explained the impact of reshaping the physical environment on creating a particular environment. Looking across these vignettes for tactics (deCerteau, 1984), a

dominant model appears. Throughout these examples, students relied on the formation of territories. Their ability to interact with a space was contingent upon their ability to permeate the existing boundaries and instead to rely upon relational meanings of self and space that extended beyond the walls of a coffee shop or the school (Mbembe, 2000). Like the link in Mbembe's African territories, the self determined how students adapted to the conceived spaces and how they perceived these spaces. The development of territories in the formation of place parallels Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and yet is distinct. The tactics employed by the students are useful in pushing our understanding and use of Lefebvre and Mbembe.

Consistent with Lefebvre (1991), the ways in which students experienced lived places was determined by the conceived ideas that structured the places and how those places were perceived by the viewers. Lefebvre stresses the strategies of conceived space and the power of these conceptions to affect the way in which people are able to experience place. The differential experiences of people in perceiving and using space are secondary. In the experiences articulated by these students, their perceptions or tactics dominated their understanding of and engagement of place (lived space). The model in figure 1 captures the intersection of conceived and perceived place in the production of territories and lived space.

Figure.1. Model of students bounding place
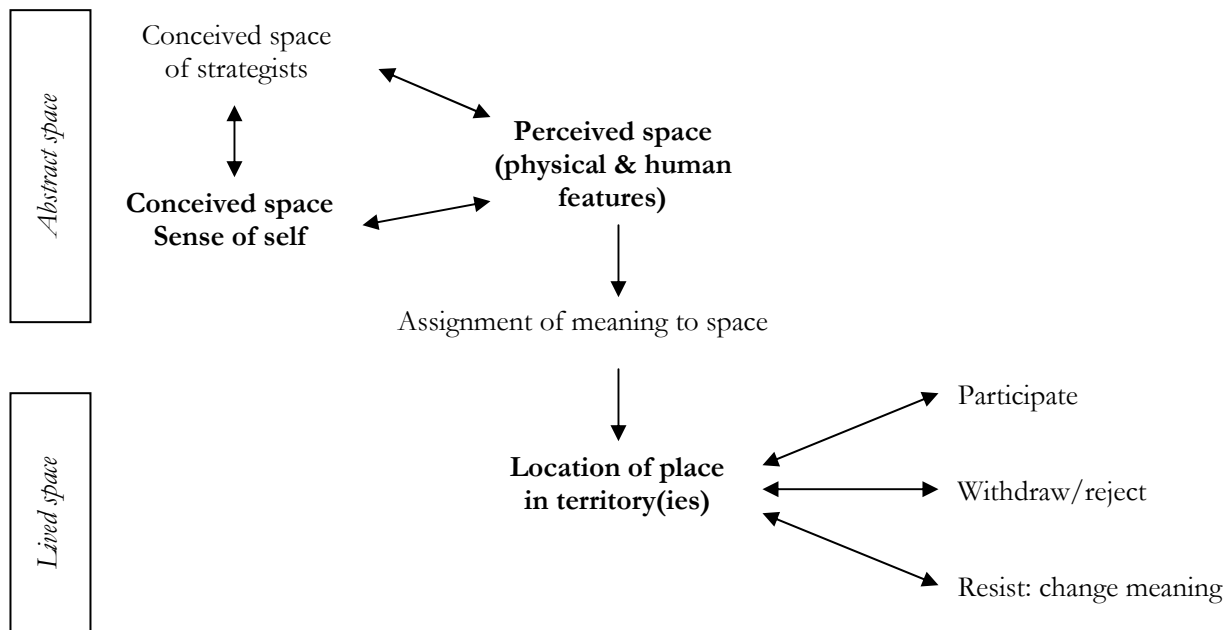
The mappings with students highlighted two conceived spaces that affected their ability to perceive place. The first, borrowed from Lefebvre, is the conceptions that shape how people produce physical space. The places students referred to draw upon pre-existing conceptions exterior to their understanding. Stephanie acknowledged that the name "coffee shop" limits what might happen therein. It is unlikely that she would use a coffee shop for viola practice. Kristen shared the idea that a gymnasium in a small school is a place of multiple uses. That it is constructed with both a stage and athletic courts suggests that it was designed for multiple purposes. The second conceived space, adding to Lefebvre, is the conception students brought of them-

selves through which they mediated space. Similar to strategists who use conceptions of what a space should be, the sense of self is a strategy for approaching and observing space intentionally. The students brought an identity that impacted how they made meaning. Kristen was competitive. Anthony was a race activist. Stephanie was social, yet studious. If a conceived space is one in which ideas evolve, then this simplified list of identities suggests ideas that mark the self who is the agent of place just as abstract constructs like equality or capital are implicated in the strategies that produce place. For these students, the sense of self was generally stronger in their understanding than Lefebvre's conceived space, hence, the conceived space of strategists is diminished in the model.

