Why a critical pedagogy of place is an oxymoron

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Given the growing environmental awareness, educators – especially in science and environmental education – need to avoid embracing a ‘critical pedagogy of place’. Why conflating critical pedagogy with place-based education is an oxymoron, and why it perpetuates the thinking and silences that undermine both the diversity of the world’s cultures and ecosystems are the main foci of this essay. The main theorists of a critical pedagogy of place – Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and David Gruenewald – draw on a tradition of thinking that emphasizes decolonization and rehabilitation. While these words create the illusion of a culturally and ecologically sound approach to place-based education, these theorists are unable to recognize the nature and ecological importance of the cultural commons that exist in every community – and that represent alternatives to a consumer-dependent existence. In effect, their commitment to universalizing the process of decolonization without a deep knowledge of the diverse cultural practices that have a smaller ecological impact meets the definition of an oxymoron where two contradictory positions are assumed to be compatible. A culturally informed knowledge of place takes account of different approaches to dwelling on the land, as well as the ability to listen to the keepers of community memory of past environmentally destructive practices and of sustainable traditions of community self-sufficiency. It is not driven by a Western ideology that takes for granted the progressive nature of change, or assumes that Western theorists possess the answers that the other cultures should live by.

Keywords: critical pedagogy of place; cultural commons; double blind thinking; thick description; de-colonization

Introduction

There are many assumptions and values that science and environmental educators share with the proponents of critical pedagogy and place-based educators. The critical pedagogy theorist’s emphasis on social justice issues and the place-based educator’s stress on student’s becoming active participants in the interplay of their local communities and bioregions can easily be interpreted by science/environmental educators as natural allies in creating a more sustainable future. That all four groups have learned to take for granted many of the same cultural assumptions as well as the silences promoted in their university education is yet another reason that the agenda of a critical pedagogy of place appears so appropriate for supplementing the pedagogy and curriculum in environmental and science education classes. Among the key assumptions they share in common are: thinking of change as an inherently progressive force (what the critical pedagogy theorists refer to as ‘transformations’ and ‘transformative learning’); a deep seated ethnocentrism that is now masked by abstract references to valuing cultural differences; a view of language as a conduit – which

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marginalizes an awareness that words have a history and that their meaning needs to be continually updated through what the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, referred to as ‘thick description’ (1973); and that critical thinking always leads to overcoming oppression and environmentally destructive practices.

The other key assumptions reinforced in a university education take the form of prejudices that can be traced back to the ideas of Plato that were, in turn, reinforced by Enlightenment thinkers and most contemporary Western philosophers. These prejudices relate to the way ‘traditions’ are now represented in most university classes – and especially in science-oriented classes. Another prejudice is that indigenous cultures are essentially backward and thus must be modernized by adopting the Western model of development – including modern science. One of the major silences in the university education of critical pedagogy theorists, place-based educators and science-oriented educators is about the nature, importance and diversity of the world’s cultural commons for living a less consumer, more community-oriented, lifestyle. To make the point more directly, science and environmental educators share many of the same assumptions that are taken for granted by the proponents of a critical pedagogy of place and thus do not recognize that combining ‘critical pedagogy’ with ‘place’ is a oxymoron. According to the dictionary, an oxymoron is ‘a rhetorical figure in which incongruous or contradictory terms are combined’. When both groups – the proponents of critical pedagogy of place and the science/environmental educators – find in each other’s approach to educational reform the language that appears to represent common interests, they may think that it is unnecessary to question whether the conceptual baggage (including the prejudices and silences) of both groups leads to basic contradictions – or what I would prefer to call conceptual double binds.

