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Transforming Identities: Theorizing Place(s) and Space(s) in Community Engagement Pedagogy

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Abstract

While rightly focusing on relationships and partnerships, community engagement scholars sometimes ignore the powerful ways learning may be impacted by mundane places like public schools, parks, and community centers and the ways spaces are imbued with emotions, power, and history. This piece argues that community engagement faculty must make the physical places and liminal spaces of our community partnerships purposeful parts of our curriculum. Using a Writing in the Community course as a case study, the article analyzes undergraduate reflections, then theorizes important differences between place and space and offers a critical lens—via feminist geography—for community-engaged teachers to consider the places and spaces in which they partner and ways those locations impact identities inhabited by students and by community partners. Finally, I offer reflection questions for faculty, students, and community partners intended to position temporal and emotional locations at the heart of community-engaged curriculum.

Keywords: community engagement pedagogy, mobility studies, place-based learning, girlhood

Middle school is the last place I wanted to return to. It represented my least-favorite me: one filled with anxiety, insecurity, and confusion. But that's exactly where my spring Writing in the Community (WRTC 486) class took me and 16 undergraduate students enrolled in my inaugural community-based learning course. Turns out, no one really *wants* to go back to middle school. My students were even more apprehensive than I was about returning to junior high, and they worried that they would have trouble relating to the community of 12-year-old girls we planned to write with. But I found that this space, one fairly dripping with awkwardness and vulnerability, was actually a space for powerful learning and self-reflection for my students and for me. In line with Megan Boler's (1999) "pedagogy of discomfort," this course embraced the awkwardness and unease as an invitation "for each person, myself included, to explore beliefs and values" (p. 185) related to our own identities and our relationships to others. Being in community and in place with girls very different from ourselves—in regard to race and socioeconomic status—created space for new self-knowledge and broader understandings of others' positionalities.

Educational experts have long touted the power of learning in context and in space (Knapp, 2007). Whether enrolling in a semester abroad or participating in a community service project, when students encounter learning beyond the classroom wonderful things can happen for them and for the communities they engage. As education scholars Paul Theobald and John Siskar (2014) explained,

> A particular place on earth can be a kind of curriculum lens through which all traditional school subjects may be closely examined. The immediacy and relevancy of place in the lives of students can be a huge catalyst to deep learning. (p. 216)

Student identities aren't the only ones changed in place: Community partner identities are also impacted by where we choose to convene, how and when we travel to and with one another, and by access granted or denied to certain locations. For example, the middle school girls we wrote alongside were invited to inhabit future selves as college students and scholars when they took a tour of our campus. Community engagement educators tend to privilege the *who* of our partnerships over the *where*. Although engagement scholars rightly focus on establishing and maintaining strong partnerships, we sometimes ignore the powerful ways learning may be impacted by mundane places like public school classrooms, parks, and community center meeting rooms and the ways such spaces are imbued with emotions, power, and history.

This piece argues that community engagement practitioners and scholars must critically examine the physical places and liminal spaces where we locate our community partnerships and make those locations purposeful parts of our curriculum. Beginning with a limited case study and brief analysis of data collected via undergraduate reflections for a 2016 Writing in the Community course, the article goes on to theorize important differences between place and space and offers a critical lens—via feminist geography—for community-engaged teachers to consider ways places might be positioned as geographical, physical, and contextual, while space may productively be thought of as ephemeral, aspirational, and transformative. For the purposes of this project and with a focus on engagement pedagogy, I argue it is also useful to draw a theoretical distinction because place is often ruled by logistics—times, dates, transportation, funding, and so on—whereas space might be reframed as vital to the transformative power of community engagement learning. Next, the piece interrogates the relationships between place/space and existing and aspirational identities of students and partners working in those locales. Finally, I offer a series of questions for educators, students, and partners to focus critical attention on places and spaces and the learner identities that grow from both.

Case Study: Teacher-Research Reflections

Working with and for girls in local public middle schools during our Writing in the Community course forced me to think about place, space, and movement in new ways. Although the public schools served as important pedagogical tools for my students and for me—as labs, practice halls, meeting rooms, and even time machines—I noticed that the actual movement to and from these places also had a real impact on my students' learning and on their concepts of self, both current and future. The course is built on a partnership with the local chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), with undergrads working specifically with BBBS's Young Women's Leadership Program (YWLP). The class was born both of my research interest in girl identities and in what Erica Yamamura and Kent Koth (2018) explained as an "emerging model of place-based community engagement" (p. ix) in their *Place-Based Community Engagement in Higher Education.* The course ran for 3 years with students from the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication (WRTC) planning and facilitating weekly activities for an afterschool program intended to empower young women to lead by building confidence, writing, technical, and storytelling skills, and offering training in critical awareness and analysis. For my undergrads, the main course objective was to study the ways girls write and are written and how discourse impacts identity performances for girls and, by extension, for all of us. In the first iteration of the course in spring 2016, 16 undergraduates from a variety of majors, including English, sociology, justice studies, communication studies, social work, health sciences, and WRTC, and I met as a group on campus on Monday evenings, and then the class split into two teams to work on site at local middle schools on Tuesdays or Wednesdays. Our Monday evening classes included discussions of readings and artifacts aimed at increasing the undergraduates' rhetorical, technical, and design skills while also introducing them to the concept of public and private discourse as shaping identities. We began the term with training from the Office on Children and Youth, which covered ways for the undergrads to be approachable, respectful of middle schoolers' privacy, and aware of likely differences between themselves and our community partners, specifically involving race and socioeconomic status. Along with readings on gender performativity and girlhood in particular, we also read about ways texts impact ethnicity, body image, and notions of class. About halfway through the course, we devoted a week to

