



## Toward the Concrete: Critical Geography and Curriculum Inquiry in the New Materialism

Robert J. Helfenbein, *Loyola University Maryland*

**Abstract:** This paper offers perspectives on the ways in which Curriculum Theory has, might, and perhaps should turn its attention toward the concrete. In a recent book on the future of cultural studies, Grossberg (2010) suggests that the political commitments of critical work push scholars not to “high theory, nor is it captured in those intellectual practices that, starting with the concrete, leap into the universal... not the attempt to find the universal in the concrete, and the concrete is not an occasion for philosophizing, however brilliant and pertinent such philosophizing may be in the final analysis...” But instead to take up work that “is always in the service of the concrete, enabling one to produce the concrete in more productive ways” (p.2). In particular, the paper explores Grossberg’s charge and its application to a curriculum in/of urban contexts specifically as contested and contradictory places and focuses attention on new possibilities for “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience” (Pinar, 2004, p. 2).

**Keywords:** Critical Geography, Urban Education, Curriculum Theory, Cultural Studies of Education, Qualitative Research

*Theory is always a detour on the way to something more important”*  
(Hall cited in Grossberg 1997, p. 346)

*You should only use theory if it creates illumination, casts light on things, helps you present a phenomenon more fully in itself*  
(Willis, 1977, p. 190).

## I. The Concrete

This article offers perspective on the ways in which the field of Curriculum Theory might take up the question of its relationship to qualitative research and the context somewhat ambiguously coded as urban education. I am specifically thinking about a return to an intentionality that focuses our attention on what Pinar (2007) refers to, building on Ted Aoki, as “the lived experience, this place where we hear the call of teaching” (p. 42), or, said another way, points us toward the concrete. Obviously, the choice here of the term concrete is intentional on my part and perhaps provokes some reaction in its possible meaning. Indeed, I am trying to be provocative in pointing to the concrete as opposed to the abstract, the empirical as opposed to the theoretical, and the urban in specific, the city as a site for curriculum theorizing. Curriculum theory and curriculum studies have a complicated history that involves the tangling up of multiple—although it should be noted primarily Western—epistemological trajectories (see Kliebard, 1995; Paraskeva, 2012; Pinar *et al.*, 1995; Schubert, 1986; Watkins, 2001). In some ways, the richness of the Reconceptualized field lies in its explicit openness to the application of social and psychological theory outside of itself—in fact, I feel comfortable in saying that this is why most of us in curriculum theory were attracted to it.

So then, this effort is not to say that this is the only way forward for curriculum theorizing or to invalidate other types of curriculum work in what I happily embrace as a polysemic field. It is to say however that I think these may be places where we might intervene in “the nightmare of the present,” where we might engage in the types of intellectual work that expose the contradictions and political possibilities within what is being called “education reform,” and hopefully *act upon* what must be considered the first rule of any critical project: that is, that the world doesn’t have to be the way it is.

Part of my own intellectual project has involved looking for the intersections of cultural studies and curriculum theory and I continue to believe the ground to be fertile. Continuing to read in cultural studies has in fact inspired this paper. In a recent book on the future of cultural studies, Grossberg (2010) suggests that the political commitments of critical work push scholars not to:

high theory, nor is it captured in those intellectual practices that, starting with the concrete, leap into the universal... not the attempt to find the universal in the concrete, and the concrete is not an occasion for philosophizing, however brilliant and pertinent such philosophizing may be in the final analysis... [But instead to take up work that] *is always in the service of the concrete, enabling one to produce the concrete in more productive ways.* (p. 2, emphasis added)

It seems to me that within this text is an admonition, a caution, and a charge that one could consider just as seriously for the field of curriculum. The charge here—an intellectual project in the service of the concrete that recognizes its role in the production of the concrete—and its application to a curriculum in/of urban contexts requires an analysis grounded in some empirical investigation and a recognition of the contested and contradictory nature of those places. I would argue that this focuses attention on new possibilities for “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience” (Pinar, 2004, p. 2).