Part of the conceptual baggage that critical pedagogy theorists never mention is that Paulo Freire was a deeply Social Darwinian thinker, which can be seen if the reader goes to his description of the three stages of human (cultural) development in Education for Critical Consciousness (1974a, English language edition). There he describes the indigenous cultures living in the interior of Brazil as ‘men of semi-intransitivity of consciousness who cannot apprehend problems situated outside of their sphere of biological necessity.’ His categories for other cultures that have evolved to a higher stage of development include ‘transitivity of consciousness’, ‘naïve transitivity’, and – finally – ‘critically transitivity of consciousness’, which he identifies as the most evolved consciousness of critical pedagogy theorists (pp. 17–19). John Dewey, the other less quoted source of thinking that environmental/science educators are more likely to have studied in their teacher education courses, is also a Social Darwinian thinker. His stages of cultural evolution can be seen in his many references to ‘savages’, people locked in a ‘spectator’ approach to knowledge, and the more evolved thinkers who rely upon the experimental mode of inquiry for continually reconstructing experience. Both Freire and Dewey assumed that change is inherently progressive in nature, and both ignored the environmental damage of their times. Dewey (1916), for example, refers to traditions (habits) ‘as routine ways of acting, or degenerate in ways of action to which we are enslaved …’ (p. 5). Freire’s (1974b) most famous injunction for overcoming oppression can be found in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, where he urges each generation to rename the world of the previous generation (p. 76) and in The Politics of Education (1985) he states that ‘history makes us while we make it. Again, my suggestion is that we attempt to emerge from this alienating routine that repeats itself’ (p. 199). Their misunderstanding of the nature and complexity of traditions is reproduced in the thinking of the advocates of a critical pedagogy of place, and is one of the reasons the latter group are unable to recognize the ecological and community strengthening characteristics of many of the world’s cultural commons.
A strong case can be made that even though the current generation of critical pedagogy theorists, such as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, now suggest that the multicultural nature of the world must be taken into account, and that we must address the economic basis of the ecological crisis, we can still see in their writings the main themes of both Freire and Dewey – which is the need to transform the world by relying upon an abstract Western epistemology that carries forward a number of misconceptions and prejudices that can be traced back to Plato’s *Republic*. Their emphasis on the efficacy of abstract theory in leading to a better world reproduces Plato’s assumption that rational thought, which only an elite can effectively engage in, is a more reliable source of knowledge than narratives, embodied experiences and the achievements of other cultures (Bowers 2007a). For McLaren (2005), the epistemological framework that should serve as a universal guide for addressing the ecological crises is the Marxist analysis that he is now attempting to ‘green’. The silences and prejudices found in the theories of Dewey and Freire – particularly their indifference to the importance of the cultural commons as sources of resistance to the globalization of market forces as well as their prejudice toward other cultural ways of knowing – also continue to be reproduced in the thinking of Giroux and McLaren – and to a lesser extent in the thinking of David Gruenewald. The problem for science/environmental educators is that these are the same silences and prejudices that were part of their own university education. These shared silences and prejudices, along with the shared cultural assumptions, are the most likely reasons that science/environmental educators do not recognize that a critical pedagogy of place is an oxymoron.

If one reads the writings of Giroux and, more importantly, McLaren, one finds recommendations for educational reforms that are based on a clear understanding of how capitalism is contributing to the development of a world monoculture and to destroying the sustaining capacity of natural systems. McLaren gets this part correct. Whether the culturally diverse educators of the world will adopt his ‘green revolutionary critical pedagogy’ that is to lead to an ecologically sustainable socialist future is more problematic. The important point is that neither Giroux’s vision of the teacher as a ‘transformative intellectual’, McLaren’s revolutionary Marxist-oriented critical pedagogy, nor Joel Kovel’s (2002) eco-socialist pedagogy ever address the specific curriculum reforms that should be undertaken. Their writings contain sweeping generalizations about social justice, the need for overturning oppressive practices – including capitalism. But they fail to explain how to introduce these reforms in the world’s diversity of cultures that range from the Euro-centric to the Muslim, Hindu and the thousands of indigenous culture that make up the majority of the world’s population. As many of these non-Western cultures are well represented in urban areas across America, Canada and Great Britain, as well as other Western countries, there is a need for these critical pedagogy and eco-socialist theorists to explain how these cultural groups are to be educated to abandon their non-Western forms of consciousness, and to adopt the supposedly emancipated consciousness of Freire, Giroux and McLaren.