The crucial element in making meaning and producing boundaries was perceived space. This was how students observed and made sense of their lived environment. The vignettes show the depth of observation these students made of the physical and human attributes in their surroundings. They noticed many details, but their perceptions were not objective. The subjectivity of these observations was facilitated by the strong sense of self described above in conjunction with an effort to turn the observation into utility. Tables were not merely tables. Electrical outlets were not merely outlets. Each of these helped students produce meaning. Certain kinds of tables, colors, décor, patterns and people all contributed to building a sense of the place. The sense of self affected what we each noticed in a place. Olivia and I made very different maps at Crossroads. I attended to the students studying while she noted the prices and artwork. At Muddy's, Anthony was very attentive to the menu choices and the African jewelry, two features that were absent in Kristen's map of the same location. The sense of self also affected how the students interpreted the features they observed. As a student, Stephanie was far more likely to notice outlets and what this might allow her. The large table at Crossroads indicated to Olivia that they were designed for eating. Perceived space cannot be isolated from conceived spaces when students look to make meaning.

After assessing the site, students provided a narrative of its meaning and possible rules and uses for the place. Developing this narrative amounted to producing a territory to which the place belonged (Mbembe, 2000). Mbembe notes that territories emerge because people are seeking economic patterns, ethnic identities, etc. that transcend colonial boundaries. Similarly, by classifying and labeling places in a particular manner, the students in this study produced a meaning of that place and its location within a larger category. Kristen's gymnasium was evaluated as a basketball court but it also clearly painted a picture of competitive spaces—what they look like and who is comfortable there. Stephanie argued that a coffee shop was not merely a coffee shop. It's location within categories of places for studying or socializing differentiated seemingly similar places. Olivia's decision to identify Crossroads (a self-identified café/coffee shop) within a group of uncomfortable places affected her decisions about entering/using the place. Its association as a coffee shop would have produced a different relationship to the place. Anthony described the different territories to which a place could belong. His production of the different meanings—a White space, an academic space, a student space—and the different features attached to each spoke to the way in which meaning, not walls were important in understanding place. Because meaning cuts across boundaries the abstract conceptions that arrange space have limited effect.

The intersection of who the students were, what they needed and how they produced meaning of place within these larger territories ultimately determined the rules of participation—whether it will be revisited, rejected or resisted. In each vignette, understanding the place alone and in relation to the self and other places served the purpose of allowing the students to make

decisions about what to do and how to act. Stephanie and Anthony negotiated territories to invite their participation. Stephanie's sense of self and place made coffee shops matter in a way that transcended coffee. The territories they made to produce meaning enabled them to gauge the potential participation by others. While at Peet's, Liz and Stephanie separately made correct predictions about families that would drink quickly while warming up on a cold afternoon. Kristen anticipated that a man and two young girls would get their drinks to go at Muddy's. But the strength of meaning meant there were places that discouraged participation. There were many White places Anthony refused to visit because he would not be comfortable. A number of the students identified the nearby city as wrought with crime and refused to consider visiting locations therein for the study. Olivia located herself outside Crossroads. The decision to enter or withdraw has a two directional arrow. While the students indicated the effect of meaning-making on their actions, their actions help to reify the meaning that they assigned. Finally, there were times when students not only made sense of place, but actively reconstructed a place. Kristen's example above highlights the process. She not only made mean of the gymnasium but actively sought to resist and reshape that through appearance. Stephanie led the way in reconstructing her school library as a social space through her engagement therein. Although not all students saw themselves as strategists in shaping the meaning of a place for others, such examples certainly emerged. On an everyday basis, students have to make decisions about where and when to enter and the interaction of sense of self and conceived and perceived spaces played a critical role in determining this.