To continue to follow Grossberg (2012), we can argue that curriculum theory like Cultural Studies “attempts to strategically deploy theory (and research) to gain the knowledge necessary to describe the context in ways that may enable the articulation of new or better political strategies” (p. 25). This is what Stuart Hall (following Marx) refers to as “a detour through theory” that promises new ways in which to engage in the project of social analysis. This particular cultural studies approach insists on including in our analysis

both the social construction of structural constraints and the material effects of those constraints in lived experience.

Social constructions, like whiteness for example, are precisely that—constructed, yet the material, tangible effects of these forces at work in the project of construction and maintenance are laden with issues of power and privilege and play out in classrooms, playgrounds and neighborhoods every day. How people make meaning of these constructions, work against or in support of them, and do identity/assemblage work all within these matrices of power is precisely part of the concrete that curriculum theory might turn towards. The detour through theory, through the invention and appropriation of new concepts offers the potential for new and nuanced understandings of the contexts in which we take up curriculum work. *But*, here again Grossberg cautions us, “it must also take a detour through the real, through the empirical context, in order to be able to go on theorizing” (p. 25). The challenge for curriculum workers then is to strive for different and perhaps better understandings of the contexts in which we work. The challenge is to know more than when we began. Curriculum theory, like cultural studies, “is not supposed to rediscover what we already know.” (Grossberg, 2012, p. 25)

Thinking about power in these terms involves thinking about change within the terms of modulation, rearticulating and redirecting the terms of the center-periphery that dominates neo-Marxist optics on social formation toward envisioning the materialization of new communities and investment in the work of the imagination, working with and against constraint, in the struggle for happiness. (McCarthy, 2004, p. 162)

Therefore, culture seen as an open system, continually in flux serves to create the space for new possibilities, or what Grossberg (2012) calls *better truths*.

A cultural studies approach refuses the reduction of theories of power to a single force, theories of culture to a homogenous receptor, or theories of theories without an intentional look at the consequences of those particular

intellectual choices. This then lead to an unapologetic call for a rhetoric of complexity. The context of each theory of power must continually be considered and reconsidered; one cannot assume how culture or power works. As in the cultural studies notion of a “field of struggle” (Williams, 1965) the goal becomes the pursuit of *better* truths, better in the analysis of how they work in particular context and place and what might be possible within new subjectivities.

## II. The City

Saskia Sassen (2011) has offered that we might consider “the city as heuristic... something that helps us understand something larger than itself” (n.p.). Recognizing that urban space has often been take up as a strategic site for inquiry into the social, she suggests that it has not always been take up as “a heuristic space—a space capable of producing knowledge about more than itself, including knowledge about some of the major transformations of an epoch” (n.p.). Certainly, heuristic space played a key role in early urbanist theory (i.e. Weber, Benjamin, Lefebvre) but it can be argued that thinkers such as Foucault, DeCerteau, and the current critical geographers Massey, Harvey, and Soja consider urban space to be frame within which to take on the study of social challenges writ large.

However, urban spaces quickly became coded with the less theoretically efficacious study of social problems, noted clearly in the continued categorical struggle between urban and poverty, urban and economy, urban and globalization, etc... The move toward (or back toward) the concrete reflects strategically recognizing again the city as an object of analysis in new understandings of how our social spaces are mapped and deeply entwined in the process of being remapped, how trends in social, technological, and political forces are materially experienced. Again, Sassen (2011),

Among these trends are globalization, the rise of the new information technologies, the intensifying of transnational and translocal dynamics, growing inequality, and the strengthening presence and voice of specific types of socio-cultural diversity. Each one of these trends has its own specific sources, contents and consequences. The city is one stop in often complex trajectories that have many non-urban stops, and can in fact be global trajectories. But that urban moment is one where each of these trends (whether economic, technological, social or cultural) interacts with the others in distinct, often complex manners, in a way they do not in just about any other place. In that sense the city makes legible some of the most complex issues we confront. We can learn by just standing at a bus stop. (Sassen, 2011 n.p. See also Sassen, 2010)