"writing race" and studied visual imagery of BIPOC women and a film called *A Girl Like Me* (Davis, 2007) created by and featuring young women of color. We also read excerpts from *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, as well as bell hooks's *Bone Black.* The goal was to carefully think through representation of marginalized populations in our media and school systems.

Our Tuesday and Wednesday classes were held at two middle schools, 3:15–5:30 p.m., with the undergrads taking turns leading literacy activities that included blogging, composing with images and video, photography, and critical literacy approaches to media artifacts like music videos, TV, and print advertisements. Through these composing and analysis activities, we hoped to encourage girls to explore literacy in many modes and to make them critical consumers and producers of the messages surrounding them, particularly those related to concepts relevant to girl culture and identity like body image, bullying, self-expression, cultural and ethnic representations, and gendered language. While seeking to build personal connections with the middle schoolers, we stumbled upon the importance of place to girlhood and personhood. Two specific activities—analysis of children's storybooks and the "Where I Come From" poem—encouraged middle schoolers and undergrad students to make explicit connections between physical places and memories and identities and knowledge creation. Because ours was a community writing project, our assignments were concerned mainly with textual analysis and production, but they also relied heavily on discussions of gender and racial representation, ways to speak back to those representations, and the power of location to define us for ourselves and for others.

The first activity asked mixed teams of four to six university and middle school students to first read and then critique storybooks featuring female protagonists of differing ethnicity, race, and geographic locations. In particular, the stories depicted a modern-day African American ballet dancer living in the city, a West Virginia girl growing up in coal country, a Native American folktale about wild horses, a young girl born in the southwest in 1824, and an adaptation of the children's song "Miss Mary Mack" featuring an upper-middle-class White girl. The activity opened up important spaces for collaboration and community building and also helped us identify and theorize subtle messages about ways the protagonists' identities were wrapped up in the places where they were, were from, or were trying to go.

The second activity, the "Where I Come From" poem, provided a more pointed interrogation of locations of origins and drew direct correlations between place, memory, and identity. The poem activity is a staple on our campus during the First-yeaR Orientation Guide (FROG) week for freshmen and was suggested by one of the undergrads in our class, who thought the 12-year-olds in the YWLP might find the writing task a way to learn about one another and to celebrate their own geographic and cultural origins. An 11-question prompt asks authors to first focus on the details of places they inhabit or have inhabited and to then transform those answers into a poem. The poem prep worksheet asks things like "Describe where you live. What does it look like? What does it smell like? What does it feel like?" Answers to these and other questions are then incorporated into a poem by simply adding the phrases "I'm from" or "From" at the start of each stanza. This intensely personal writing yielded rich and sometimes troubling texts, including one middle schooler's challenging early days in our small city after her family relocated from Honduras, portraits of strict parents and occasional food insecurity, the joys of cooking with parents, and the burden of parenting younger siblings. Writing about ourselves is a fairly standard pedagogical tool for creating classroom community and validating students' personal experiences and knowledges, but I did not, until after we'd completed the activity, see the powerful connection between girls' current and aspirational identities and the places and spaces they inhabit. Creating "Where I Am From" poems allowed writers to locate deeply personal memories in and through physical place and to make connections about ways place offers and denies space for possible selves. The assignment also highlighted ways White privilege unfairly protected me and most of my undergraduates from poverty, racism, and other struggles many of our community partners faced.

Our class interacted with a total of 42 tweens, all 12-year-old girls in the seventh grade. The girls were either active with BBBS or had been identified by school guidance counselors as needing additional academic support or potentially benefiting

from mentoring opportunities with local college students. The middle schools are located in a community with a large immigrant population—with 57 languages represented in local public schools (*Enrollment Statistics*, 2017)—and thus have remarkably diverse student populations, particularly for a southern town of 50,000. The population of the YWLP included a variety of ethnicities, with 19% identifying as Caucasian, 17% identifying as Black, 9% identifying as Other, including Hispanic, and the remaining 55% choosing not to identify. In contrast, the undergraduates enrolled in the course were mostly White, and although not asked to specifically identify their own ethnicity in class or as part of this study, the issue of Whiteness and privilege was a constant topic in our classroom, with students often interrogating their own biases and blind spots regarding such privilege. The class included only one member identifying as Hispanic and the other 15, including two men, performing Whiteness; this is unsurprising at a university with nearly a 75% White student population (*James Madison University*, 2018). None of the undergraduates were international students. Not only did the undergraduates differ from the middle schoolers racially and ethnically, they also came from vastly divergent socioeconomic backgrounds, with many JMU undergraduates hailing from wealthy East Coast families. The median household income for JMU students is $129,000, whereas our community's average household income is $40,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (*Harrisonburg City*, 2018).

