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A Southern Treasure

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Place becomes an important means of linking particularity to the social concerns of curriculum theory.

Joe L. Kincheloe (1991, p. 21)

Joe L. Kincheloe died suddenly on December 19, 2008, cutting short an astonishing career that traversed the history of education to curriculum studies and critical pedagogy. It is a body of work that merits our sustained and critical attention, as it articulates the key concepts and issues with which many of us have grappled during the past twenty years. One place to begin the study of Kincheloe's work is Shreveport, Louisiana, where I met Joe in 1989. At that time I was chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at LSU-Baton Rouge with jurisdiction (technically, not practically) over teacher education at LSU-Shreveport, where Kincheloe taught courses in the history of education. Joe and I hit it off from the start, deciding to collaborate first over doctoral course offerings at Shreveport¹ and then over the concept of "place." Still in shock over the move from Rochester, New York (where I had taught from 1972-1985) I was relieved to find a receptive and engaging Joe Kincheloe. Even with his East Tennessee upbringing and doctorate from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Joe agreed with me that Louisiana demanded, well, explanation. The uniqueness of Louisiana not only pointed to its own peculiar history and distinctive multi-culture, it underscored the particularity – including the historicity (Roberts 1995, p. 64) - of every place, however muted some places seem.

The concept of "place" enabled us to appreciate that even disinterested curriculum inquiry bore some meaningful relation – perhaps "should" bear some meaningful relation – to the place where it occurs. We were hardly interested in affirming provincialism, but, rather, in cultivating cosmopolitanism by working through the local. We began working on a collection that linked the concept of "place" in curriculum theory to the social psychoanalysis of critical theory.² The collection went out of print by mid-decade, and with the publisher's permission I incorporated my chapter into *What Is Curriculum Theory?* (2004) In this remembrance I will review Joe's main points, supplemented by commentary. I start with his introduction and conclude with his chapter.

Seeking a "deeper reading of the word and the world"³ (1991,

p. 1), we fastened upon social psychoanalysis in order to denote the order of inquiry “place” required. Understanding the particularity of place meant understanding subjectivity’s reciprocal relation to reality, simultaneously constructed by and contributing to the creation of place. Joe wrote: “Human beings emerge as active agents who, due to their awareness of historical forces and the effects of such forces on individuals, help shape the future expression of these historical forces” (1991, p. 3). Understanding the past’s presence functioned as a midwife to the birth of the future by enabling agency. No historical teleology or overdetermined structuralism here, Kincheloe’s conception is grounded in subjectivity’s capacity to extricate itself from the forces which construct it through awareness and understanding. Citing not only the Frankfurt School, but also the early Marx and Paulo Freire⁴, Kincheloe affirmed the “power of humans as creative, meaning-seeking actors” (1991, p. 3). To put the matter almost psychoanalytically: “remembrance” of a repressed past supports “emancipation” (1991, 3). Today these formulations sound so *optimistic*⁵, but in that earlier era of “resistance” (see Pinar *et al.*, 1995, pp. 252ff) we were representing less an empirical reality than confirming contestation.

“Remembrance” – now associated with pedagogies of testimony (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000) and curricula for reparation (Pinar 2006) – was to be focused on “feeling,” also forefronted subsequently (Boler 1999). Linking feeling to place, Joe referenced Eudora Welty⁶:

Feelings, Eudora Welty wrote, are bound up in place. Knowing where one started allows one to understand where he or she is. This relationship between place and feeling is central to curriculum theory’s study of place. (1991, p. 4).⁷.

“literary understanding” – specifically fiction – as potentially progressive, permitting us to move into “unexplored realms of consciousness, in some cases altered states of consciousness” (1991, p. 6).⁸ Also like Nussbaum (1997, 14), Joe suggested that the “imagination” is in fact “unleashed” by “place” (1991, p. 7).