In a similar way, Jane Jacobs (1961) offers in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that,

Cities happen to be problems in complexity, like the life sciences. They present situations in which a half-dozen or even several dozen quantities are all varying simultaneously *and in subtly interconnected ways*. Cities, again like the life sciences, do not exhibit *one* problem in organized complexity, which if understood explains all. They can be analyzed into many such problems or segments which, as in the case of the life sciences, are also related with one another. The variables are many, but they are not helter-skelter; they are interrelated into an organic whole. (p. 433, original emphasis)

So then, to take up the city as heuristic offers multiple and at times contradictory frames. On one hand we can see the potential for identifying new capacities in make visible the invisible in extreme, mapping the capacity to collectivize and coalition build, and explore “leaky spaces” (Roy, 2003) and “spaces of possibility” (Helfenbein, 2009; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). On the other, we recognize the function of contemporary urbanism to obscure race and class relations (e.g. charters and trophy schools), and to note the basis of its cartography in the scarcity required of the neoliberal order. In other words, to take as a priori Fiske’s (1991) descriptor of “the city is a mix of freedom and constraint” (p.204) as well as Sassen’s maxim: “the city talks

back...[highlighting] the incompleteness of the city” (Sassen, 2011). The city then, or in my terms, the concrete, is understood as:

constituted by opposing forces: on the one hand, there is the physical infrastructure of the city (streets, buildings, etc.) and on the other hand, there are the lived qualities of the urban experience that cannot be reduced to plans or maps. Making this (Bergsonian) distinction between quantities and qualities allows the thinker to recapture the very essence of city life: multidimensionality, unpredictability, irreducibility. (Fraser, 2009, p. 381)

### **III. Curriculum toward the concrete or *What would a curriculum of the city look like?***

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

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

comes to be. But important too in this project is to not only look backward but to turn our attention to the future, to what may be emergent or imminent. Ellsworth (2005) points to “places of learning [that] struggle to remain, themselves, *things in the making*” (p. 10) and, following Massumi seeks out the possibilities in spaces that “scatter thoughts and images into difference linkages or new alignments without destroying them” (Massumi as cited in Ellsworth, p. 13). This willingness to be open to uncertainty roots this approach in a language of possibility or, as Springgay (2005) argues, “inaugurate[s] new worlds, opening bodies to other bodies and encounters” (p. 108). As argued elsewhere, one could think of this desire as a geography of getting lost (Helfenbein, 2004), one open to new subjectivities, new forms of meaning-making, new forms of resistance, new forms of agency.

But then, how might we put what Soja (1989) calls “reassertion of space in critical social theory” to work? How do we turn to the task of recognizing social forces in the material and everyday lives of people in the everyday spaces of schools and schooling? Critical inquiry into both the agency and structure of the spatial construction of schools reveals hidden inequalities of race, class, and gender, as well as underlying assumptions buried within often-used concepts such as community, identity, place, and space. Such recognition illuminates a step in moving toward “lines of flight” from these oppressive, social forces and practices and offers new insight into forms of agency, resistance, and resiliency. As Lefebvre (1970) observed, “we have forgotten or overlooked the social relationships (primarily relationships of production)” (p. 1) of urban contexts both historical and contemporary due to analytical work overly focused on time and history as opposed to space. Art historian John Berger (1974) noted that “it is space not time that hides the consequences” of social action from us. In even more compelling ways, Mbembe (2000) interrogates the concepts of boundaries, territory, and sovereignty in the African context to point to the obfuscation provided by the

oversimplification of the time-space relation (i.e. the absence of attention to “temporal pluralities” and a tendency to see history in global terms or “world time”).