Although the partnership was, I believe, truly guided by and benefited all participants, I want to focus here on ways this work impacted the undergrad students specifically. The course description promised to teach enrolling students about girl identities by inhabiting, for a time, the places girls write and learn in. What began as a logistical decision—it was easier to transport adult students than middle schoolers—soon resulted in pedagogical benefits for my students that I could not have imagined at the onset of the course. Traveling off our campus to work and write in these child-centric places somehow transformed both my teaching and my students' identities. In these on-the-move and initially very unfamiliar learning locales, my college students were immersed in girlhood by leaving the familiar surroundings of our adult-centric university classroom. This course forced students into unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable, intellectual and geographic terrains.

Student Reflection Data

The impact of place and space on my students was something I observed generally during the program, but it was not until I read their final reflection assignments for the course that I began to really consider the connections between mobility, location, and identity. Every student in the WRTC 486 course produced an end-of-term reflection, and this data was covered under a retroactive IRB application that included a consent form sent to students via their university emails following the completion of the course. In the two subsequent cycles of the class (in 2017 and 2018), undergraduates would be asked to participate in focus groups and complete surveys to more fully investigate place, race, socioeconomic status, and other issues related to the project, based in large part on my initial—and, frankly, limited—findings from the reflections from the first iteration of the course. Although there is no direct data from the middle schoolers in this essay, my community partner, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Harrisonburg-Rockingham County, gathered data from the YWLP as part of a larger study run by researchers in the education department at my university and focused on retention, future success, and individual impact of BBBS.

The prompt for students' final course reflection asked them to consider "knowledge, insight, and personal awareness gained or challenged in this course" but didn't specifically ask students to focus on location. Yet in 13 of the 16 essays, place, space, or mobility terms were heavily represented. After first noting this trend in my regular grading of the reflections, I used a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 1996; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007) to "explore the phenomenon" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 71) of my students' seemingly intuitive understanding of ways inhabiting unfamiliar places and communities impacted their learning and their perceptions of themselves. Saldaña explained that grounded theory is most often used when researchers endeavor to "develop new theory about" (p. 92) a trend or relationship while working systematically to avoid preconceived notions. In particular, I follow Charmaz's constructionist model that rejects objectivity by embracing ways

data shapes the research and the researcher (Charmaz, 1996, p. 31). For this study I was in no way a dispassionate observer, but was an involved instructor and community activist interested in understanding and bettering a new community-based learning model.

In my initial "exploratory coding" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 92) phase, I noted repeated discussion of comments on location and mobility. I then assigned broad descriptive codes about the data, and in only 16 short reflection essays I coded 27 instances of explicit reference to acts of movement and mobility. In subsequent analysis of the data, I noted references to specific places, ways places defined students and the girls in the YWLP, and ways moving to and through places resulted in transformative learning. In their essays, students recalled their opportunities "to explore," "to be surrounded by," to "immerse" themselves in and to "enter this experience" of working with the middle schoolers. Mobility scholar Tim Cresswell (2010) noted that "weaving of narratives around mobility" (p. 19) is common as we often experience movement as liberating and transgressive. Some students, for example, reported being glad they "took the plunge" or being grateful for the opportunity to "break out of the JMU bubble." A junior in the course, one of the most popular mentors among the tweens in the YWLP, reported that "walking in the shoes of a middle school girl" changed how she thought about girlhood and more broadly about gendered identities. Traveling these same routes and terrains revealed to my students more about the girls they worked with, and also about their own identities in relation to others. "Going to the middle school was fantastic," one student reported. "Not only did I feel like I was teaching these young girls about feminism and leadership, but I also felt like they were teaching me so much more than what I expected to get from this class."

Lawrence Grossberg (1996) encouraged us to think of identities as "ways of belonging. They are the positions which define us spatially in relation to others, as entangled and separated" (p. 101). The undergrads working in middle school cafeterias, hallways, computer labs, and outdoor soccer fields each week then not only created new affiliations and relationships but also discovered and inhabited new (or forgotten) identities. Enrolling as students, many emerged from the course as "someone girls can look up to," "a nurturer," "a good influence," or "some sort of mentor," according to students' reflection essays. Although many of these evolving identities were located in relationship to the girls, others were more inwardly focused. One student reported rediscovering "my awkward times as a middle school student," and another said she often felt like "my middle school-self" again. Still others retained more traditional student identities, with one undergrad reflecting on her gratitude for the opportunity "to learn from some amazing young women." Finally, other reflections included claims to new and in some cases future roles as teachers, disciplinarians, coaches, and guides.