If we were to do an empirical study of whom science/environmental educators rely upon most for their understanding of how to adapt a critical pedagogy of place to their approach to teaching and curriculum, I suspect that the person they would cite as the most influential would be David Gruenewald. The essay they are likely to cite as providing the best understanding of a critical pedagogy of place would be a ‘The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place’ (Gruenewald 2003). If the reader lacks a knowledge of the historical roots of double bind thinking encoded in the language processes that are largely taken for granted, including how the silences and prejudices that have characterized Western philosophy since the time of Plato are still being perpetuated in universities, they are likely to
think that Gruenewald has achieved a synthesis that avoids the problem of critical pedagogy of place being an oxymoron.

A key word that has been missing in the writings of Freire, and his many followers around the world (including McLaren’s reductionist and thus non-culturally grounded and non-embodied use of the word), is ‘conservatism’. Gruenewald (2003) attempts to soften the emphasis of critical pedagogy on continual transformation, which is the goal of Freire’s critical pedagogy, by stating that the ‘question of what needs to be conserved takes on a special significance to a pedagogy of place’ (p. 10). His acknowledgement that not everything needs to be transformed and decolonized was a result of an hour-and-a-half telephone conversation with me, which he acknowledges the ‘Notes’ section of the paper. Had he not had this conversation, his effort to explain the need for place-based educators to balance ‘decolonization’ with helping local communities to learn how to ‘reinhabit’ their place would have left the reader with the idea that both critical pedagogy and place-based education have essentially the same reform agenda. His reference to the need to be aware of what needs to be conserved puts him outside the mainstream of critical pedagogy thinking. Unfortunately, Gruenewald does not acknowledge that conserving involves, among other things, an awareness of the ecological importance of the many forms of intergenerational knowledge, skills and patterns of interdependence and support that can also be understood as traditions. As pointed out above, a constant theme in writings of Freire, Giroux, McLaren and Peter Roberts is that traditions need to be the main focus of the universal project of decolonization and emancipation. Gruenewald’s reference to conserving thus represents a radical departure from the emancipatory agenda of critical pedagogy theorists, but he fails to recognize that many of his readers will impose their stereotypical and reductionist understanding on his use of he word.

While Gruenewald makes a verbal genuflection in the direction of making awareness of what needs to be conserved part of his understanding of a pedagogy of place, he never goes on to identify what needs to be conserved. That is, like the other critical pedagogy theorists, there is no specificity to the recommendation – and this silence has to do with their collective lack of a deep understanding of cultures. To put it another way, Gruenewald shares with the other critical pedagogy theorists a lack of awareness of how a ‘thick description’ of the local intergenerational knowledge should be a core creature of place-based education. The result is that the reference to knowing what needs to be conserved does not eliminate the problem of a reform agenda that is based on oxymoron thinking.

A careful reading of Gruenewald’s essay reveals that the agenda of critical pedagogy, which he refers to as ‘decolonization’, is his primary concern – and that ‘reinhabitation’ turns out to be a context-free metaphor that has ‘God-word’ standing that is beyond questioning. Unfortunately, he adopts from others an explanation of ‘reinhabitation’ that justifies the transformative mission of critical pedagogy. He quotes the definition given by Berg and Dasmann, that reinhabitation means ‘learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation’. He also quotes David Orr’s explanation that ‘the study of place … has significance in re-educating people in the art of living well where they are’ (Gruenewald 2003, 9). What is important to note is that both quotations fail to acknowledge that there are aspects of the cultural commons that do not require ‘re-education’ and learning to live in non-environmentally destructive ways. Gruenewald’s reliance on the word ‘reinhabitation’ further strengthens the likelihood that science/environmental educators continue to ignore the importance of the cultural commons that have a smaller ecological impact. Unfortunately, educators are ill-prepared to re-educate the people who possess the economic and political advantages that have allowed them to exploit the environment – though recent experience has demonstrated that students can...
participate with other environmentally activists in forcing corporations and other environmental malefactors to modify their behavior.