The cultural turn, and more appropriately the spatial turn, in intellectual circles in recent decades has therefore been fueled by a widespread rewriting of cultural understandings in a more nuanced, spatial language. Many of the most pressing political issues today—globalization, environmental change, the condition and future of nation states, cyberculture, privatization, the transnational flows of goods, people, and contraband—occupy the nexus between space, place, culture, and politics. However, such a turning is not without its pitfalls as place can become the totem for essentialized conceptions and space reduced to either abstraction or static surface on which the game is played (see Massey, 2007). An example of an attempt at corrective lies in Tsing’s (2005) redirection of “friction,” a relational conception intended to on the interaction between the global and local as opposed to the more common bifurcation. By turning toward the concrete, curriculum theory may, in new ways, more effectively and accurately problematize, analyze, and address the world we all live in and the problems that we face, hidden and otherwise. Or, as Grossberg (2010) challenges us, to take up theory as “in the service of the concrete, enabling one to produce the concrete in more productive ways” (p. 2).

So then, what I’m calling a turn toward the concrete takes the charge from Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) seriously and notes, in particular, the work of critical geographers as useful to scholars in education who seek to take “a grounded view of the world,” to move toward the concrete. Soja (1985) points to a critical social theory in which, “being, consciousness, and action...[exist] not simply ‘in’ space but ‘of’ space as well. To be alive intrinsically and inescapably involves participation in the social production of

space, shaping and being shaped by a constantly evolving spatiality” (Soja, 1985, p. 177).

The discussion of existence in and of space as well as the discussion of a life “intrinsically and inescapably” takes up ontological questions in terms of being/becoming in a way that is emplaced; the ontological ground of such of “grounded view” lies in the configurations of positions that is place (see DeCerteau, 1984). Here may be an opportunity to think about place, subjectivities, the ontological, and affect in terms of curriculum as lived experience *yet again*, and theory in education as looking to foster spaces of possibility for kids, educators, communities.

Nowhere are the processes of shaping and constantly being shaped by the spatial more evident than in the city. “Urban” as a term refers to more than category or conceptual organization, it is “an elaboration, a search...a practice, *urban practice*” (Lefevbre, 1970/2003, p. 5). Further, Fiske (1991) offers that,

The city is a mix of freedom and constraint. It is designed to promote certain ways of behaving, of moving, of thinking...Yet its very complexities make it also the place of greatest disorder, its multiple systems of control and discipline open up gaps where life can lived out of control, beyond discipline. (p. 204)

Urban understood in this way then—while undoubtedly coded and racialized—acknowledges the set of relations all at work, both freeing and limiting, a practice that is neither guaranteed or predetermined. The implications are not only theoretical but also methodological for scholars as we consider curriculum theory projects within the changing formations of the global city; a turning that, as Springgay (2005) suggests, is open to cartographical drift or an exploration of “the un/expected encounters with bodies” (p. 116). While not suggesting that this terrain is new, turning toward the concrete represents a more explicit staking of that claim. However, just because the spatial component of social relations seems to be apparent does

not mean that it is connected at all times to everything or outside of ideological, discursive, or affective forces. In fact, the hope lies here in a spatial analysis that provides another way in to those very considerations of lived experience. One cannot say space is everything or worse, the *only* thing, but at the same time one should be extremely careful as to where and when we say it matters. True too, with the language of “urban,” always coded and contextual, but as in a return to Sassen, this remains a useful heuristic for an analysis of a larger social field.