Not only did the physical places we worked and learned in impact notions of identity, but location often became a signifier, an avatar of sorts to describe ourselves and others. In the reflections, and in class discussions, I noticed that the students were often identified by and with the buildings they inhabited. For example, my undergrads referred to girls in the YWLP as "the middle schoolers" or "the Thomas Harrison girls." And when I showed up alone on the Wednesday of our university's spring break, our 12-year-old community partners asked impatiently where the "JMU people" were. Both sets of learners/writers seemed to embody and to be embodied by the places they were allowed and expected to move in and through. Feminist geographer Susan Hanson (2010) reminded us that this may be particularly important in regard to feminine identities because "women are quite literally kept in their place by being denied access to certain locations at certain times" (p. 10). One undergraduate student echoed this idea in her reflection, saying, "It's not who you are, but where you are." Our schools and the physical buildings and lands comprising those schools quickly became extensions of—and stand-ins for—the undergrads and middle schoolers themselves. We learned to know one another by first recognizing our assigned and sanctioned places and spaces.

Place-Based Education

Place-based learning is an accepted pedagogical approach, and although thinking about the ways we move to, in, and through these physical locations is important, considering how such places create critical, intellectual space for identity work may

not yet be garnering as much attention. Education scholar Clifford Knapp (2007) considered the connections between place, mobility, and curriculum:

> Teaching is to guide students on adventures into partially unknown territory. . . . I never will have complete and accurate maps nor will I know all of the course territory. Sometimes my students show me new places that don't appear on the course map. When this happens, we explore together. With each trek into subject matter, I feel more confident on the journey. (p. 9)

Location often drives community engagement work that can challenge students' perspectives by moving beyond the familiar campus. Place necessitates the common conversations of transportation, mobility, and regionality. Community engagement scholars Yamamura and Koth (2018) explained that "place-based community engagement focuses intensively on a clear and definable geographic area" (p. 18). Similarly, girlhood studies scholars Pamela Bettis and Natalie Adams (2005b) explained that the "daily habits" and material realities of girls' lives must be "taken seriously, explored, played with, explained, and theorized" (p. 3). Both geographic place and intellectual space may be "inhabited" and are closely tied to the daily habits and routines of those therein; however, for our purpose place provides learning by immersion in local culture and rituals and helps us understand the needs and values of other communities by being "present." Students in the YWLP project commented frequently on place in their final reflections and employed visceral terms to document how it felt "being on site" and "being in" the classroom or learning "to fit into" the place (both figuratively and literally maneuvering adult bodies into child-sized plastic chairs). Like Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, our learning in the middle schools was "about bodies, about particulars, about the 'real' material world we live in" (p. 196). Still other students adopted a learning as journey metaphor (Knapp, 2007), using phrases like "came from," "to travel," "being with and beside the girls," "walking into class," and "going to" to describe both physical and intellectual movement. We must consider, then, both the specifics of a place—and its recursive rituals and practices—as well as movement through such physical places and toward aspirational spaces. Mobility studies scholars, too, understand the importance of interrogating everyday places and practices, particularly those of marginalized populations. Cresswell (2010) explained that "mobility studies have begun to take the actual fact of movement seriously" (p. 18). He also observed, "Mobility can be thought of as an entanglement of movement, representation, and practice" (p. 17). For our class, the middle school was a lab of sorts where we could work together and also a shared place of common origin and experience despite the often radically variant home lives, home countries, and cultural backgrounds of my undergrads and the middle schoolers in our YWLP community.

Place Versus Space

In order to critically consider location and mobility as pedagogical tools—and sometimes barriers—for community engagement work, we must first differentiate between place and space. The importance of space and location swept multiple disciplines, including the humanities, during the "spatial turn" of the 1990s as described by theorist and urban planner Edward Soja (Blake, 2002). Yamamura and Koth (2018) stated that they "believe that place-based community engagement offers institutions of higher education a powerful tool to become more connected to their communities, with a goal of transforming their campuses, their local communities, and our nation" (p. x), but their notion of place seems tied solely to geographic location and does not consider the often more ephemeral, transformational notions of space. My understanding of place as more fixed, more stable and material and space as fluid and generative and creative recognizes that whereas both place and space often exist concurrently, drawing theoretical distinctions between the two might allow us to more productively respond to calls in civic and community engagement to attend to the "why" of place. "Engagement defined by activities connected to places outside the campus does not focus attention on the processes involved in the activity—how it is done—or the purpose of connecting with places outside the campus—why it is done" (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 6). Though this observation was made more than a decade ago in a white paper chronicling an early 2008 Kettering Foundation debate on reasons civic engagement had not reached its

potential, such critiques persist in civic and community engagement initiatives. The temptation to take our "academic knowledge" out in service to other "places" and people persists, but attention to place and space as themselves learning tools and sites of knowledge creation with and for students and community partners may help us more accurately see off-campus locations as opportunities to create rather than deliver knowledge.

