Learning (and Leaving) the Comforts of Home:
A Radical Pedagogy of Homeplace

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In her essay "Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place," Claudia Ruitenberg argues for education to take into account the environments in which one learns, asserting that "*Where* we learn becomes part of *what* we learn."[1] Building upon Ruitenberg's work, I argue for a shifting, polyvocal, radical pedagogy of *home*place, looking at how discourses of the "ideal" home and family contribute to the construction and maintenance of systems of oppression.[2] Though Ruitenberg's radical pedagogy of place opens up an important discussion about the spatialization of education, I contend that her call for nomadism and hospitality may take for granted certain elements of the "ideal" home and family, offering only a partial perspective on place-based education. Using the work of María Lugones to complement Ruitenberg, I argue that challenging systemic oppression requires a fluidity and multiplicity in our theories about teaching place, home, and community, as well as in our understanding of what it means to feel "at home" in an academic community, in a discipline, or in a classroom, as scholars, educators, and students.[3]

The radical pedagogy of homeplace I propose here draws upon theories of "nomadism," "'world'-traveling," and "streetwalker theorizing" to help reconceptualize "home" in a way that seeks to avoid reproducing systemic social injustice. However, I suggest that while all these theories contain very important strategies for resistance, it may be dangerous to take up any one theory as an overarching paradigm. Examining some of the limitations of each theory, as well as in my own theorizing, I argue for the need to be able to travel between "solutions," to consider them in simultaneous multiplicity and tension, in order to avoid making ourselves too comfortably at home in any one of them.

To begin, I wish to offer a brief account of place-based education as laid out by Ruitenberg. Quoting from Gregory Smith, Ruitenberg defines place-based education as education that "'adopts local environments — social, cultural, economic, political, and natural — as the context for a significant share of students' educational experiences'" (*DEL*, 212). Yet as Ruitenberg points out, much theorizing about place-based education focuses on environmental issues, romanticizing a connection to the local and neglecting place as it relates to the social world. While deconstructing the local as the place of one's "authentic" identity, Ruitenberg maintains a focus on the pedagogical significance of place, using the work of Jacques Derrida to demonstrate the impossibility of separating knowledge or experience from locality. Ruitenberg asserts: *"[O]ne's subjectivity and identity at any particular moment in time cannot be understood outside one's local context and history of local contexts"* (*DEL*, 215, emphasis added).

It is this idea that one's subjectivity is partly formed by locality that I am interested in taking up in my discussion of the pedagogical significance of "home." Like Ruitenberg, I also want to explore how "the local" comes to inform what one can know about oneself and about others. Ruitenberg argues:

> Deconstructively speaking, the "hereness" of the local is intelligible only by virtue of the "thereness" of the non-local. But there is no "hereness" that is uncontaminated by "thereness," not only because in these technological times there is no locality that is uncontaminated by globality, but because, structurally, the otherness of elsewhere cannot be excluded without it leaving a trace. (*DEL,* 216)

Similarly, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack assert that in creating boundaries for a home, or creating the "here" of the local, it needs to be determined who gets to be included in the family as an "insider," and who is excluded as an "outsider."[4]

Quoting from Patricia Hill Collins, Fellows and Razack point out that: "'As the "Others" of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries.'"[5] As is evident in this quotation, the creation of a "comfortable" homeplace where one belongs requires the creation of marginal spaces from which it is distinguished, spaces inhabited by Others who do not belong. I contend that within dominant Western/Northern/Anglo discourses, this ideal homeplace of belonging, distinct from the public world, is a home built upon racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism, among other distinctions. Like Ruitenberg's contentions about the pedagogical significance of place, I argue that it is in this homeplace where dominant and subordinate identities are learned and taught. By "homeplace" here I do not mean simply the abode where one resides, but also other environments and institutions in which one is made to feel welcome or unwelcome, such as educational, political, legal, economic, and social institutions.

