

# *Creative Tensions in Place-Conscious Learning: A Triptych*

*David A. Greenwood  
Lakehead University*

## **Abstract:**

The following was a keynote address delivered at the Curriculum for the Bioregion Conference on "Fostering an Ethic of Place," February 7, 2015, at the University of Puget Sound, in Tacoma, Washington. The Curriculum of the Bioregion Project, led by Jean MacGregor from The Evergreen State College, is a consortium of over thirty regional universities in the US and Canada that engages faculty communities in exploring the issues of sustainability and place-based learning in a broad array of courses and disciplines. This address aims to narrate a fluid theorization of place as curriculum that is responsive to the lived experience of everyday life. It draws on key moments of learning in the author's biography and presents these learnings as three short stories. These stories try to convey and clarify how a theoretical construct such as place is lived as nuance and contradiction in everyday life, especially when we open to the experience of others, human and more-than-human. Fostering an ethic of place, the author suggests, depends on sensitivity to this nuance and the recognition of parallax.

**Keywords:** place-based curriculum; place-conscious learning; narrative research; parallax.

**I**want to talk about why place matters. You already know why it matters. Everyone has a place they love, or hate. Deep down inside you know why place matters. Your body knows.

My message is basically this: we can learn to pay attention to the places in and outside of us that matter. Learning this over and over again is how an ethic of place evolves.

So what are places?

Places are heavy with paradox. I'll mention six.

Paradox one: places are complex, and places are simple.

Places are simple because we all know what they are already and we're all experiencing them all the time. What's the big deal? Places are complex because there are a lot of different places, and there are as many ways to experience and know them as there are ways to experience and know. Multiply that number by everyone who has ever lived everywhere, and every person or place yet to be born. Places are complex.

Paradox two: there is, after all, no such thing as a place, and likewise, there is really no such thing as the world.

There is no such thing as the world, because, as Gary Snyder (1990) said, "the world is places" (p. 25). Global thinking, as Wendell Berry (1991) said, "can only be statistical" (para. 1). We can't know the world. The only way to know the world, to really know it and feel it, is through a scaled-down version: in other words, through its places. But on the other hand, there is no such thing as a place cut off from the rest of the world. Everything is related to everything else, and whether we're talking science or yoga, everything is on some level a part of the same whole. So we're done here. There is no such thing as the world, and there is no such thing as a place.

Paradox three: places are both a meeting ground for diverse people coming together in common cause—like we are today—and, places are also a contact zone of disagreement, conflict, and violence—everywhere on earth. Places are a meeting ground; places are contested ground.

Paradox four: places are fundamentally ecological, and yes, places are fundamentally cultural. Places are ecological: all culture, all identity positions originate in the earth. There is no cultural place that is not totally dependent on sunshine, rain, and dirt. And, human experience of place, no matter how finely tuned and present to the imminence of the creation, does not happen outside of our cultural programming. Places are cultural; places are ecological.

Two more.

To live more gently and sustainably on the earth and with each other, our places need to be reinhabited, reimagined. Yet, in order to reinhabit places without reinscribing damaging cultural patterns, places also need to be decolonized. Historical wrongs need to be acknowledged, reconciled, healed. This is a thorny paradox.

One more: places can be thought about, intellectually, on a lot of different levels. While we can think analytically about place, *places* offer us something different: the experience of being wholly alive in the world. Abstract thought and embodied experience are two modalities of place that live together in the tension of paradox.

I want to explore some dimensions of place that may be important to a developing ethic, but I also want to share with you a fuller experience of being alive to the rich relationship we have with place. I'm going to do this by sharing some story, some poetry. Walt Whitman (1855/2005), that verbose lover of the open road, said,

Logic and sermons never convince,  
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul. (Section 30)  
Poetry, like music, leads me back home, not merely to ideas about life, but to the embodied experience of living.



Let me tell you a story.

It's 1984. I'm 19, starting my second year at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I work for the Nuclear Weapons Freeze. Reagan is President, and he speaks in black and white terms about the "Evil Empire" of our belligerent "enemy." U.S. military spending rises like fists: billions targeted for the MX missile, an ICBM capable of striking any time, any place, and the Strategic Defense Initiative, the so-called "Star Wars" technology that would litter space with launch pads to shoot down the rockets that "they" might fire at "us". I learn the phrase Mutually Assured Destruction. Our defense policy and its bloated budget seem ludicrous to me, and I need a job, so I sign up with the Freeze.