Placing the Tactics in the Curriculum

Critical geographers are attentive to issues of place and its meaning. But much of the work in this area comes from the perspective of the strategists. It assumes that those with the power to construct places have the dominant role in developing meaning. Drawing from Lefebvre, they study the senses of place that exist and pose questions about the power relationships inherent in this sense—how do global conceptual ideas affect the identity of a place, how is meaning perpetuated across time, for whom does the dominant sense of place exist? All of these questions inherently accept the agency of the person who encounters space, but they largely draw from the lens of conceived space. Although there was one example of a space in this study in which conceived space limited perception, most of the examples highlighted an under-noticed conceived space—the sense of self. The study reveals the pervasiveness of perception in dictating the way in which individuals make their own sense of their places of encounter. In addition, the research pushes our understanding of boundaries and territories. Familiar categories and identities bind places across common notions of boundaries. Each of these contributions to critical geography also has implications for the use of place in curriculum.

This study suggests that there is reason to think theoretically about the concept of place used in school. The stability of place as presented across school curricula presumes that the meanings of places are written by authors and by strategists. The place we present alongside a piece of art or in the characteristics of a nation arise from the dominant senses of place ascribed to a location from historical or geographic authorities. The model above asserts the agency of students. Unlike deCerteau (1984) who asserts that tactics are predominantly unconscious, the students referred to unconscious and conscious moves through, into, and across place. While students did not regularly construct the space, they were active in creating its meaning and aligning it with other

places. Students' abilities to recognize the complex and contested meaning of places, boundaries, and territories increase the demand for teachers to be more attentive to the manners in which they engage place with students in the curriculum. This study challenges teachers to consider the way perception affects the representation of places. Places may be taught as locations, but they are not understood in a decontextualized manner. The study supports the literature of curriculum theorists who attend to how the place of school affects the meaning students make in the classroom. The decisions students make about how they individually enter this space has implications for what they are able to do as students in the place. The findings also challenge teachers to be more thoughtful about the social and political meaning of the boundaries students study. The use of boundaries is problematic without a consideration of the way they include and exclude. Further, the students show that boundaries may not be the most useful way to examine places and their relationships to other people and places.

These findings are not without concerns. The creation of territories raises questions about the familiar and unfamiliar. Students were most often drawn to places that were familiar. They did not have strong understandings of how they came to know new places nor were they often tempted to investigate unfamiliar locations. Their decisions to find new places were limited and typically based on what their friends already knew. The unfamiliar places they dared to visit were not unfamiliar as types of places. They trusted their friends' assessments of new places and rarely stumbled upon new places without the help of someone who had gone before. Obviously, this chain must start somewhere, but they were never familiar with the front of the train that dared enter into the new frontier. This raises concern for teachers who want to disrupt the unfamiliar in order to help students engage with new ideas. In addition, students were not generally attentive to how their territories excluded others. When making territories, they paid little attention to how the relationships they detailed affect people on the margins of a territory. The lack of discussion of exclusion highlights the limited ability of this study to talk about the issues of race, class, and gender identity that were present but largely silent in the description and analyses. The backgrounds of the students likely matter far more than was revealed in this study and clearly needs further attention in the study of meaning making in place and the ability of people to participate in meaning making.

Returning to deCerteau (1984), students are navigating places based on personal knowledge and assumptions. These tools are powerful because they help students give meaning, draw boundaries, enter/stay away, and reshape the places they encounter. Students in this study demonstrate that they do act as geographers, taking in information about places and synthesizing it to construct meanings around places and to predict relationships between people and their physical and social environment. We would be well served as teachers of place to make space for the geographic skills students carry into schools.

About the Author

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NOTES

1. There was no experimental design involved in selecting students. Without strong connections in local communities, it was a challenge to find six participants. I came to know these students from different personal contacts with local schools.

2. Student names are pseudonyms.

3. The names of locations are pseudonyms. The names are selected using another random location in the U.S. because the names of the places communicate something about them – whether they were large chains, small chains, or local entities. Peet's Coffee is a pseudonym for a smaller chain of coffee shops. Local shops like Muddy's are local establishments. The scale is approximately equivalent and the real names of the places we visited are not used.

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