Changing metaphors, Kincheloe characterizes “place” as “a window to the *Lebenswelt*, a vehicle to self-knowledge, and a crack in the structure that allows the archeologist of self to discover the etymology of one’s research act” (1991, 6). At one point he links sensuality with politicization⁹:

The appreciation of individual sensation can be the genesis of larger political awareness – the refusal to deny restlessness, discomfort, moral ambiguity, and the impulse to reject. As one struggles with the problematic nature of the lived world, he or she begins to sense the unity of self and situation. (1991, p. 21)

Heightened sensation may animate individuals to “struggle and endure ... “emerging as poetry and politics” (1991, p. 21), a reference to Dwayne Huebner’s inspiring call-to-arms (1999 [1975], p. 231ff.) It is not an entirely phenomenological conception of place Kincheloe describes (see 1991, p. 21), however, as he insists on the primacy of history: “Place is place only if accompanied by a history” (1991, p. 8).

Certainly the American South is “accompanied by a history.” In

the South, Kincheloe (1991, p. 9) noted, “place” has been “under attack” at least since the Civil War. Defensively, then, the uniqueness of the South is not only an empirical reality, but, as well, a political counter-attack, an ongoing refusal to be integrated into the Union. The flash-point of this refusal was racial integration (1991, p. 14), experienced, Joe tells us, as “an invasion of their [Southerners’] parlors.” For Southern whites, the public sphere was co-extensive with the private. This affirmation of distinctiveness is expressed in the very structures of knowing, structures, he suggests (1991, p. 16) of particularity. He cites southern fundamentalism¹⁰ (1991, p. 16) and country music (1991, p. 18) as forms of this cultural preoccupation with detail and specificity.

Kincheloe forefronts the Mississippi journalist, novelist, and editor Willie Morris as personifying the white southerner’s dilemma. Criticized by some as embracing the local, others dismissed him as scalawag¹¹. Morris is, perhaps, Joe’s alter ego, enabling him to represent his loyalty to as well as his critical distance from the South that was his home.

Place is the concept wherein the particularities of history, culture, and subjectivity become entwined. Kincheloe endorses the concept of “totality” – foreshadowing his later turn toward the Marxism¹² that is embedded in conceptions of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe 2004, 46ff.) – in an effort to bridge “particularity” and “generalized socioeconomic structure” (1991, 22). In the “totality” of place, he suggests, “economic and individual-focused curriculum theorists might reunite” (1991, 22). While the individual-as-agent almost disappears in his later work (except as “produced” by culture and society: see 2007, p. 32), this early effort to incorporate subjectivity and sociality gets represented later in his characteristic and totalizing lists (2004, pp. 6ff., 50ff., 2007, pp. 21ff.). Also a pedagogical device, these lists – in his chapter, as we will soon see, he lists both southern ghosts and southern treasures – constituted “an appreciation of the dialectical interplay between them, e.g. social, economic, and political force [and] particularistic anecdotes” (1991, 22). In the early 1990s, Joe Kincheloe associated totality with emancipation: “Indeed, the essence of liberation is attached to the notion of totality, of epistemological synthesis” (1991, 22). This dialectical view, I suggest, is the animating aspiration of Kincheloe’s life-long scholarly project; it represents his reconstruction of southern ghosts and treasures.

Kincheloe first introduces these concepts in his chapter focused on Willie Morris. This chapter (1991, pp. 123-154) is first and foremost about Morris, but it is also about the social psychoanalysis of place and, indirectly, about Joe’s own dilemma as a politically progressive Southerner. Kincheloe starts by underscoring that Morris’ work is “primarily autobiographical, constantly relating his personal story to the story of his place.... to come to terms with those traditions in his or her own life” (1991, p. 124). While that place is Mississippi not Tennessee, it is a South that “is lost to him” (p. 125). That experience of loss, tinged, perhaps, with regret, is qualified, however, as Joe acknowledges that place inhabits subjectivity, even when one is displaced. “Morris,” he confides, “writes of structures of feelings that are no longer his” (p. 124). No longer identical to the person he was brought up to be, Morris (and Joe Kincheloe, I am suggesting) are haunted by the loss of who they once were as they are simultaneously sustained by the “treasures” internalized and later synthesized into a reconstructed subjectivity.