It's my first experience with organized political action. I'm relieved to leave my job in retail for something more meaningful, and a bit crestfallen when I realize my pay is all commission I might draw from knocking door to door in rural America. Three nights a week, five or six of us pile into the Econoline and drive—out beyond the progressive stronghold of Madison, through the surrounding farms, to the Republican towns nearby. It's winter, the talk in the van is quiet. As we pull into town, we ready our clipboards, our talking points, our hats and mittens. Snow banks are piled high, sidewalks like tunnels. I have low expectations for the night's take. Richard, our leader, says he expects \$100, says you just take the rejection and move on. I look out at the night, and my smart political script seems inadequate. I don't deal so well with rejection.

But there is something about talking to people about the destruction of the planet that is strangely energizing. "Good evening, my name is David and I'm with the Nuclear Weapons Freeze. I wonder if I might talk with you for a few minutes about nuclear weapons." I drop the intro like a bomb into people's front doors. Mutually Assured Destruction as government policy. Billions of dollars wasted in failed programs. I learn that if someone is actually willing to listen to what I have to say, my chances of a cash pledge are better than fifty-fifty. I learn how to correlate bumper stickers with my chances, and I learn I can be dead wrong about my assumptions.

Tonight, I'm in an orderly working class neighborhood in Stoughton, Wisconsin. Very 1950s. A grandmotherly woman at the door. Me with my practiced political rap about the end of the world and the madness. The overheated house smelling like cleansers and cookies. She takes my arm and guides me to the dining table. *Who is it?* the husband asks from the glowing TV room. The woman mutters with her purse hanging from the closet door. Now, here's the man, his grey crew cut, and my politics. Now the fist of his large hand in my hair, his proud years in the Air Force, our country 'tis of thee, pulling me by my long

hair back into the cold. I'm terrified, outside now on the doorstep behind the slam and the glow. Suddenly silence, like the quiet that engulfs a gunshot. I open my own clenched fist around a twenty she had pressed into my hand—could it have been—before he saw it?

I learn something that night about marriage, and about how one house, one place, can mean very different things.

In college, I enroll in a course on the political theory of nuclear weapons and read about the disastrous triumphs of progress. I am convinced that nuclear weapons are *the* most important issue facing people who care about the planet. I'm convinced that everyone else needs to think so too, and I feel a righteousness toward those whose ordinary concerns keep them unaware and unmoved by our collective march toward madness. My activism puts me in the spirit of proselytizing, and so that is my posture when I meet my sister's new boyfriend, who happens to be Lakota Sioux from ranching land in North Dakota. Craig asks me over dinner what I do and I launch into it about Reagan, the MX, and Star Wars, about Mutually Assured Destruction, and about how even the former head of the CIA, William Casey, opposes Reagan's nuclear policy. *Nuclear weapons*, I tell him zealously, *are simply the most important issue facing everyone on the entire planet.*

Craig listens to me rant with an eerie calm and then responds unblinkingly, *Not for me, they're not, not for my people.*

I'm stunned. I'm accustomed to doors closing in my face. But no one ever looks me in the eye and tells me the issue isn't important. *How can you say that?* I want to know, *Political apathy will bury us.* Then Craig tells me that his family has other things to think about, like whether they're going to lose more of their land. He tells me about his community, its struggles with poverty, unemployment, addiction, and abuse. He's a community organizer. He says he doesn't give "the end of the world" much thought, and neither does anyone he knows.



My good friend and colleague, artist and researcher Pauline Sameshima (2007), uses the term *parallax* to describe the phenomenon of perspective. Parallax: you and I see the same object from different vantage points. We see different parts of the same object. There are parts that are obscured from you, and parts that are obscured from me. Parallax: it may appear that we are looking at totally different objects.

My exchange with Craig haunted me. He planted for me the idea that what I care about most might be the least of someone else's concerns. This was hard to swallow. While I was wrapped up in the drama of global crisis, he was dealing with immediate threats to his family, place, and community. And never did he imply that I should abandon my concerns for his, even though, as I've since learned, his concerns were rooted in layers of past and present colonization in which I, and my white middle class politics, were deeply complicit.

