




REVIEW

A Review of “Developing Place-responsive Pedagogy in Outdoor Environmental Education: A Rhizomatic Curriculum Autobiography”

Stewart, A. (2020). *Developing place-responsive pedagogy in outdoor environmental education: A rhizomatic curriculum autobiography*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer

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Deleuze and Foucault’s (1977) notion of viewing philosophy as a “toolbox” and “plugging in” new ideas (p.208) aims to trouble the way that high theory is often viewed and experienced as elite or exclusionary, allowing educators a new route into philosophical thinking and application. This process aims to render theory active and process-based by utilising concepts as levers for new imaginings, and is put to work in this book by educationalist Alistair Stewart in a range of exciting and engaging ways. “Developing Place-Responsive Pedagogy in Outdoor Environmental Education” explores the author’s journey through curriculum, autobiography, stories and philosophy alongside more-than-human kin in the environs of the Murray River, south-east Australia. By introducing concepts as active components for new thinking (or as “bricks” as Massumi (1992, p.5) puts it) Stewart leads us to vital educational questions such as: What kind of human and non-human assemblages can be formed and enacted in the rethinking of curriculum? What might it mean for educators to work, as rivers do, in rhizomatic ways? And, What might educational research look like if it were informed by the natural history of a continent and the lives and needs of the species that live there? Stewart thus spurs the reader to pose key philosophical and ontological questions that are rarely addressed in hegemonic education systems that rush to metrics and the retention and regurgitation of knowledge. Rhizomes, assemblages, deterritorialisation and “lines of flight” are just some of the Deleuzian conceptual personae introduced in the book; each concept helping us to understand in different ways the entangled, intra-acting nature of autobiography, culture, history and environment.

The book’s structure reflects the way in which knowledge can emerge through diffractive and unanticipated connections between disparate ideas. Organised into plateaus, Stewart encourages us to read the book as if it was a record, moving between tracks, or chapters, in non-linear ways; identifying favourites and returning to them, and remixing ideas to create new understandings. Plateaus, for Deleuze and Guattari are “pitches of intensity” (p.18); and much like entering the nexus of a spider web, we arrive at locations where Stewart’s thoughts converge around the key question “How should we respond pedagogically to the challenges of our times?” We are accompanied on our journey by kin of various kinds; along with the river, we meet Murray cod, speckled warblers, red gum trees and echidna. Stewart puts to work a “rhizo-currere” (p.6) which

brings together Pinar's (1975) notion of curriculum as "currere" (an autobiographical approach to curriculum inquiry) with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophical enactment of the rhizome (a structure without ends or a central core). In this way Stewart's autobiographical, professional and personal reflections open outwards to connect rhizomatically with place and more-than-human kin in serendipitous and disparate ways; place, and its inhabitants in themselves becoming more-than-human teachers.

Readers will connect with different stories from the plateaus, necessarily and affectively linked to their own histories, traditions and educational biographies. For myself, two "lines of flight" resonate in particular. Lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) are departures from established ideas which take thoughts in an unprecedented direction; often unacknowledged, but significant in the way they disrupt educational business-as-usual. In the first example, Stewart considers the notion of "un-naming," that is, setting to one side our human tendency to create labels and taxonomies which reflect engrained species and ecological hierarchies (p.40). Un-naming, or renaming (using the language of local Indigenous people), Stewart suggests will allow for considered conversations as well as stimulating alternative thinking about our human-more-than-human relations. The second line of flight refers to the need for educators to be ecologically attuned to specific notions of place. In a time when Indigenous scholarship and epistemological practice is often appropriated, this call to remember our own located selves and become "ecologically attuned" (p.45) feels particularly pertinent. Our histories are shaped by colonial and settler-colonialist practices in a multitude of ways, and a critically affirmative stance is vital in order to avoid utopic framings that continue to position nature as idealised "other."

Michel Foucault in 1970 (p. 885) suggested that "... perhaps one day this century will be known as Deleuzian." He may have been a little ahead of the times, but increasingly in the 21st century we are getting a sense that we need to break with engrained and binary ways of thinking that fail to address the various ecological crises facing the planet. This book is therefore recommended for teachers of all kinds; not only those working in environmental education but anyone wanting to break free of disciplinary silos. It can be read, not just as an inspiring introduction to place-based teaching and learning, but as a route in to working with theories that are particularly valid for our contemporary predicament regardless of our teaching context. How we put Stewart's ideas to work, and what lines of flight we take, can then be decided by ourselves in conjunction with our own land, place and more-than-human kin, with all their rich teachings.

References

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Author Biography

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