In order to maintain a "home" as a place apart, a place of safety, comfort, and privilege, "home" needs to be denied to anyone failing to fall into the category of "family/familiar" as defined by dominant discourses. Otherwise, as Collins suggests, the moral and social order of the home may be threatened. Therefore, a great deal of effort has gone into denying "home" to those who are deemed to stray from the dominant ideal of family, that is, those who are not white, financially stable, heterosexual, Christian, able bodied, and able minded, among other distinctions.[6] As bell hooks comments:

> An effective means of white subjugation of black people globally has been the perpetual construction of economic and social structures that deprive many black folks of the means to make homeplace….For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance.[7]

I would add here that denying a homeplace to certain groups functions not only to limit resistance to oppression, but also to limit feelings of responsibility on the part of privileged groups toward those excluded from the home and family. In an educational context, this may have an impact on *what* and *who* one feels responsible for teaching, or on *what* and *who* one feels responsible for researching, for example.

Collins notes that, "In a situation in which notions of belonging to a family remain important to issues of responsibility and accountability, individuals may feel that they 'owe' something to, and are responsible for, members of their families."[8] Following this argument, if marginalized groups are excluded from the home and from the family as community and nation, fewer obligations are entailed on the part of socially privileged groups. In order to maintain benefits for some groups in society, which can only come at the expense of others, home and family need to be learned and taught in a way that justifies exclusion, in a way that makes hierarchy appear natural. As Collins points out:

> Individuals typically learn their assigned place in hierarchies of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and social class in their families of origin. At the same time, they learn to view such hierarchies as natural social arrangements, as compared to socially constructed ones. Hierarchy in this sense becomes "naturalized" because it is associated with seemingly "natural" processes of family.[7]

In her essay "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," Minnie Bruce Pratt recalls how this naturalization of hierarchies impacted her own understanding of home and family.

After losing her own family, her children taken from her because she fell in love with another woman, Pratt writes that she yearned for a place to call home. However, she admits that:

> The place I wanted to reach was not a childish place, but my understanding of it was childish. I had not admitted that the safety of much of my childhood was because Laura Cates, Black and a servant, was responsible for me; that I had walks with my father because the woods were "ours" by systematic economic exploitation, instigated, at that time, by his White Citizens' Council; that I was allowed one evening a month with my woman friends because I was a wife who would come home at night. *Raised to believe that I could be where I wanted and have what I wanted, as a grown woman I thought I could simply claim what I wanted, even the making of a new place to live with other women. I had no understanding of the limits that I lived within, nor of how much my memory and experience of a safe space to be was based on places secured by omission, exclusion or violence, and on my submitting to the limits of that place.*[10]

As a lesbian denied family and home because she refused to adhere to the restrictions placed on a woman to be "lady of the house," Pratt recognizes the importance of home, of having a space where one can belong, yet at the same time acknowledges the dangers of attempting to create a space in which one belongs at the exclusion of others.

Illustrated in Pratt's recollections and in the work of Collins, learning a privileged view of one's home, one's town, of the townspeople, requires learning to accept social hierarchies as natural, to accept exclusionary practices to keep others out, for the sake of one's own comfort and security. For scholars, educators, and students, there is a need to pay attention to the lessons one learns about the social world as one learns about what it means to feel at home (in classrooms, in departments, in theories, in disciplines, in communities, and in nations) so that these hierarchies and exclusionary practices, as well as the systemic violence they lead to, cease to shape the world in which we live. Part of the solution then, as Ruitenberg suggests, is to pay attention to the ways in which our environment shapes our education and to move away from an attachment to the local that can serve to solidify

boundaries between social groups. As an antidote to the harm caused by pedagogies that ignore the spatialization of education, Ruitenberg argues for a radical pedagogy of place that takes up a commitment to hospitality and nomadism. She asserts that such a pedagogy "acknowledges the local contextuality of discourse and experience, but it examines this locality for trans-local traces, for the liminal border-zones, for the exclusions on which its communal identity relies. It encourages not entrenchment in one's locality and community but rather hospitality and openness" (*DEL*, 219).