Although many feminist geographers, whose work I rely on heavily, seem to use "place" and "space" pretty much interchangeably (Davidson, 2012; Moss & Al-Hindi, 2008), others often mark "place" as the less physical of the two and as aspirational. Isabel Dyck (2005), for example, is interested in ways that physical spaces create "a place" for women in particular. She explained "exploring the hidden spaces that feminist scholars show are integral to contemporary place-making" (p. 235). Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharp (2001) also argued for attention to "mundane spaces" of women in order to better understand ways such spaces and practices impact women's realities. Juval Portugali (2006) explained the distinction between place and space as largely disciplinary and having to do with how a scholar wishes to be identified:

> Space is located among the "hard" sciences as a central term in the attempt of geography to transform the discipline from a descriptive into a quantitative, analytical, and thus, scientific, enterprise. Place, on the other hand, is located among the "soft" humanities and social philosophy oriented social sciences as an important notion in the post-1970 attempt to transform geography from a positivistic into a humanistic, structuralist, hermeneutic, critical science. (p. 647)

Geographer Andrew Merrifield (1993) argued that the distinction between the two terms may be dangerous if it is overly rigid:

> The Cartesian viewpoint assumes a duality between the material (external) world and the (internal) world of human consciousness. . . . Space is not a high level abstract theorization from the more concrete, tactile domain of place. . . . An attempt to overcome this absolute separation is made . . . by arguing that both space and place have a real ontological status since they are both embodied in material process—namely, real human activities. (p. 520).

Like Merrifield, I see the terms as slippery and undoubtedly entangled, but some distinction may be helpful for those pursuing community engagement with the dual goals of better understanding the places we inhabit with others while also creating new, aspirational spaces for our students and our partners. Place and space are inextricably linked and need not be rigidly or antithetically defined, but can productively be theorized as serving distinct roles in community engagement.

In simplified terms, I frame place as a fixed and physical location, whereas space might be thought of as more abstract and fluid, as often aspirational or inspirational. In our class, the middle schools proved important as physical places for our groups to meet as well as spaces of history and origin for my undergrad students—as touchstones to their own pasts—and as spaces of both possibility and limitations for the students and our young community partners. The girls we worked with faced any number of rules and regulations about physical places they may occupy in the school, when, and with whom. The college students also experienced physical restrictions via locked doors, buzzers for entry, and name tags to prove "the right" to move in the hallways alongside their 12-year-old counterparts. Such physical restrictions impact ways inhabitants are encouraged and allowed to think of themselves. The middle schools, then, were spaces of aspiration and of becoming for all members of our writing project as we worked to build a YWLP community identity. The schools served as sites of incredible vulnerability for both current and former middle schoolers experiencing the insecurity, anxiety, and unease that come in the in-betweenness and liminal space of growing up and learning.

Although notions of place may be rooted mainly in the present and past, space—in this context—may productively be thought of as future focused. In community engagement, space often invites students to inhabit future professional or civic selves in order to work effectively with community partners.

This sort of identity "liminal space" has been thoroughly discussed in feminist and girlhood studies (Bettis & Adams, 2005b) and was important to community-engaged students in my class as they constructed new identities as activists, teachers, experts, explorers, and any number of other roles facilitated by the more abstract spaces of "girlhood," "tween life," and "community outreach," as mentioned in their end-of-term reflections. Space, then, might be thought of as aspirational and as an invitation to change and grow. Such spaces both "carry the residue of history upon them" (Mountford, 2001, p. 42) and bring direction and promise for the future. This liminal space of "becoming" considers both what came before and what will follow and is important to students and faculty engaged in learning, and might also create opportunity for new community partner identities and experiences to evolve. For example, rearranging chairs in our middle school classroom created space and invitation for often shy girls in the YWLP to join in an impromptu dance party led by the undergrads. On another day, YWLP girls were invited to dress up as famous feminists of the past (Amelia Earhart, Queen Elizabeth I, Rosie the Riveter, etc.) to make space to imagine themselves as feminist leaders. Both of these experiences were made possible by the physical (place) and emotional (space) environment.

Soja (2013) explained the need for "the new spatial consciousness" (p. 71) in his interest in "thirdspace," a critical perspective that finds "no space is completely knowable" (2014, p. 177). For Soja, thirdspace is "not a specific kind of space but a way of looking, with maximum breadth and scope, at any space one chooses" (2014, p. 177). This sort of spatial awareness is ideal for the field of community engagement, which, despite globalization, remains committed to the importance and complexity of local spaces. This opening up of space and place as an invitation to critical thought and personal and social transformation is also connected to the ideas of space as "liminal," or in-between spaces and times that come after what was and precede what will be. Susanne Gannon's 2010 article "Service Learning as Third Space in Pre-service Teacher Education" posited that a "required . . . volunteer placement in an alternative education setting" at her university's teacher education program "invokes transition, transformation and productive instability" (p. 21) for students. This place-based community engagement work, combined with critical reflection, then created a "third space" to consider otherness and difference and also a liminal space for student teachers that "entails a potentially radical reconfiguring of their personal identities and subjectivities" (p. 21). These sorts of student transformation, often happening in liminal spaces of becoming, are fairly common goals in most community engagement work, but critical discussions of ways places and spaces facilitate these transformations seem fairly absent from scholarship in the field.