Learning to participate in these collective environmental restoration efforts should be a key part of place-based education. However, what is not recognized in Gruenewald’s ideologically driven effort to make place-based education dependent upon the critical pedagogy of decolonization (a word that has its roots in a Marxist analysis) is that most environmental activists rely upon a more general understanding of critical reflection that can be traced back to the ideas of Socrates. Indeed, critical reflection, over the centuries, has not always been used to achieve social justice. It has been relied upon to solve a wide range of problems, such as how to identify and punish people who were drifting from the orthodoxies of the Catholic Church, how to introduce social reforms that would contribute to greater social justice in society, how to market products that the public was unaware of needing, and how to ensure that the adoption of a new technology would not undermine the intergenerational knowledge essential to a morally coherent and mutually supportive culture. A specific example of the exercise of critical reflection that was not informed by the change-oriented interpretation that the critical pedagogy writers take for granted (except for the Bowers’ influenced qualification that Gruenewald makes) is how a First Nation culture in Canada relied upon critical reflection in sorting out the cultural issues involved in adopting computers in their approaches to education. For them, critical reflection involved examining what needed to be changed and what needed to be conserved – and it was a process that combined critical reflection and democratic decision making that took two years to work through.

Gruenewald’s efforts to incorporate a concern with balancing a decolonizing educational agenda with an awareness that conserving must also be taken into account in place-based education brings into focus another aspect of the conceptual baggage that is part of critical pedagogy thinking that few educators think critically about. Gruenewald, like Freire, McLaren and Moacir Gadotti (Director of the Paulo Freire Institute in Brazil) reproduce a tradition that can be traced back to one of Plato’s contributions that Western philosophers have been happy to sustain: namely, the idea that there is such a thing as ‘pure thinking’. That is, the idea that thinking, when rationally based, is free of the influence of the cultural epistemology encoded in the metaphorical language of the cultural group – and upon which the ‘thinker’ relies and generally takes for granted.

The current manifestation of this phenomenon was best described by Alvin Gouldner (1979) when he wrote that ‘the culture of critical discourse is characterized by speech that is relatively more situation-free, more context or field ‘independent’. This speech culture thus values expressively legislated meanings and devalues tacit, context-limited meanings. It’s ideal is ‘one word, one meaning for everyone and forever’ (p. 28). This proclivity of relying upon abstractions that have been melded together into a theory can be seen not only in Gruenewald’s reliance on the words ‘decolonization’ and ‘reinhabitation’, but also in Gadotti’s claim that environmental educators should foster a ‘planetary consciousness’ and that this form of consciousness can only be created as the environmental educator disrupts the process of cultural transmission by encouraging students to discover this consciousness for themselves. This is to be achieved, according to Gadotti (2000), by encouraging students to undertake ‘the grand journal of each individual into his interior universe and the universe that surrounds him’ (p. 9). While Freire would not go along with this subjective approach to emancipation from the processes of cultural transmission, Gadotti’s proposal is not fundamentally different from Freire’s argument that each generation can only achieve the fullest expression of their humanity as they rename the world of the previous generation – a proposal that ignores the differences in cultural ways of knowing that often were, and still are, the basis of living within the limits and possibilities of their bioregion.
McLaren also reproduces the Platonic pattern of representing abstract thinking and theory as more legitimate than context-dependent forms of knowledge – which I will explain more fully in terms of Geertz’s idea of ‘thick description’. For example, McLaren reduces the discussion of what needs to be conserved in America’s political and environmentally degraded circumstances into a word game where one abstract definition is played off against another abstraction – and in the process reproduces another part of the Platonic legacy that Western philosophers have perpetuated. Namely, the marginalization of other cultural ways of knowing, including the nature and ecological importance of their cultural commons. In his usual style of misrepresenting the ideas of people whom he disagrees with, McLaren (2005) (along with Donna Houston) writes that ‘we may have found some more common ground with Bowers if not for his insistence on boiling everything down to a linguistic struggle over whether the word transform or the word conservative is the more appropriate political term’ (p. 204). By ignoring the extended discussion in my earlier book, Mindful Conservatism (Bowers 2001), which was based on a thick description of the biological, linguistic, psychological processes that are unavoidably conserving, and that presented the conservative ideas of Edmund Burke, Michael Oakshott and such environmental conservative writers as Wendell Berry, Vandana Shiva and Masanobu Fukuoka, he represents both of the words conserve and transform as having a universal meaning and, thus, as free of cultural contexts. If we examine the key words in Gruenewald’s article, we find the same proclivity of assuming that words have a universal meaning.