Like Pratt, Ruitenberg's radical pedagogy of place draws attention to the need to examine the exclusions and hierarchies created in defining one's home. In order to avoid reproducing systems of dominance and subordination, Ruitenberg argues for the need to be able to leave one's home, to travel beyond the borders that one has constructed within a community, as well as the ability to welcome others in. She states: "[A] home is not a home until one can leave it and open it to the other — otherwise, it is a prison…[N]omads who have learned the ethical gestures of hospitality and openness to a community-to-come will bring nourishment to any place in which they land" (*DEL*, 219). I think this approach to understanding home from a nomadic perspective offers some useful strategies for the development of a radical pedagogy of homeplace.

Focusing on the need to be able to remove boundaries, to be more inclusive, to be able to move fluidly between localities, Ruitenberg's notion of nomadism offers an important alternative to the dominant ideal of home as a stable, comfortable, bounded space, which functions to naturalize hierarchy and thereby perpetuate social injustice. Robin Usher expands on this idea of nomadism, stating that,

> [M]etaphors of movement are deployed to destabilize the centres of power and provide for new power geometries through different mapping practices. Traveling, then, assumes a political as well as a metaphorical role — "nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere."[11]

Both Usher and Ruitenberg point out that taking up a nomadic perspective on home can change the way one thinks about oneself in relation to others, in that constant movement destabilizes a center of focus, destabilizes contrasts between the familiar and unfamiliar, and challenges inequalities based on ideas of a fixed community or locality. When every space becomes a potential "community-to-come," as Ruitenberg puts it, one needs to pay attention to the spaces beyond one's current home and to others who are potential community members-to-be. One's concerns and responsibilities therefore expand beyond one's immediate localities to encompass a much broader area.

However, although approaching "home" from a nomadic perspective opens up many possibilities for challenging systems of oppression, metaphors of nomadism at the same time carry certain limitations. That is, in taking up Ruitenberg's call for hospitality, I question who is expected to be hospitable, and whether or not this puts a further burden on already marginalized communities. Because of existing unequal power relations between different social groups, I worry that there might be an expectation for reciprocal hospitality in a way that reproduces these inequalities. An

obligation to "share" might be unfairly placed on groups whose homes have been destroyed repeatedly by those they are expected to welcome in. Would a refusal to welcome such groups warm-heartedly be seen as inhospitable?

A further concern I have with nomadism is that, as Usher quotes from R. Braidotti, nomadism is "being capable of recreating your home everywhere,"[12] although this can sound very similar to imperialism. Socially dominant groups have always been very good at recreating their/our homes everywhere, through colonial conquest, land appropriation, or more covert forms of assimilation, which only contribute to systems of oppression. I worry that such an approach to nomadism may only reinforce the belief of dominant groups that all space belongs to them/us, or as I quoted from Pratt earlier, the belief that, "I could be where I wanted and have what I wanted."

Additionally, I worry that theories of nomadism assume an equal — and equally desirable — mobility shared by all groups, though such an assumption fails to recognize many of the realities of systemic oppression. I do not want to suggest here that Ruitenberg's notion of nomadism needs to be rejected, as I feel it can offer some important strategies for resisting dominant discourses of home, but I do think nomadism as a concept needs to be approached with caution, in order to avoid reproducing social injustices. While Ruitenberg's radical pedagogy of place can function as an important starting point for thinking about anti-oppression education, perhaps in order to get a broader picture of what an effective radical pedagogy of homeplace might look like, it is necessary to pay attention to multiple voices, to *practice* a sort of nomadism in one's own theorizing. And so I turn to Lugones's work here to help expand on what a radical pedagogy of homeplace might look like if we are to take up Ruitenberg's concerns and attempt to address them with the openness, polyvocality, and fluidity that Ruitenberg seems to call for.