The anxiety and vulnerability of liminal spaces, in particular, connects to Boler's (1999) notion of a "pedagogy of discomfort." According to Boler, "A pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others" (p. 176). Challenging personal perceptions begins in the distinction between spectating, or "to be a voyeur" (p. 183), and witnessing. "Witnessing, in contrast to spectating, is a process in which we do not have the luxury of seeing a static truth or fixed certainty. As a medium of perception, witnessing is a dynamic process" (p. 186). Witnessing, then, is embodied and in place and in relation to others and so is almost always uncomfortable and disorienting. For our class project, being in and traveling through shared middle school places created space for my students to undertake "collective witnessing" (Boler, p. 178) that shifted their thinking about racial and socioeconomic positions radically from individualistic "spectating" that often "signifies a privilege" (p. 184). Notions of privilege are paramount for students doing community engagement work and, as Beth Godbee (2009) reminded us, "White privilege—like other forms of institutionalized power and privilege—is made invisible so that whites often find themselves unaware and unreflective about their own unearned advantages" (p. 39). Michalinos Zembylas (2015) explained that such new awareness and enhanced empathy "is inescapably tied to others" and "pedagogical discomfort, then, is the feeling of uneasiness as a result of the process of teaching and learning from/with others" (p. 170). Tying productive discomfort in physical places to aspirational identities and spaces in community engagement

adds new layers to what we hope to teach our students, what we hope to learn from and with community partners, and ways we need to prepare students.

In their reflections, the undergraduate students in WRTC 486 registered the middle schools as places of knowledge creation for themselves and our young partners and seemed to locate space in a hierarchy above place. Several students described making "space" for themselves and for the girls in the YWLP as a primary responsibility of ours in the partnership. One undergraduate described the need to provide "space for creation and expression" for the girls in our program, demonstrating ways we understand not only identity but perhaps also space as a concept itself in flux, as liminal location or borderland intimately connected both to who we are and who we are yet to become. Another student, a senior, explained, "I am glad I put myself out of my comfort zone to learn from the experience." In their reflections, students appeared to understand the off-campus sites as places to inhabit a variety of identities—that of learner, teacher, colleague, thinker—for and with our community partners creating a space of reciprocity rather than service.

In particular, the notion of thirdspace as a transformative space of becoming and change seems an important concept. Borrowing from the work of Lefebvre, Soja explained thirdspace as "distinguished . . . from the traditional binary mode of looking at space from either a material/real perspective or a mental/imagined perspective" (Blake, 2002, p. 141). Thirdspace then may be thought of as "the place where temporality and spatiality, history and biography are really written, fully lived, filling the entire geographical or spatial imagination" (p. 141). Although these sorts of nuances might seem more appropriate to geographers, philosophers, and historians, I argue that careful consideration of space and place will enrich both our students' learning and the work we do with our community partners. For our community partners, space in particular is often defined by access and who has "the right" to be certain places and who does not. Space is not always about liberation, but more accurately about the productive discomfort that often results in learning about ourselves and others.

Spaces and Places and Identities

With the lens of space as transformative and place as tied to notions of belonging, we may begin to see the connection between spaces and places and the identities of our students and our community partners. The notion of identity as a product of and in place is well established. The authors of "Muskrat Theories, Tobacco in the Streets, and Living Chicago as Indigenous Land" (Bang et al., 2014) reminded us that Indigenous scholars have long recognized the vital connection between people and place and pointed out that Western epistemological models often "deny peoples' connections to place" (p. 42). Similarly, the importance of place to girl identities—the central focus of our course—is well established in girlhood studies. Bettis and Adams's (2005a) anthology *Geographies of Girlhood* considered particularly the temporary places girls occupy—schools, buses, malls, in transit to and from places, and so on—and argued that such physical locations are liminal spaces critical in shaping and understanding girlhood and the position it occupies between babyhood and womanhood. This project, then, argues that the places our students occupy or travel to and from while engaged in place-based community engagement work offer not only disciplinary expertise and self-awareness, but also challenges to their current and future identities. Just as scholars posit girlhood as a liminal space, or what Bang et al. might describe as "sites of potential transformings" (p. 39), I see community-engaged and place-based learning as a liminal space for our students to discover, articulate, and construct identities based on locations and movement through places. Focusing on what feminist geographer Rachel Silvey (2006) called "the co-constructed nature of identities and places" (p. 69), faculty must thoughtfully consider the ways that places and spaces contribute to all manner of learner, professional, and civic identities.