#### IV. Curriculum, Qualitative Research, New Materialism

As Coole & Frost (2010) offer “as human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter” and further,

our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives. In light of this massive materiality, how could we be anything other than materialist? How could we ignore the power of matter and ways it materializes in our ordinary experiences or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories? (p.1)

The emergent field of New Materialism represents an attempt by a diverse range of theorists to turn the attention back to the material and put subjectivity/positionality under “radical reappraisal” in the hopes of pushing further the conception of self/affect/place in relation. Building from advancements in ecological understanding, quantum physics, and posthumanism—both in its anti-anthropocentric and cyborg subjectivity trajectories—these thinkers suggest a return to “the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans

within a material world” (p. 3). This rethinking of matter itself—much like redefining space and place—holds profound implications in such central concepts as agency, identity, and the political. This relationality pushes one to consider that “matter becomes” rather than “matter is” (p. 10)—a push as quantum physics does to think of science as the study of process as opposed to state. In concert, Massey’s (2007) states that “space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded in material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made” (p. 7). These “choreographies of becoming” then involve “objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardingly and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes” (Coole & Frost, p. 10). This charges us again to take up the challenge of cultural studies via Grossberg (2010) “to think the concreteness of the object in its many different relations” (p. 27).

So, then, presented here are excerpts from three distinct qualitative research projects with urban youth and urban schools. These vignettes examine how students use informal and after-school spaces—what I think could be referred to as material and/or corporeal—to negotiate and navigate the structures at work in both schools and communities. Examples of such spaces include computer labs, community-based programs, and remapped city streets that require a cartography of how we take up the challenge of developing new understandings of how “all our lived spaces have been shifting from a period of crisis-generated restructuring to the onset of a new era of restructuring-generated crisis, a crisis deeply imbricated in the post-modernization of the contemporary world” (Soja, 1996, p. 23). Using the framework of Critical Geography—the necessarily relational convergence of space, place, power, and identity—within the ontological move of the new

materialism, new understandings are explored in how these youth engage in place-making specifically under conditions not of their own making; or as argued in the paper, to attempt a curriculum theorizing that moves “toward the concrete.”

The context of these stories lies within “the urban” and although one might claim the project of re-articulation or heuristic analysis, the coded nature of the term belies some explication. It goes without saying that the term urban remains dominantly coded racially and in class-based terms. Urban schools (as described here) continue to predominately serve students of color, economically disadvantaged communities, and reflect the racialized history of both US education and US education reform. In short, the urban context of schools has shifted in that what was once a tolerable and intentional practice of racial containment is now contested by new interest in urban development and a return to the city (see Lipmann 2011). The stories presented here provide insight into the ways in which the studies that find themselves within these changing spatial dynamics make sense of self, school, and larger context.

### **Urban School Stories**

The first group of youth briefly presented in this paper attends an after-school computer lab situated across the street from an urban secondary school (called the WELL), attendance is entirely optional and students may work on what they wish with some priority given to academic work. The alternative community alluded to earlier begins with a crossing of the street that forms a border between school and something else. This border crossing is significant not only in its immediate spatial distinctions but also metaphorically in the sense of identity that students take up. Students spoke of themselves as uniquely not “over there,” referring to the spaces that make up the school grounds. As the WELL is intended for academic work yet has no set curriculum, meaning only that it allows students to police themselves for the most part. It too exhibits a liminal character. It is neither school nor

home, public nor private but rather a conglomeration of all, of both. It is a place in which the students themselves play a role in fashioning its meaning. It is in this sense that critical geography can help us understand this particular place and the curriculum that describes the lived experiences of the students that attend.

The students who attend the WELL live a highly mobile life. Everyone knows the difficulty of moving when a person is young—new friends, new neighborhood, and, most frightening of all, new school. Many of the young people in this study told a story of transit. Whether they moved from other states or merely other schools, these students often began the stories they told of the WELL with movement. It is of note however that these stories were not laments but rather stated somewhat dryly, as if it simply was the way of the world. This degree of student mobility was cited by the WELL administration as a partial reason for the lack of a formal curriculum at the WELL. Students “came and went” both on the scale of showing up some days over others but also in the sense of literally moving to new schools, cities, counties, and states. Attempting to set a structured curriculum under these conditions seemed foolish. It is these conditions then, combined with the alternative expectations of an after-school setting, opens up a space for these students to actively, perhaps more freely, construct their own curriculum and make their own place. This was most tellingly made clear when I asked a student why kids chose to come there, she responded—looking at me in way that suggested she thought the question facile—“to get what they need.”