Let me be more specific here. The context-free use of language that characterizes both how critical pedagogy and place-based education are supposedly complementary processes is key to understanding why, when fused together, a critical pedagogy of place is an oxymoron. The quotations that Gruenewald borrows from Berg, Dasmann and Orr represent only a partial understanding of how people inhabit place. And their representation of how people need to be ‘re-educated in the art of living well’ represents an example of context-free thinking. If Berg, Dasmann, Orr and, for that matter, Gruenewald, had engaged in a thick description of what all is constituted in inhabiting place they would have found that the nature of place-based education has a more complex agenda than that of decolonization and reinhabitation.

According to the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, thick description is what enables one to know the difference between (to use his example) an involuntary wink of eye and a wink that is intended to send a message. That is, thick description involves examining the history of prior relationships, issues of gender and class, personal biography and all the other background cultural patterns that may have influenced the nature of the message that was being sent. Another example is when feminists challenged the prejudices inherent in genderized language by doing a thick description of their history of achievements, patterns of discrimination, various forms of exploitation – and even the mythopoetic narratives that represented them as inferior to men. Thick description involves challenging the abstractions that carry forward past misconceptions, prejudices, silences and stereotypes that are encoded in metaphors such as decolonization, critical inquiry, emancipation, individualism, tradition, woman, planetary citizen, American, Canadian, British, Muslim and so forth.

Why a critical pedagogy of place is an oxymoron can be seen if a thick description of how different cultural groups inhabit place is undertaken. This would require a thick description of the cultural traditions and practices of the nearly 6000 linguistic groups still surviving (with some on the verge of extinction), as well as all the ethnic groups that mix and mingle with other groups in urban areas. Recognizing this huge task, which can be undertaken if the science/environmental educator focus on local people and local places, can lead to profoundly different pedagogical practices that go beyond the assumption that all
people need to in learn how to re-inhabit on a sustainable basis the local bioregion. A thick
description of the relationship between people and place may reveal the patterns of environ-
mental abuse, as well as the ideology and techno-science developments that are major
contributors to degrading the environment. But it may also lead to an awareness of many
aspects of the local cultural commons that have been carried on for generations, and that
represent alternatives to the consumer/industrial culture that is being globalized. The inter-
generational knowledge that sustains many of the cultural commons that strengthen patterns
of mutual support within communities and that have a smaller ecological impact represent
patterns of habitation that do not need to be ‘decolonized’.

A different vocabulary than that of critical pedagogy theorists is required in describing
(doi ng a thick description of) the many expressions of the local cultural commons that
represent sites of resistance to the hyper-consumer dependent lifestyle required by the
industrial system of production and the incessant pursuit of profits. A thick description of
the cultural commons carried forward by different ethnic groups, such as their approach
to the preparation and sharing of food or their traditions of mutual support, would bring out
the complexity existing within the community’s mutual support systems as well as their
historical continuities. Making explicit these traditions (some of which may perpetuate
forms of discrimination) may also being out the degree to which there is an awareness of
how the cultural commons are being enclosed – that is, being incorporated into the market
system of production and consumption. Women in Third World cultures who have had the
traditional responsibility of identifying the seeds for next year’s planting are aware of how
the introduction of the Green Revolution, with its reliance on chemicals and excessive use
of water, is forcing them into the double bind of becoming increasingly dependent upon a
money economy when their incomes are so severely limited.