Moving in, to, and through places impacts not only our personal identities, but also our collective identities and our capacity to understand those around us. Grossberg (1996) saw "subjectivity as spatial," noting that "people experience the world from a particular position—recognizing that such positions are in space" (p. 100). Community engagement faculty member Ashley Holmes (2015) agreed that "situating student experience, learning, and writing in public sites beyond the classroom provides a meaningful context through which to explore social issues while facilitating student learning"

(p. 50). It also facilitates and forces students to see others in relation to themselves. As Boler (1999) explained,

> Students and educators may feel a sense of threat to our precarious identities as we learn to bear witness. Witnessing involves recognizing moral relations not simply as a "perspectival" difference—"we all see things differently"—but rather, that how we see or choose not to see has ethical implications and may even cause others to suffer. (p. 194)

Consciously choosing where to locate learning in physical and virtual spaces then allows a focus on the identities we perform, create, and reject and how such identities bring us closer to or farther from community partners. Moving through middle school home ec classrooms, miniature bathrooms, and hallways festooned with cartoon characters and inspirational quotes, my students also moved through several identities: teacher, mentor, confidant, disciplinarian, playground pal, writer, researcher, learner. Considering these places as also liminal spaces for transformation allows us to see beyond the physical limitations and possibilities of engaged places and to instead view them as texts of sorts that invite students and community partners to learn from and with others and create space for us to craft evolving identities. Spaces, places, and identities are never fixed, "not a once-and-for-all" (Hall, 1990, p. 226), but instead are fluid and shifting. Learning in place with others changes then not only our individual identities, but also the identities we perceive and assign to those around us. This is what makes community-engaged work often uncomfortable for students, teachers, and partners in that we risk having to really change who we are and who others are to us.

Discussion

Partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters for this community literacy project, my undergrads and I were writing in place with and for girls facing inequalities based on gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status. Focusing on the places the girls in YWLP were writing from—keeping in mind that young people are often assigned and limited to certain places—seemed paramount to understanding and encouraging these young women's literacy practices and for expanding and shaping the university students' understandings of those unlike themselves. "The unequal geographies of mobility, belonging, exclusion, and displacement" (Silvey, 2006, p. 65) have been linked to economic and social inequality related to gender and other identity markers like race. Feminist geographer Hanson (2010) confirmed, "Feminists have long known that gender and mobility are inseparable, influencing each other in profound and often subtle ways" (p. 5). Experiencing firsthand the places where our young community partners could and could not be became both a pedagogical tool and a line of inquiry for our course. Having more critical awareness of the ways physical places we inhabit with our community partners may impact and even open up aspirational spaces for community building, as well as shape current and future identities for individuals, changed the ways that I as instructor thought about and designed the two subsequent iterations of this course. For example, race and Whiteness were part of my original curriculum during discussions of discourse and representation, but reading my students' reflections encouraged me to have more explicit discussions of place and socioeconomic status and access. One day in February, the undergraduates began chatting excitedly about plans for spring break in their small groups, and the middle schoolers' revelations that most had never been on an actual vacation and some had never traveled much more than an hour outside our 50,000-person town brought into stark relief notions of privilege for my undergrad students. The following Monday, our on-campus discussion centered on ways that socioeconomic status often not only impedes people from traveling to and through other places, but also may deny intellectual space to imagine oneself as a traveler or participant in other cultures.

This new awareness encouraged me to revise course readings to include texts on mobility and identity formation specifically. And even now, 2 years after the last time I taught this course, I am still grappling with better ways to more systematically explore the place-based notions of knowledge creation, the importance of material places and aspirational spaces, and the ways both shape our individual and collective identities with my students. As Roxanne Mountford (2001) reminded us, "Spaces have heuristic power over their inhabitants and specta-

tors by forcing them to change both their behavior . . . and, sometimes, their view of themselves" (p. 50). Understanding the spaces and places we occupy and are granted or denied access to then feels paramount not only to understanding personal identities, but also the challenges facing many in our society that are so often taken up in community engagement partnerships. My students clearly recognized this connection between movement, location, and identity in their final course reflections. One student commented on the connection between place and the ways identity "forms and changes in the spaces between home and the classroom," and so she felt that as adults we had a responsibility to "facilitate productive thought process in those spaces."

Making location and mobility a central concern of community engagement work and curriculum necessitates focus from both students and faculty. Although this data set is limited in size and scope, the analysis of the undergraduate reflection essays and details about the curriculum suggests the importance of location and mobility and ways place-based education offers unique learning opportunities for students. Further, the theoretical distinction between place as more fixed and material and space as aspirational and potentially transforming offers ways for both instructors and community partners to better understand places as imbued with cultural and political meanings and always connected to us as people and as communities of learners. To that end, I offer a series of questions for educators, students, and partners to ask themselves in order to reinvigorate or make explicit connections to locations of learning.

Critical Questions for Reflection and Planning

The questions below are intended to help community engagement faculty reflect on and prepare for the role that place, space, and challenges to identity may play in their partnerships. The three sets of questions—for faculty, students, and community partners—potentially can challenge us to consider both the limitations and opportunities of the places and spaces we move through.

Questions for Faculty

Place

What logistical matters (time, travel, monetary needs, etc.) are associated with the place where we will work?

What is the local history of this place?

What restrictions govern this place? Who is denied or granted access? When?