As Ruitenberg, Lugones similarly argues the need for individuals to abandon a static notion of the home, to remain open to contradiction, to difference, to what may seem alien. Focusing on the importance of flexibility and adaptability in living within and resisting systems of oppression, Lugones argues that the ability to travel between "worlds," between the social, political, economic, and metaphorical spaces we and others inhabit, is a crucial part of coalition work and of challenging systems of domination. In discussing the experience of "outsiders" to a dominant culture, focusing on Latinas/Latinos in the white/Anglo culture of the United States, Lugones asserts that:

> [T]he outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less "at home." This flexibility is necessary for the outsider. It is required by the logic of oppression. *But it can also be exercised resistantly by the outsider or by those who are at ease in the mainstream*. I recommend this resistant exercise that I call "world"-traveling.[13]

By moving beyond the spaces where one feels comfortable, by making a commitment to travel to different worlds, whether of the self or others, one is forced out of the comforts of home and into a space where one is no longer at the center.

"'World'-traveling" requires a certain humility; it requires the ability to recognize that one's "world" is not the only one that exists. While this is often forced upon individuals in socially marginalized positions, "insiders" to dominant culture have the "privilege" of never having to step outside their/our home/culture. These groups or individuals making a commitment to "world"-traveling are making a commitment to challenge the hierarchies constructed in the creation of a dominant "world," a commitment which Lugones asserts can only be made out of love. Lugones writes: "By traveling to other people's 'worlds,' we discover that there are 'worlds' in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable."[14] By traveling to other people's "worlds," one comes to discover that "home" is not a limited, bounded, static concept, but rather has many meanings, not all of which require notions of inequality to function.

Similar to Lugones's notion of "'world'-traveling" is her concept of "street-walker theorizing." Streetwalker theorizing takes a ground-level view, a perspective from the street, amongst — rather than above — others. Like "'world'-traveling," "streetwalker theorizing," or the theorizing of *la callejera* (loosely translated as "the pedestrian"), requires that one move beyond the comforts of one's own home, into the public engagement of the street. Lugones explains the concept of "streetwalker theorizing":

> It is in this line of vision, street-level, among embodied subjects, with ill-defined "edges," that the tactical strategist lives without myopia, without epistemological/political short-sightedness…Hanging out permits one to learn, to listen, to transmit information, to participate in communicative creations, to gauge possibilities, to have a sense of the directions of intentionality, to gain social depth.[15]

Again, like "'world'-traveling," "streetwalker theorizing" forces one outside the comforts of the ideal home, to a level of engagement beyond the familiar. Taking this perspective, that of street level, rather than from high above or through the windows, one gains a much deeper, multiple, flexible understanding of the self and others, beyond what is offered in the privileged home.

If Lugones's concepts of "'world'-traveling" and "streetwalker theorizing" are combined with Ruitenberg's notions of "nomadism" and "hospitality," a new way of teaching and learning home and social identity begins to emerge, one that moves away from a need for impermeable boundaries built upon exclusions which often only serve to reinforce social privilege and oppression. Rather, as one takes up a commitment to creating shifting, indefinite, multiple understandings of homeplace, family, and self, one begins to transform the social landscape into a space that belongs to everyone. However, while Lugones and Ruitenberg offer useful strategies and concepts to challenge the systemic inequality taught through dominant discourses of home, I am wary of taking up any one theory, including my own, as an ultimate solution.

Although I have tried to address the significance of discourses of the "ideal" home in teaching and maintaining systems of oppression, and to examine ways to

challenge these discourses, I have largely neglected to address the important role that home can play as a site of resistance for marginalized groups. Further, I fear that I have focused on the need to reject an "authentic" or essential identity, neglecting the significance that claiming a center, a place of belonging, can have for the self-definition and resistance of marginalized individuals and groups. For example, as hooks writes in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*:

> Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.[16]

As hooks illustrates, having a home, a place of belonging at the exclusion of others, may be necessary at times, and so to suggest that there is only one way of viewing "home" is for me to gravely oversimplify the issue. Certainly, home can also be a very *uncomfortable* place for many. While I focus in this essay on dominant discourses of the "ideal" home and the harms caused by these discourses, it is important to recognize, as hooks suggests, that this is only a partial glimpse into the issue of how "home" can inform our subjectivity and social, political, and economic relations. Furthermore, in arguing that discourses of home play a large role in naturalizing hierarchies and teaching systems of oppression, I do not want to suggest that this is simply a problem confined to individual families or homes, or that learning inequality is inevitable.