How does such subjective reconstruction proceed? In his chapter Kincheloe not only outlines the process; he specifies its content. First is “invalidation” of what he calls “myth,” those collective fantasies of what the South was (p. 126). It becomes clear (as we will see momentarily) that this is not only a cognitive affair, but a corporeal one as well. Connecting subjective with social reconstruction, Kincheloe asserts that such invalidation constitutes an “important step toward social progress” (p. 126). So conceived, he posits this step as a key “concern of the reconceptualized southern curriculum – to demystify southern experience in such a manner that distortions are confronted” (p. 126). Without such confrontation and consequent demystification, “individuals lose the memory of that things were once made” (p. 127). Joe lists the myths (see p. 128), among them the “Lost Cause¹³,” “Southern Womanhood,” the “Happy Darkie,” and the “Honor Myth” (p. 128). These myths inform the “ghosts” that haunt Southerners today, among them “mindless racism” (p. 134), “religious tyranny” (p. 134), “male bonding rituals” (p. 135).

What animates the labor of subjective reconstruction? Writing of Morris Kincheloe postulates the second step in the process, noting that Morris’ “desire to remove himself from his deepest loyalties” he ascribed to the “imagination” (p. 140). It is the imagination that enables Morris – and, presumably, Southerners generally – to envision life beyond what is and what has been.¹⁴ A “deeper level of understanding” is possible as the imagination propels the search for “*Lebenswelt*” (p. 140). The medium of distortion in the past, lived experience becomes now the promise of truth in the future. That Kincheloe’s view was no naïvely phenomenological one is indicated by his acknowledgement of the power of language, that, in fact, it is language that makes “accessible” the “world” (p. 141).

Referencing Freud, Fromm and Barthes, Joe positions demystification as key to laying bare “social distortion, its genesis, its nature, and its effects” (p. 128). From demystification he moves to liberation, referencing Freire’s work as extending “our thinking about the relationship between these psychic mutilations, historical location, anthropological context, and liberation” (p. 131). This list specifies the scope of Joe’s aspiration. In a key passage Kincheloe (1991, pp. 131-132) claims his Southern heritage as he describes his pedagogical aspiration to understand it:

I am a child of the South, one who has sought to understand the rhythms of southern life and their effects on me. For many reasons, my first exposure to Willie Morris about twenty years ago provided much insight into my own *southern* consciousness. So profound was the effect that I adopted Morris’s *North Toward Home* for my introduction to education classes when I came to Louisiana to teach. An excellent educational autobiography, I hoped that the work would touch the consciousness of my students. I hoped that it would promote an introspective analysis of personal educational experience that might lead to a better understanding of the social forces that shaped southern students.

I shared Joe’s conviction that preparing to be a teacher requires reflection on where teaching takes place, if today a planetary as well as regional concept.

Twenty years ago Joe – and I – were teaching in the Deep South. Despite its destruction by industrialization¹⁵, there remained resources – Joe called them “treasures” – on which Southerners could draw. While he cautioned these “powerful virtues” were not to be “romanticized” (1991, p. 145) the very concept comes close enough to doing so. To his credit, Kincheloe insisted these “treasures” be juxtaposed with the “ghosts” (p. 145) that haunted the South.

“Closeness to the land” and “a feel for the rhythms of nature” comprise the first of the treasures Joe identifies, followed by “the importance of friendship” and an appreciation for “the aesthetic of sport”¹⁶ (1991, pp. 145-6). Given slavery, the Civil War, racial segregation, and the violent struggle for civil rights, the fourth treasure seems delicately worded indeed: “*The South is a place where people gain a special sensitivity to the struggle of our national experience through the medium of strained racial relations*” (1991, p. 148). This statement is followed by praise of the South as a place where African- and European-Americans “actually know each other” (p. 148). The violent historical content of that “struggle” goes unremarked.