What challenges must be addressed in this space (furniture arrangement, physical access for students and partners with disabilities, etc.)?

What possibilities does this space offer for physical, emotional, and intellectual connection with our community partners?

Space

What is the mood of this space?

What semiotic (the study of signs and symbols) messages are present? What colors are used? What does the layout of the room or building communicate to users? What explicit and implicit messages for the use of place and space exist?

What does this space invite/ask us to do (get involved, help, seek help, etc.)?

Is this a temporary (liminal) space like a refugee center for resettlement or a more permanent space like a local neighborhood?

Are there opportunities for this to be a liminal space—a space of transition and/or transformation—for my students, myself, my community partners?

Identity

What population(s) are most identified by and with this place and space?

Who does this place/space invite us to be (volunteer, at-risk, in need, team member, etc.)?

Questions for Students

Place

What logistical things do I need to know about this space? How will I get there? Do I have physical needs (accessibility, allergies, noise levels, etc.) that this place may not meet?

What is the local history of this place?

What restrictions govern this place? Who is denied or granted access? When?

Space

What is the mood of this space?

How do I feel in this space? Am I an insider, outsider, or both in this space?

What does this space invite/ask me to do (get involved, help, seek help, etc.)?

Identity

What population(s) are most identified by and with this place and space?

Who does this place/space invite me to be (volunteer, student, at-risk, in need, team member, etc.)?

Do I have prior experience with this place/space or one like it? Were those experiences positive or negative or both? How does that impact my current experience?

Questions for Partners

Place

What physical, financial, or logistical resources can I provide to this partnership?

What resources do I need from my partner to better prepare this place?

What places do our partners need to access to better understand my community?

What restrictions govern this place? Who is denied or granted access? When?

What places or resources can I contribute without inconveniencing my community?

Space

What does this space invite/ask those in it to do (get involved, help, seek help, etc.)?

What is the mood of this space?

Is this a temporary (liminal) space like a refugee center for resettlement or a more permanent space like a local neighborhood?

Are there opportunities for this to be a liminal space—a space of transition and/or transformation—for our community, for the students?

Identity

What population(s) are most identified by and with this place and space?

Who does this place/space invite us to be (volunteer, leader, at-risk, in need, team member, etc.)?

Conclusions

Considering questions like those above while moving into and through new places may allow learners to move into unknown intellectual spaces and identities as well. In our Writing in the Community class, identities like teacher and mentor were as much new terrains for my undergraduates as were the middle school art room or main office. These places opened up space for my students to inhabit their former middle school selves, critically engage their current, mostly White-privileged student positions, and imagine future parent and community volunteer identities. In her final reflection for our class, one student explained, "Physically visiting the middle school put me in a whole new environment that made me learn a lot about myself and identity-crafting." Although my students struggled with feelings of discomfort and outsiderness in these middle school places, this initial—and, for some, constant—discomfort in place proved an important generative

space for the undergraduates, for me, and likely for many of the girls in the YWLP. Working together in this new place, there were mistrust and nerves at the beginning. Many in the diverse group of tweens we partnered with were understandably initially suspect of a group of mostly White, mostly affluent adults invading their girl space. A new awareness then of privilege became a recurring theme of our course—particularly when reflecting on time spent at the middle school with many girls who differed from my undergraduates in national origin, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Connecting with others unlike ourselves was a challenge for all of us in the partnership, but this uncomfortable space was temporary—liminal—and, I think, taught us all a bit about learning from and with others.

Bettis and Adams (2005b) took seriously "the liminal spaces of being an adolescent and of being female" (p. 6), and those of us that spend much of our time moving in and around learning places take seriously classrooms as spaces of discovery and transformation. Considering the work of other scholars and these initial findings from my students' reflection essays helped me to make more nuanced connections between people and places, places and spaces and privilege, and place/space and identity creation. Although we often privilege new places for learning and adventure—like in study abroad—this project suggests to me the importance of embracing also a return to our places of origin and ways these discovered and revisited places open up ephemeral and aspirational spaces for growth. We all made it through middle school, so the place is familiar, and yet moving through it as adults is also strange, making my students' visits to our local middle schools both a journeying back and a visit to a new land. In one student's reflection, she noted her appreciation of the opportunity "to immerse myself in a place I had been living in for four years but barely knew anything about." The playgrounds and classrooms we moved through are products of those housed within them and are also an invitation to change, to become, to grow. Learning in place and in community forced the undergraduates into uncomfortable and often vulnerable emotional spaces, but also afforded them new critical lenses as well as new identities and identifications anchored in locations. As I guided students through multiple physical locations, we became less a class and more a community of learners and workers and change agents. As one student wrote, I now consider myself an "advocate, a feminist, a woman, a service-worker, and a human." These identities might have manifested in a traditional classroom, but to be in liminal, "in-process" spaces with others invites students to step into new intellectual territories. Purposefully incorporating these new terrains into our community engagement partnerships and curriculum allows us to name the magic we, as educators, intuitively know so often happens when our students venture off campus to learn with and from others.

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