The students at The Academy (pseudonym) are part of what’s known as the alternative school movement that has a varied history and role in contemporary education reform. Begun as a place for innovative schooling practice or the enactment of diverse educational philosophies (see Raywid, 1994), in contemporary schooling structures, the alternative school tends to be an option for youth that have been unable to be successful in traditional

school settings either in terms of academic achievement or behavior. While some remnants of an innovation model persist (i.e. online instruction), many educators are concerned that these schools serve as nothing more than dumping grounds for kids on the margins.

In brief, what is clear from talking to the students at The Academy is that they understand education as key to their economic future and point to very specific structural concerns with the large, urban, traditional public schools in which they all have spent time. It should be noted that high rates of mobility marked the experience of all the students interviewed; most had been to a wide selection of traditional public and charter schools across the city, a characteristic widely cited in educational research as detrimental to academic achievement. The youth pointed most clearly to the dominance of standardized testing (specifically the End-of-Course Assessment required for passing a grade) as the reason for their own lack of achievement but, perhaps even more poignantly, as their characterization of poor teaching. They cite that the only justification for curriculum is “that it’s on the test” and describe benchmark tests as serving to “score teachers not students.” What is important here is that the students show a critical understanding of the ways in which public policy on education reform in the US impact not only their daily experience but their future access to economic power. When asked to describe how they would reform schools, they noted: smaller class size; more counselors to help with course scheduling and college applications; and specific support for students to pass the ECA. In describing the “ideal teacher” they listed: knowledge of pedagogy in addition to content (i.e. “they know the stuff, they just don’t know how to teach it”); a variety of teaching methods; a variety of ways to assess learning; and a more positive attitude (i.e. instead of “their attitude sucks” they want to hear teachers say “I love this stuff!”). A key point about these students was revealed in their discussion of choosing to attend the Academy—other schools were described as “ghetto”

and not about learning. These students are *not* oblivious to the forces at work on the life of schools and are *not* choosing to resist in ways that simply reproduce their marginalized status—they have chosen the alternative school thoughtfully in the hopes of negotiating a system that, to this point, hasn't served their needs. This was most directly stated when one student remarked, “if I have a kid, I won't send them to IPS [the traditional urban district]”. In talking with a parent of an Academy student, she stated her daughter was “prepared for school but the school wasn't prepared for her.”

The third vignette comes from a Community School, a traditional public school with a history of resisting its closure through political organizing and sustained commitment to providing a range of support services to the community in which it resides. Like many urban schools, the historic building (opened in 1927) has deep community connection and is filled with memorabilia of previous classes and their accomplishments. Shrinking enrollments as a result of the white-flight following desegregation put the school, as well the district as a whole, in crisis. The adoption of a community school model in response included partnerships with the local university and a number of non-profit organizations. The result of this tumultuous history can be felt as one walks through the halls, seeing the deep history, the subsequent neglect, and the new energy in its present incarnation.

The students interviewed were part of those wrap-around services in an afterschool program called the Hub. These students, over 100, voluntarily participated in a variety of programs that ranged from academic support to enrichment activities to free-time in the gym for basketball and other sports. The youth commented that it was “the community” that made the difference at this school (mobility rates were the same for this group as the Academy). At other schools they described their experience as with “teachers that don't care,” “teachers there for the paychecks,” and no extra help for students that ask. Notable here was the student's deep awareness that their school was

under scrutiny for their performance on standardized tests. While proud of the school's math scores (i.e. "we're killing them in Math") they pointed to the lack of challenging curriculum in the social studies and language arts.