Joe names instrumentalism in the fifth treasure: “*time is a precious entity that an individual controls by not letting it be filled with other-directed and organized activity*” (p. 149). Suspending my skepticism that time is ever in any sense controllable, this treasure must derive from Joe’s childhood, as the Southerners around me worked long and hard (and for less compensation) than any regional grouping in the United States I had known. But no skepticism surfaced when he named the sixth treasure: “*The South is a place where people love storytelling and believe that this tradition builds community by linking us to our past*” (1991, p. 149). Joe cites his own childhood as filled with such stories, and his cousins, aunts and uncles (the subjects of these stories) remain, he tells us, “are more familiar to me in my mind’s eye than some of the people I have called *close friends* in my life in the America of the late twentieth century” (p. 150).¹⁷

Given the character of fiction, then, one is not surprised that the next treasure is the imagination: “*The South is a place where people revere the impulses of the imagination that shape our speech, our music, our literature, our love of place, and our potential*” (p. 150). Joe insists his listing of “treasures” does not constitute another moment in the century-long tradition of a romanticized and nostalgic “southern tradition” (1991, p. 151). Indeed, Kincheloe insists that these treasures must be juxtaposed with ghosts (see 1991, pp. 134-5; above).¹⁸

Despite having moved from critical theory (and its forefronting of social psychoanalysis) to critical pedagogy (with its forefronting of collective struggle and political analysis), Kincheloe remained committed to culture, history, and subjectivity. In his call for “new phase of critical pedagogy” (2007, p. 16), he reminded us that “culture shapes the political” (2007, p. 31) as he called for “attention” on “questions of identity and the production of the individual” (2007, p. 32), even on “self-realization” (2007, p. 36). “What is the relationship,” he asked (2007, p. 26), “between the macro-power and the subjectivity of individual human beings?” In asking this question Joe was once again confronting the collision between private and public life, between the “treasures” of his southern upbringing and

the “alienation” he faced in the United States of America.

The last time I saw Joe Kincheloe was over lunch at AERA 2007 in Chicago. Sitting between Shirley Steinberg and me, Joe was, as usual, humorous in his bitter, sometimes self-deprecating, way. While he seemed energetic and upbeat, Joe had been working too hard for too long; he took to heart issues others seem to shed like water on a duck’s back. Maybe those dead people were calling to him. Despite my ambivalence over the concept of southern treasures, it is clear to me that Joe was one of them.

Endnotes

¹LSU had hired me to strengthen its Ph.D. program in curriculum and instruction. By the early 1990s, students at Shreveport became able to complete a significant portion of their coursework at LSU-Shreveport, after which they moved to Baton Rouge for a year of residence to complete the degree. Joe was one of two instructors who met eligibility requirements to teach doctoral courses; Ph.D. students took so many courses with him we renamed LSU-Shreveport “the University of Kincheloe.” Joe stayed with his students when they came to Baton Rouge to work with me and/or my colleagues, among them Jacques Daignault, William E. Doll, Jr., Cameron McCarthy, Leslie Roman, Tony Whitson. The reference to Shreveport in Joe’s *Critical Pedagogy Primer* is not, then, fortuitous (2004, p. 8).

²Joe wrote the introduction (I edited it) and he recruited all the contributors – Clinton B. Allison (1991), Kathleen P. Bennett (1991), Susan Huddleston Edgerton (1991), Joseph W. Newman (1991) - save Louis A. Castenell, Jr. (1991), whom I had met on a doctoral student-recruiting trip to Xavier University in New Orleans. Castenell was Dean of the Xavier Graduate School at the time; soon after he departed New Orleans to become Dean of the College of Education first at the University of Cincinnati, then at the University of Georgia. Louis and I co-edited *Understanding Curriculum as Racial Text* (1993). Joe reports that he was first introduced to the idea of place by “Manny” Pridgen (1991, p. 154).

³Joe would repeat these words, inflected with Freirean concepts, to define critical pedagogy: “Critical pedagogy is enacted through the use of generative themes to read the word and the world and the process of problem posing” (2004, p. 15).

⁴Freire would remain a major inspiration for Kincheloe’s prodigious scholarship (see, for instance, 2004, pp. 3, 17; 21; 2007, p. 11). After accepting a Canada Research Chair at the McGill University, Kincheloe – with his partner Shirley Steinberg – established the Paulo and Nita International Project for Critical Pedagogy.