And yet, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, in 2015, moved the doomsday clock they keep two minutes closer to midnight, two minutes closer to global catastrophe, citing climate change, nuclear weapons, and political foot-dragging as clear and present dangers (Doomsday, 2016). An ethical failure of leadership. We're sitting at three minutes to midnight. How can anyone not care about Mutually Assured Destruction? About nuclear weapons and climate change?

So the simple truth of place is this: it's parallaxical, and an ethic of place needs to be spacious enough to allow for parallax.

Part of appreciating differences of perspective, is knowing something of our own stories, about how we are not fixed and static, but diverse, contradictory, and changing. "Do I contradict myself?" Whitman (1855/2015) asks, "Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes" (Section 51).



Let me tell you another story.

Baseball season, 2012. My twelve-year-old son Eli loves the game but dreads practice. His coach—Gates we call him—yells a lot. He barks orders, hits the ball hard, ridicules some kids for errors, and tries to motivate with sarcasm, as in, *Nice throw, you think maybe next time you could get it to me?* Still, he loves the game and as I keep telling my son, what he lacks in personality he makes up for in fundamentals.

Gates is a mechanic at our local Honda dealer. He's worked on my Accord a couple times. Appreciates its vintage. He's been with Honda over twenty years, knows what he's doing. He works long hours in the garage. Three or four times a week he sheds his coveralls, drives straight for the ball field, and lugs the old canvas equipment bag to the dugout. *Why is everyone late?* he asks nobody in particular.

My son pitches, and it stresses me out so much I can hardly watch the game. When he's pitching I walk down the first base line toward the river just past right field. It eases the stress some to see the inning unfold from a distance. Gates knows better, though, than to yell at pitchers. He stays out of their way and lets them throw, occasionally bows and shakes his head. But watch out if the ump makes a questionable call. Gates will rise up out of the dugout kicking dust. He loves the game. He knows the rules. He wants to get it right and he'll prove it.

My wife Jill talks to Gates. Me, I get uncomfortable around mechanics. Mechanics always talk cars to me like I know what they're talking about, and I don't, so I end up nodding stupidly and saying *Hmm, yeah, okay*. Jill asks him where he learned to play ball. We're surprised to learn he never played. He says he always loved the game, but never had a chance to play it, which is why he loves coaching now and playing with the boys.

Jill's uncle dies and she has to drive six hours to Minneapolis to take a plane to Denver. Something's wrong with her Accord, it's leaking transmission fluid, and there's this rattle. It's Sunday. She says we should call Gates and see if he'll look at it. I say, *You can call Gates to see if he'll look at it. It's Sunday and the guy works on cars six days a week*. She calls him and he says sure bring it over. She asks me if I'll do this. She needs the car for a funeral; I drive it to Gates' house.

Gates lives on a block of row houses parallel to the expressway. I knock on the door and Gates appears in clean coveralls. The house smells like good food. Gates says his wife cooks Sundays. I apologize for bothering him on a Sunday and thank him, excusing myself with Jill's uncle's funeral. Outside he tells me to pop the hood and I do it, relieved when I get it right. Gates checks fluid levels and crawls underneath the engine, gets up wiping his hands. *Let's go for a drive*, he says.

He gives me directions to the auto parts store and talks to me about gaskets and seals. I listen afraid that I might get lost, the city suddenly as strange as car parts. Gates

walks into the parts store and is immediately recognized. He knows people here, and seems to know more than they do. They follow his lead, and I take an unearned pride in tagging along.

Back in his driveway he installs the parts in less than ten minutes. We talk a little baseball, and I thank him for coaching and hold out fifty dollars. He declines, but I insist. He tells me I better pick up a quart of transmission fluid just in case, and specifies the type. *Has to be for Honda*, he says, *Walmart will have it*. I tell him I think I'll go back to the parts store, that I try to avoid Walmart. *Oh yeah, why's that?* he asks. I tell him I don't like their politics and that every time I'm in one of those places it just feels bad. Gates tears off a post-it note for me with the specs for the transmission fluid I need.

*My wife's worked there for seventeen years*, he says. *Oh shit*, I say, feeling my body collapse into a hole. I've just hit myself in the head with a bat. I've just thrown the ball the wrong way. *How does she like it there?* I ask him. *She likes it*, he says, *she's been a floor manager now for years, manages fabrics*. The door opens behind him, his wife calling him in to dinner.