Rather, I believe that the discourses used to construct the boundaries of home as a place apart and a place of privilege are the same discourses that function to uphold local, national, and even global distinctions between who gets to belong and who does not, as well as to whom one is or is not obligated. As questions about citizenship, immigration, globalization, refugee rights, migrant workers' rights, and similar concerns become more pressing, the need for a radical pedagogy of homeplace grows more urgent. For these questions are about home on a macro level, and understanding them seems to require an examination of what one learns about the self and others through dominant discourses of the ideal home.

Although in this essay I have offered only a partial, and perhaps at times contradictory view of the role "home" can play in teaching systems of dominance and subordination, building upon Ruitenberg's work, I hope to have made clear the need for a radical pedagogy of homeplace, one that examines how notions of family, home, belonging, comfort, and security can inform our own subjectivities and the way we understand the subjectivities of others. Furthermore, I think there are many practical implications of this analysis, covering a broad range of educational questions, such as: What sort of knowledge or material "belongs" in academia? In the classroom? What is excluded? How do knowledge-making communities include or exclude particular individuals or groups? What does it mean to claim a place for oneself as an educator? What sort of hierarchies of knowledge might this involve?

How might one use "nomadism," "'world'-traveling," and "streetwalker theoriz-ing" to challenge these hierarchies?

There are certainly many more questions that could be asked here, but what I hope to have demonstrated is the need to examine and trouble how notions of home and belonging can function within systems of oppression. As Ruitenberg and Lugones suggest, there is a need to question what it means to feel at ease within particular environments and institutions. What might be the implications for scholars, educators, and students of troubling or disrupting this sense of ease? How might the performance of these roles change? As I have discussed in this essay, I think concepts such as "nomadism," "'world'-traveling," and "streetwalker theoriz-ing" are all useful to keep in mind in attempting to practice a radical pedagogy of home, that is, in trying to navigate and muddle through the physical and metaphori-cal spaces that bear significance to our understanding of ourselves and others. However, one needs to be able to travel within, among, and beyond these concepts, in simultaneous multiplicity and perhaps contradiction, because making a comfort-able home for oneself within any single theory can risk reproducing the inequalities that each theory seeks to avoid.

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1. Claudia Ruitenberg, "Deconstructing the Experience of the Local: Toward a Radical Pedagogy of Place," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 214 (emphasis in original). This work will be cited as *DEL* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. In speaking of an "ideal" home and family, I am referring to the hegemonic idea of a biological, heterosexual nuclear family that shapes a great deal of social, economic, and political policy.

3. "Our/We" here refer to "we" as an audience of scholars, who have the privilege to make a home for ourselves in the institutions of knowledge production, while also meaning "we" who share some of the privileged social locations I inhabit as a white, able-bodied, able-minded, heterosexual, financially secure, English-speaking, Christian-raised woman. I realize that this second use of the term "we" does not apply to all readers, but I am uncertain as to how to use both senses of "we" simultaneously, and so I mark "we" as a term in tension, which I hope the reader will keep in mind throughout this essay.

4. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations Among Women," *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 1, no. 2 (1998): 335–52.

5. Ibid., 343.

6. As Fellows and Razack argue, although white, heterosexual, wealthy *women* are often subordinated in the home, they often continue to benefit from notions of home as a place of privilege, and therefore have a stake in maintaining some social hierarchies. For a further discussion of how home and family have been denied to marginalized groups, see for example: Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2005); and Anna Agathangelou, *The Global Political Economy of Sex: Desire, Violence, and Insecurity in Mediterranean Nation States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

7. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between-the-Lines, 1990), 47.

8. Patricia Hill Collins, "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," in *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, eds. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 165.

9. Ibid., 158 (emphasis added).

10. Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, eds. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), 26 (emphasis added).

11. Robin Usher, "Putting Space Back on the Map: Globalization, Place and Identity," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34, no. 1 (2002), 46.

12. Ibid., 46.

13. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 77 (emphasis added).

14. Ibid., 97.

15. Ibid., 209.

16. hooks, *Yearning*, 42.