While teachers were notably not an active part of the afterschool activities of the Hub, the director used her position as a liaison between the students and school day staff. She checked in on students' progress in particular courses and on upcoming projects and tests and served as something of an academic counselor. Striking here was the close identification that the students had with the Hub and their position as member of that "community." The students proudly marked the difference of this school and the Hub from other schooling experiences they had and it seems fair to say that the mix of freedom and constraint, when made explicit in this case, was indeed empowering and valued by the students.

## V. Conclusions

This quick introduction to three groups of urban students points to how youth find ways/spaces in which to "get what they need" –be it socialization, academic resiliency, safety, or merely an opportunity to discuss the constraints they feel every day. In studying youth and youth culture, we've often seen the ways in which kids adopt resistant or oppositional identities in response to their lived realities (i.e. gang literature's mantra, "if you're pushed out, you create your own in"), but in these cases, students take up and remap identity positions as they see fit, playing with them, perhaps most importantly, talking about them, and when it's time to cross the street again, casting them off—an economy of identities. But again, these are not utopian visions. Spaces of possibility are risky spaces, *terra incognita*, merely glimpses into how these students navigate the structures that work on them in the bell to bell of the school day and beyond. Much of that navigation comes from the border crossing into the space of possibility that these alternatives allow.

The fact that these students told stories of transit reflects both the materiality of the lived experiences of urban youth and their connections to the changing formations of urban geography. Urban spaces in the period of late capitalism no longer follow the simple maps of historical development but rather shift in ebbs and flows that include the complexities of gentrification, resegregation, social fragmentation, and distributed networks of production and consumption. Without question, these shifting social formations affect the lived experiences of students and teachers, youth and adult, and play both contextual and constitutive roles (see Pinar 2004). As is well-acknowledged, the work of Paul Willis opened the door to analysis of the everyday lives of youth and the cultural practices formed in response, reaction, or rejection. His presentation of “the lads” and “having a laff” characterized a form of resistance (partial penetrations) that ultimately proved reproductive—having a laugh leads to the shop floor. But, of course, for urban youth in the US, *there is no more shop floor*. In addition, it seems to me that the youth presented here (small sample that it may be) begin to do what contemporary critiques/rethinking of Willis point to (see Dolby, Dimitriadis, & Willis, 2004); that is, these youth are beginning to develop a political subjectivity in terms of the relation between themselves, education, and identity yet-to-be.

I would suggest that the spaces described here held much more meaning for the students who attend than academic success, after-school homework help, or even a space to socialize. As the demographic shifts occurring in the broader urban context affect the high school, old structures of social hierarchy become harder to maintain and students entering in find their position tenuous. In the case of the WELL, a place to play with identity and explore possibilities that are otherwise denied is provided—in fact, much like the category of subculture, the social rules of the school are not just rejected but inverted. For all of these students, the intersections of race and class are ripe for analysis and these spaces provide room for reflection that

also does not exist across the street. In these places, youth can deconstruct the events of the formal schooling, analyze the structures at work on the students there, and even strategize ways to navigate through them. Through the process of place-making, these students are involved in the construction of identity but in ways that are not as limited by conventional notions of culture. In effect, these students are engaged in culture-making just as they are in the process of place-making. To return to the cultural studies of Paul Gilroy (2000), “we do not have to be content with the halfway house provided by the idea of plural cultures. A theory of relational cultures and of culture as relation represents a more worthwhile resting place” (p. 275).

The threads of theorizing culture, place, identity, and curriculum presented here all embrace the relational aspects and complexities at work in the lives of youth in schools. The spaces of the schools and after-school programs presented here are bound up in the history of the urban contexts in which they reside, the history of particular schools and communities, the changing dynamics of development in late capitalism, and what is being called the education reform movement in the US as well. Cultural Studies and Critical Geography offer ways to both theorize in and around the intersections of all these forces while still valuing the individual, material experiences of the people that live within them. It is the hope of this work to bring a radical contextuality—including issues of space and place—to the analyses of urban education and how urban students engage in the complicated business (or, economies) of identity. If these are indeed spaces of possibility, it would seem then the political project becomes one of creating more of them.