She's wearing a homemade apron, like the kind my wife likes to make and give as gifts. Sometimes Jill buys the fabric at Walmart. I have one of these aprons. My daughter likes to wear it. The fabric is printed with gorgeous evergreens. Savory smells spill into the driveway. Gates introduces me as Eli's dad. *He works at the university*, he says.

Gates' wife smiles and shakes my hand. *Smells good*, I say. Devastated, I thank them both and crawl back into my car. It takes me time to remember how to move the shifter from park to reverse.



What happened to me in Gates' driveway is what the activist theologian Mary Jo Leddy (2012) calls getting "faced." In her book, *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls Us Home*, Leddy shows through her own story of meeting refugees that it is easy to remain unchanged by social issues until we physically meet the people who embody them face to face. Before meeting Gates' wife, I had never met a career employee of Walmart. Getting faced means getting uncomfortable, it means letting down our guard and allowing others, unlike ourselves, to mean something to us. It means allowing ourselves to be changed by the encounter with the other: other people, other places.

I was humiliated by my encounter with Gates, and humbled. I told the story to my children who had listened their whole lives to me preach against Walmart, and I proclaimed in that moment of transformation that *from now on, Walmart is my favorite store*. I began finding reasons to shop there: *It saves me gas. It's closer than the other big boxes. Are they really that different? Isn't it more important for me to be grateful for what we have, and to reduce my need for stuff in general, than to dismiss Walmart wholesale? Is Walmart really the enemy? The Evil Empire?*

It's three minutes to midnight, and everyday places are grounds for encounters such as these; opportunities for being faced are waiting for our attention.

How do we pay attention and what do we pay attention to? These are the questions that fascinate me as a lover of places, and they are the same questions that we ask ourselves as learners, educators, and artists. I recently heard the renowned Shakespeare director Peter Sellars talk about theater. Sellars said theater is that place where "we're

always trying to touch something we can't touch; to feel something you know you're carrying with you, but you can't see" (Kennedy, 2015). As I listened to Sellars talk about theater, I thought to myself, he's talking about place. And then he actually started talking about place. He said—and I'm paraphrasing—theater opens places, not a location, but some deep weird connection that we feel. Place is here and now, it's the entire past and future, it's the meeting point between the past and the future. Sellars asked, Where are we really? We are not only in places where we *are*, we are also in places *where we are not*. We are not here! When we are here or there, because we are human, we are also somewhere else, we walk around with names and places and times echoing within us. They are always there, here. We all carry our places within us and it's not a single image, but more like a mandala, a colorful cosmology of our relationships with other people and places, a cosmology of our relationships with ourselves. How we pay attention, and what we pay attention to, depends a lot on what's in our mandala. Shakespeare, Sellars says, shows us how no place is ever just one place.



One more story.

Winter, 2015. I live in the forest north of Lake Superior. It's the wildest land I've ever known. My family shares our homeplace with wolves, lynxes, black bears, martins, all kinds of insects. The hard edges of the Canadian Shield jut up out of the ground. I think they call it the bush in Canada because the forest is so damn thick, it's like being stuck in a bush. Clear passage is choked everywhere by deadfall and sink holes and thickets of new growth. I learn why Canadians travel by canoe.

The winters here are truly cold: a serious matter of survival and preparedness. We burn lots of birch in two woodstoves, and plenty of propane in the boiler. Every January the locals start talking about direct flights to Jamaica and Cuba, though they wouldn't live anywhere else. They're from here. The winter is sublime—*like millions of diamonds*, I tell my daughters.

To make it through the winter you have to get out there in it. I snowshoe as far as I want right outside my door, winter being the best time for travel in the bush as the snowpack raises the ground above the deadfalls, and the leafless deciduous trees open lanes of vision cut off in summer growth. My family skis with a Finnish community that seems undeterred by any kind of cold. My son races on the ski team, but my wife and I favor the old logging roads we can access a few hundred yards from our driveway. We like to wander on our skis and we don't even mind sharing these winter roads with the occasional snowmachine. There's plenty of room here for wolves, skiers, and snowmobilers.