⁵In his embrace of critical pedagogy, Kincheloe seemed to me to almost abandon his earlier faith in human agency and action, despite agency’s prominent appearance in the 2004 primer (see p. 2). (Even I found his definition of agency there – as person’s ability to shape and control their own lives,

freeing self from the oppression of power” (p. 2) – voluntarist, even subjectivist.) In his introduction to the 2007 collection, such “agency” disappears; he reiterates the so-called “repressive hypothesis” (Chow 2002, p. 4; Silverman 1988, p. 149) and construes “power” as only oppressive and as almost as a superstructure in its production of subjectivity (2007, p. 36). While he embraced “self-knowledge (p 24) and “self-realization ” (p. 36), it’s not clear what these phrases can mean in a scenario wherein power predominates.

⁶Another scholar who finds Welty an inspiration is Mary Aswell Doll (2000, pp. 31, 112, 167-9), if to different theoretical ends.

⁷On that point Joe cites Giroux’s critique of positivism that I, too, knew first-hand (Giroux, Penna, Pinar 1981). Like Freire and McLaren, Giroux would become central to Joe’s later formulation of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe 2004, p. 10; Giroux 2007). Twenty years ago, however, phenomenological elements predominated: “The subjectivity of place informs our understanding of the subjectivity of social research in general” (1991, p. 6).

⁸The centrality of the concept of consciousness in curriculum research had been established by Maxine Greene (1971; see also Macdonald 1995, p. 153ff.). I introduced “heightened consciousness” in my 1973 address to the University of Rochester conference (1974), and returned to it (if in a different form) thirty years later (2006, p. 43ff.). Recent collections affirm the concept’s continuing relevance and not only in the field of education (Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Sexias 2004).

⁹This corporeal conception of political engagement had been broached by another figure (dis)associated with the Frankfurt School: Wilhelm Reich. Born in Galicia in 1897 to an assimilated Jewish family, at first Reich associated neuroses with poverty, asserting that political action as well as therapeutic intervention was appropriate to address these subjective sources of social problems (see Zaretsky 2004, p. 171). Later Joe would emphasize the role of sexual liberation in socialist revolution (2004, p. 220), an issue now, of course, if stated negatively: e.g. compulsory heterosexuality only in the context of marriage is socially legitimate. Because U.S. political conservatives have seized the issue – adult demands for abstinence, I have always thought, constitute, at least in part, a restatement of the incest taboo – one is obligated to contest it (see Pinar 2009, p. 7).

¹⁰In historical terms, Joel Williamson argues, the idea of the South as “the Bible belt” is a twentieth-century phenomenon. It occurred to no one to describe the South as a Bible belt before the Civil War. Perhaps the War was the turning point:

The modern retreat of the South into the City of God might have had its beginnings on the bloody battlefields of the Civil War. That war brought southerners from high to low very suddenly, perhaps, that they are as yet unable fully to absorb the fact of their defeat.... The retreat of the South from reality

might have been furthered by the seizure by the Yankee barbarians and the black defectors of the bodies of the southern states during Reconstruction.... When southern life recrystallized again after 1915, religion was at stage center. (Williamson 1984, p. 316)

¹¹ A postbellum Southerner who betrays his fellow Southerners to Yankees for personal gain, “scalawag” (along with carpetbaggers, e.g. Yankees who went South to profit from its military defeat) remains a slur in the contemporary South. Joe Kincheloe demonstrates he was no scalawag, as he lists among the dangers even progressive Southerners face is betrayal of the South. As if anticipating his future sojourn in the North (after leaving Louisiana, Joe moved first to Clemson in South Carolina, Florida International in Miami, then Penn State, followed by Brooklyn College and the City University of New York, and, finally, to McGill University in Montreal, Canada), he states: “The exiled Southerner in search of liberation is ever vulnerable to the temptation to turn one’s back on his or her own past in the pursuit of some convenient or trendy sophistication” (pp. 142-3). Not only theories may seduce the Southerner, apparently any “outsider” is also a risk: “The attempts of outsiders to dictate what a Southerner ought to feel about the South must be resisted” (p. 143). Perhaps Joe was addressing that line to me specifically, as I complained about “the South” almost constantly during those initial years in Louisiana.