## References

- Berger, J. (1974). *The look of things*. New York: Viking Press.
- Coole, D. & Frost, S. (2010). Introducing the new materialisms. In D. Coole & S. Frost (Eds.). *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics* (pp. 1-43). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- DeCerteau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*, trans. Steven Rendall. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Fiske, J. (1991). *Reading the popular*. London: Routledge.
- Fraser, B. (2009). Narrating the Organic City: A Lefebvrian Approach to City Planning, the Novel, and Urban Theory in Spain. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 39(3), 370-386.
- Grossberg, L. (2010). *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Helfenbein, R. J. (2009). Thinking through scale: Critical geography and curriculum spaces. In E. Malewski (Ed.), *Curriculum studies handbook: The next moment* (pp. 304-317). New York: Routledge.
- Helfenbein, R., & Taylor, L. H. (2009). Critical geographies in/of education: Introduction. *Educational Studies*, 45(3), 236–239.
- Kincheloe, J. & Pinar, W. (1991). (Eds.). *Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: The significance of place*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (2003/1970). *The urban revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lippman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York: Routledge.
- Massey, D. (2007). *For space*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Massey, D. (1995). The conceptualization of place. In D. Massey & P. Jess (Eds.), *A place in the world? Places, cultures, and globalization* (pp. 215–239). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Nespor, J. (1997). *Tangled up in school: Politics, space, bodies and signs in the educational process*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Paraskeva, J. (2012 October 11) Challenging hegemonic and counter-hegemonic epistemologies: An essay review of Andreotti's *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*. *Education Review*, 15(4). Retrieved [10/5/2012] from <http://www.edrev.info/essays/v15n4.pdf>
- Pinar, W. (2007). *Intellectual advancement through disciplinarity: Verticality and horizontality in curriculum studies*. Rotterdam, NL: Sense.
- Pinar, W., Reynolds, W., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. (1995). *Understanding curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Raywid, M.A. (1994). Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership*, 52(1), 26-31.
- Sassen, S. (2011). The city: Its return as a lens into larger economic and technological histories. Retrieved from <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer2011/programme/keynote-speakers/saskia-sassen/>
- Sassen, S. (2010). The city: Its return as a lens for social theory. *City, culture, and society*, 1(1), 3-11.
- Schubert, W. (1986). *Curriculum: Perspective, paradigm and possibility*. New York: Macmillan.
- Smith, J. S. & Helfenbein, R. (2009). Translational research in education: Collaboration & commitment in urban contexts. In W. S. Gershon (Ed.), *The collaborative turn: Working together in qualitative research* (pp.89-104). Rotterdam, NL: Sense.
- Soja, E. W. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Soja, E.W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Springgay, S. (2005). An intimate distance: Youth interrogations of

intercorporeal cartography as visual narrative text. *Journal of the Canadian Association of curriculum studies*, 3(1), 107-122.

Tsing, A. L. (2005). *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Watkins, W. (2001). *The white architects of black education: Ideology and power in America, 1865-1954*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Williams, R. (1965). *The long revolution*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Rob Helfenbein** is Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies and serving as Associate Dean of the School of Education at Loyola University Maryland. He earned his Ph.D. and B.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Helfenbein has published and edited numerous research articles and book chapters about contemporary education analysis in urban contexts in journals such as *Curriculum Inquiry*, the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *Educational Studies*, *The Urban Review*, the *Review of Education*, *Pedagogy*, and *Cultural Studies*, and co-edited the books [Unsettling Beliefs: Teaching Theory to Teachers](#) (2008) and [Ethics and International Curriculum Work: The Challenges of Culture and Context](#) (2012). He is currently serving as Editor of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* and organizer of the annual Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in Dayton, Ohio. His current research interests include curriculum theorizing in urban contexts, ethics and international education work, cultural studies of education, and the impact of globalization on the lived experience of schools.