Hiking these roads this past fall, we watch two big beavers build a lodge and prepare for winter. The old road cuts through some bottom land where a dike divides two beaver ponds, one on each side of the road. In misty fall mornings we watch the beavers swim in these ponds. We squat in the alders at sunrise, facing east. Each morning they circle closer to us, until one day the beavers become more curious and accustomed to our presence. They stare darkly into our eyes, and slap their tails on exit dives—*enough of this!*

As the leaves turn and fall, we watch the beavers build their lodge at the far edge of the pond. Over the weeks, our view of their work expands as the beavers take down nearly every young alder, birch, and aspen growing on the dike. What's left is a clear view of their

lodge, which grows with branches and mud until, finally, ice and snow lock the beavers underneath a protective white dome for winter.

When the ice is thick enough, I start skiing out on the pond, one of the few open and spacious places in my neighborhood. I follow wolf and deer trails. I keep the ski track packed so I can ski on the pond in deep winter snows. For the first few weeks, I steer clear of the beaver lodge, but observe through the writing in the snow how wolves move in to investigate. One of our new friends, the son of a trapper, tells us that beavers are easy pickings for wolves in winter; they only have to sniff out the exit routes from the lodge and wait.

One day while skiing on the pond, I notice that the snow around the lodge has been disturbed. Back home I tell my wife that it looks like wolves have been digging into the beaver lodge. Later at sunset we ski out to the pond together, and while I glide its distances, Jill steps over to investigate. When I look again at the lodge, Jill's poking at it with her ski pole. Now she's on her knees digging. When I approach her, she's crying, and I see it. It wasn't wolves. Someone had come in and set wire snares for the beavers and had cut out blocks of ice with a chainsaw to access the inside of the lodge. The remains of a cut snare hang from a crude tripod of beaver sticks, and big blocks of rough-cut ice are flung into the snow. I don't want deal with this. I don't want to imagine what happened to these beavers, whose playfulness and industriousness had been to us like the rising of the sun in the mist and had shown us so much commitment, so much understanding of the land and the season. So I just shake my head and keep skiing back and forth on their pond, the pond we call the beaver pond. Jill keeps poking her ski pole gently at the lodge.

Later, back home, when I can speak, all I can say is, *I know it was Roger's son, and that's what our neighbors do.*

*But why, she says, what purpose does it serve?*

To which I answer lamely, *For the pelt, and maybe the meat, just like our kind has always done to their kind. Especially here.*

And in fact, the beaver pond is on Roger's land. Or rather, as my wife insists on correcting me, *Roger and Julie's land*, as most of their wild acreage was inherited through Julie's father, who, I can only assume, died grateful to leave it to her and her family.



The sociologist Laurel Richardson (1990) says this about stories: "At the individual level, people make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories. People live by stories" (p. 26).

What if people do live by stories? What if stories *are* all we are? What, then, is the place of stories in an ethic of place? We might conclude that people make sense of places through the mandala of their own stories. There was a time, for example, when my wife refused to allow a gun, even a cap gun, into our home. Our place was gun free, the cap gun shunned as a symbol of masculine violence. Then, when her father died and my son was gifted an heirloom lever-action Winchester, her mandala changed to the extent that now, she not only encourages his hunting passion, but praises the local flavor of his wild cuisine. Trapping beavers, however—this cultural practice is placed outside of her mandala, and is placed inside that of our neighbors. Place is where our mandalas come imperfectly together.

The beaver pond, Walmart, the nuclear test site—any place is both a potential meeting ground for finding common cause, and a contact zone of potential conflict. Common cause comes through seemingly compatible stories; conflict comes through seemingly incompatible stories. Because our stories about ourselves and about each other can change, it follows that neither common cause nor conflict is inevitable or guaranteed. What seems important, then, is to increase the circulation of stories—our own stories, others' stories, the beaver's stories. And we do this by telling our stories, and by listening.

What would it mean to meet each other—other people, other beings, other places—with the expectation that we might be transformed by a mutual encounter? Peter Sellars, the Shakespeare director, reflects:

The lack of ability to notice others is a problem in life and a problem on our planet. How do we make space for others who haven't arrived where we have? But for some reason they are here, too. What can that person—and only that person—see and know? None of us duplicate anyone else on the planet. What is the place where that person begins to open? They are themselves. How do we find out what others have to offer? (Kennedy, 2015)

I do not mean to suggest that conflict can or should be avoided. Conflict exists. It can transform us—and it can make us more rigid. The issue is, how do we deal with multiple perspectives, with a parallax of place?

How do we coexist with others and with our own contradictions?

*How do we notice when we are closed—and what is the place that will open us?*

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