Other aspects of the traditions of the cultural commons, that can be referred to as the
intergenerational knowledge, skills and systems of mutual support, include the narratives,
approaches to the creative arts, ceremonies, civil liberties and systems of reintegration into
community, craft knowledge and so forth. The cultural commons of some groups include
racist, gender and age-related forms of discrimination and exploitation – which should be
reformed by recovering the social justice traditions of the culture rather than driven by a
Western ideology. We need to remember that the Woodrow Wilson ideal of making the
world safe for democracy, which corporations and the World Trade Organization have
reframed as making the world safe for achieving a global capitalist economy, is part of the
West’s messianic tradition that has its roots both in messianic Christianity and in liberating
ideologies that perpetuate the same disregard that Plato and other Western thinkers such as
John Locke, Descartes, Adam Smith, John Dewey, Paulo Freire have shown toward the
possibility that other cultures may have developed in ways that do not degrade the envi-
ronments they depend upon.

Overcoming the oxymoron agenda of an critical pedagogy of place can be done if
science/environmental educators understand their role as more complex than educating
students to transform the local practices that are degrading the natural systems that future
generations will depend upon. In suggesting how thick description should be an integral part
of the educational process, it is important to identify another problem that is rooted in most
approaches to educating science and environmental educators. That is, while there is a
difference between the scientific method and the scientists who think and communicate in
the language of their cultural group, the professors who control the courses that science and
environmental educators take as part of their professional studies too often do not them-
selves possess a deep knowledge of culture and thus do not require this of their students.
The double bind here is that if science and environmental educators adopt a pedagogy based
on a critical pedagogy of place, they will be dealing with cultural issues for which they have little or no understanding.

And when becoming an agent of cultural decolonization and re-inhabitation they may be moving down the slippery slope of scientism that we now find being promoted by highly acclaimed scientists. I am referring here to E.O. Wilson, who claims in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998) that before the rise of Western science people were locked in a cognitive prison, that the brain is a machine, that religions are adaptive behaviors and should now be replaced by the theory of evolution and that scientists are best prepared to determine which cultural practices and values should be allowed to exist. Francis Crick, in *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (1994) promises that scientists will soon be able to explain the nature of human consciousness – including why some people become outstanding musicians and mathematicians. And Lee Silver, in *Remaking Eden* (1997) claims that the next challenge facing scientists will be to create a class of ‘Gene Rich’ humans who will, over time, occupy their own niche in the process of human evolution. The less-known scientists responsible for intelligence tests and the eugenics movement also must be kept in mind when considering how scientists often reproduce the misconceptions of their culture. The example of the many scientists who introduced into the environment thousand of chemicals without knowing how they would interact on each other or on the reproductive systems of humans and other organisms – all in the name of progress – must also be kept in mind. The scientist’s lack of a deep knowledge of cultures, including how the languaging systems of different cultures carry forward the misconceptions (and in many instances the wisdom) of the past should be a major concern of science/environmental educators who take on the role of that a critical pedagogy of place assigns them.

Given this warning, I would like to suggest an approach that addresses what is missing in the critical pedagogy approach to place-based education. As suggested earlier, the cultural and environmental commons began with the first humans walking the savannas in what is now called Africa. While environmental scientists and various conservation groups are attempting to conserve and restore what remains of the environmental commons, there are cultural commons that also exist in every community – but again in highly attenuated conditions where what remains is under constant threat of being enclosed (being privatized by individuals and corporations, monetized, turned into a new consumer product or service).