¹² Despite its formative influence in critical theory, Kincheloe bleaches Marxism from his expansive (almost totalizing) conception of critical pedagogy: he lists Marx as one influence (along with Weber!), but his primary citation is negative (2004, p. 51). In his 1991 essay the only reference to Marxism is also critical, e.g. to an “ossified” Marxism that “disregarded the particularistic” (1991, p. 22), a charge I emphasize in my critique of reproduction theory (2009).

¹³ While the South lost the Civil War militarily, it did “rise again” in the form of political conservatism, as a map of electoral results of presidential elections since the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was passed by Democrats shows (2004, p. 233ff.; 2009, p. 54). Racial politics and violence is gendered (Pinar 2001), as Joe’s list of “ghosts” makes clear. While race receives minimal attention here, it becomes central to a reconstructed canon of critical pedagogy: among “important figures in the emergence of critical pedagogy,” Kincheloe (2004, p. 59) lists Du Bois first (if for alphabetical reasons).

¹⁴ Here Joe anticipates the later emphases on the imagination importantly advanced (if differently) by Kieran Egan and Maxine Greene. The imagination, Maxine Greene (2001, 30) asserts, is “the most focal” of our “concerns.” Imagination is perhaps the central concept in Greene’s *oeuvre*, and not only in her 2001 collection of talks to teachers. Recall that her 1995 book is entitled *Releasing the Imagination*. “Without the release of imagination,” Greene (2001, 65) asserts, “human beings may be trapped in literalism, in blind factuality.” See also Greene’s *Releasing the Imagination* (1995). While the imagination may enable distantiation, humor helps as well: “humor must cultivate a fidelity as well as irreverence to place”

(1991, p. 5). Joe's irreverent humor was widely appreciated.

¹⁵ The "Southern Agrarians" of the 1930s - Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, and Andrew Lytle - bemoaned the loss of traditional Southern life to industrialization. These intellectuals were self-consciously conservative (Genovese 1994, p. 5); while present-day southern conservatism is linked to them, it seems to me to be a horse of another color (see 2004, p. 236). Like his agrarian predecessors, Kincheloe complains about the industrialization of the South, naming social alienation as its social consequence. "The Southerner who seeks authenticity," Kincheloe (1991, 144) cautions,

must be aware of modern industrial alienation, the nature of its southern manifestation, and its effect on the soul of the individual. The instrumental rationality that accompanies this alienation precipitates a dishonesty with the most distinctive things about one's self; indeed, this destruction of self-knowledge may be its most insidious aspect.

I confess I have always suspected that Southerners' suspicions regarding industrialization were informed by industrialization's association with the North. After all, it was the North's superior industrialization – not its military prowess – that ensured victory over the South one hundred fifty years ago.

¹⁶ Sport, Joe implies, has in the South escaped the commercialization it has suffered in the North. While I was ready to grant him the first two treasures – although I resisted that these were somehow special to the South – this third claim has always seemed strange to me, surrounded as I was by the sometimes outrageously aggressive promotion of LSU sports, especially LSU football.

¹⁷ "Some folks see dead people," Kincheloe (2007, p. 11) wrote recently, "I write to them."

¹⁸ In overemphasizing Southern treasures and assigning ongoing Southern injustice to the past (as implied by the term "ghosts"), Joe suspected (I think) he was guilty of projecting his own childhood onto the present-day South. Consider this admonition (to himself): "The innocent country boy (who lives inside me) who played happily and carelessly in the mountains of East Tennessee must not impose his happy images of his South upon my present attempt to garner a mature understanding of the region" (1991, p. 151). To this Yankee living in the same state (although residents acknowledged North and South Louisianans as worlds apart) as he, it seemed to me that that was exactly what he had done. At one point he characterizes these "treasures" as providing "fullness" and "possibility" (p. 151) for the South, comprising "something of great value for America" (p. 152), even a "utopian vision of community" (p. 152), and certainly an "antidote to the alienation of modern America" (p. 152). For Joe Kincheloe as an individual, these legacies of the South provided sustenance: "I revere the southern treasures; their humanity, authenticity, and ethical orientation make me confront who I really am and

the relationship between that person and who I would really like to be” (1991, p. 153). As my title implies, understanding Joe Kincheloe requires situating him in “place.”

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