The pedagogy that strengthens the local traditions of intergenerational knowledge, skills and patterns of mutual support that enable members of the community to be less dependent upon consumerism, and thus to have a smaller ecological footprint, requires the teacher and professor to adopt the role of the mediator and to engage students in thick descriptions of the differences between their experiences in various cultural commons activities and experiences in the industrial/consumer culture. The mediator, unlike the critical pedagogy-oriented teacher, does not set out to decolonize or emancipate students from the intergenerational knowledge and skills that the critical pedagogy theorist has relegated to the realm of silence or has prejudged as backward. Rather, it is to encourage students to identify and to give voice to their experiences in the various cultural commons in their community as well as the corresponding industrial/consumer activities. The mediator does not give the answers in advance and does not assume at the outset that the teaching moment is also a moment of transformation. Rather the purpose of the mediator is to engage students in the process of thick description that leads to acquiring the language necessary for exercising the communicative competence required in the democratic process of deciding what needs to be resisted, fundamentally changed or conserved and intergenerationally renewed.
Thick description can begin in the early grades by having students discuss the differences they experience in oral and print-based thinking and communication. Encouraging students to engage in a thick description would lead to giving voice to the differences in relationships, patterns of moral reciprocity, feelings, patterns of thinking, what cannot be made explicit in both modes of communication and so forth. In effect, it leads to making explicit what may otherwise be taken for granted and thus not recognized as either problematic or as a life- and community-enhancing pattern. Later, thick description may focus on the differences between an assembly-line experience and a craft endeavor, between developing a talent that leads to participating with others in one of the creative arts and becoming a consumer of artists whose works are part of the market system, between possessing the language necessary for identifying one’s civil liberties and the experience of accepting the right of government and corporations to keep every aspect of daily life under constant surveillance, between growing a garden and being dependent upon foods flown in from the far reaches of the world, between acquiring the skills necessary for helping a neighbor and working at an unfulfilling job in order to hire someone else to make the repair, between work that is returned and work that is paid, between relying upon intergenerational knowledge of healing practices and relying upon industrialized medicine, between living more self-reliant and community centered lives and being the autonomous individual required by the market systems of production and consumption and so forth. The differences between the cultural commons and the market dictated relationships exist in both rural and urban environments. A fuller account of how different aspects of the cultural commons and forms of enclosure can be introduced at different stages in the educational process can be found in the online book, *Transforming Environmental Education: Making the Cultural and Environmental Commons the Focus of Educational Reform* (Bowers 2006), which can be accessed by going to www.http://cabowers.net. The online handbook (Bowers, 2007b) that can be found at the same online address explains in greater detail the teacher’s/professor’s role as a mediator between the sub-culture of the local cultural commons and the subculture of the market/consumer dependent lifestyle.

The mediator, regardless of level of schooling (including home schooling), needs to encourage students to do a thick description of how different aspects of the cultural common impact natural systems – as well as a thick description of narratives and other aspects of the cultural commons that contribute to degrading natural systems and to oppressing, marginalizing and exploiting other members of the community. The latter may take the form of doing a thick description of the higher values to which the community also subscribes (perhaps the social gospel or other sacred texts) and the community practices that contradict these higher values.

To reiterate, the key reason that a critical pedagogy of place is an oxymoron is that the linguistic tradition of relying upon abstractions, including abstract theories that encode many of the same taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie both the idea of universal decolonization and the market liberals’ efforts to universalize the West’s consumer dependent lifestyle, fail to take account of the intergenerational traditions of habitation that still exist in communities. Places have a long and culturally varied history, while the language of a critical pedagogy of place has a specific history that carries forward the tradition of ignoring the diverse ways in which more ecologically centered cultures and community practices have contributed to long-term habitation of place.

One has only to recall the generalizations of Dewey, Freire and Gadotti that reveal their respective one-true approaches to reconstructing experience, emancipation and achieving a planetary consciousness to recognize that their prescriptions for change are based on a
culturally uninformed theory that is intended to be universalized. Unless science/environmental educators are knowledgeable about how universal prescriptions too often become a cultural colonizing agenda they should be wary of ignoring the inherent contradiction in a theory that leads to understanding ‘decolonization’ only in terms of Western cultural assumptions, and that represents ‘reinhabitation’ as an excuse for educators to ignore the different expressions of the local cultural commons that students need to help revitalize. Even though Gruenewald makes an effort to balance the transformative agenda of critical pedagogy with an awareness of what needs to be conserved, he still falls short of clarifying the nature and importance of the local cultural commons – and the pedagogy that is required for helping students recognize the differences between commons and market-based experiences. Unfortunately, the assumptions underlying critical pedagogy are now so widely taken for granted among educators in nearly all subject areas that the silence about the need to acquire a deep knowledge of culture, that of the teacher as well as the culture of others that are to be decolonized, is likely to be ignored by science/environmental educators who identify with a critical pedagogy of place.

Notes on contributor
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