

Placing the Academy: Essays on Landscape, Work, and Identity, edited by Rona Kaufman and Jennifer Sinor. Logan: Utah State UP, 2007.

Reviewed by Corinne Kopcik, Georgia State University

Jennifer Sinor (Utah State University) and Rona Kaufman (Pacific Lutheran University) edit this collection of twenty-one personal essays that looks at the way that landscape and place shape who the contributors are as teachers, scholars, and citizens. The current drive for socially conscious and environmentally aware teaching fuels the development of place-based learning as an educational philosophy, though educators have used its principles for decades. Place-based education promotes learning that is rooted in a landscape's unique history, environment, culture, and economy.

What Bruce McComisky and Cynthia Ryan did for placed-based pedagogy in urban universities, *Placing the Academy* attempts to do for all universities. In looking at such a broad topic, the collection questions and re-examines the definition of what a place is and how places are formed. Much like Nedra Reynolds's work, writing about place must include both the metaphorical implications as well as the material. According to place-based educational pedagogy, students often lose their "sense of place," or strong identification with a particular geographical area, through focusing too intensely on national or global issues. Place-based educators feel that students should first have grounding in the history, culture, and ecology of their surrounding environments before moving on to broader subjects. In this philosophy, place is more than a geographical location; it is a collection of people, stories, traditions, landscapes, knowledge, and history forming significance for the place's inhabitants—and each place holds a special lesson. To recognize these lessons, Wendell Berry advises "Stay away from anything / that obscures the place it is in. / There are no unsacred places; / There are only sacred places / and desecrated places" (lines 18-22). *Placing the Academy* is immensely enjoyable in its range, providing literary glimpses into academics' special connections to several "places" across the country and globe. The collection attempts "to make legible the land that lies within, here teachers and scholars tell stories of growing up and growing older, of moving and remaining, of working and playing, and of being placed" (5). While Sinor and Kaufman seem to have made an effort to represent many places and experiences, a Pacific slant is apparent in that fourteen of the twenty-one writers are positioned in and/or writing about the west coast.

Drawing on the work of Scott Russell Sanders, the editors construct a collection that examines the academy's relationship to nature and the role of the community in forming a sense of place, work, and identity. This book's purpose is to explore the subject and call attention to the need for placed-based teaching and scholarship in higher education, especially in the composition classroom, a space that the editors feel in its interdisciplinary interests lends itself to the type of observation and reflection central to this pedagogy. However, the collection also

moves beyond the area of composition and explores applications in other disciplines including biology, philosophy, and literature.

Sinor and Kaufman structure the collection in four sections: here, there, everywhere, and in-between. “Here” centers on the idea that while universities can seem to be separate metaphorical spaces, they are, in fact, located in real geographical places. With a keen sense of observation, students can have a greater appreciation for a university. For example, in “What I Learned from the Campus Plumber,” Charles Bergman, an English Renaissance scholar, suggests that academics “can learn not only *at* a college campus, but *from* a college campus” (66). In addition, Michael Sowder explains that he connects with landscapes by practicing Zen meditation in order to “learn to be at home.” Katherine Fischer explains the way her teaching philosophy was shaped like a river bank by the mighty Mississippi, a prominent feature of her Iowa town. The necessity of adjusting to unpredictable situations, such as flooding, taught her that her teaching must be moving and adaptable, not based on fixed knowledge. Each author explains how the place where they currently teach affects their teaching and writing.

Leaving the present and immediate places of teaching for the ones that linger in memory, “There” deals with imagined or left behind landscapes that affected authors strongly and shaped who they are today. Extreme landscapes and unique situations create stunning examples of the impact place can have on its inhabitants. For example, Mitsuye Yamada writes an autobiographical essay about being a young Japanese resident of the Idaho desert confined in an internment camp during WWII; she now teaches this land and history to her students, proving a place of pain can become a place of strength and solace. Charles Waugh, a teacher whose past work in Vietnam transfers to his writing classes in the U.S. today, demonstrates that the “far away becomes understood when one attends to the near” (19). Each of these essays emphasizes that “who we are as writers and teachers may be most shaped by places we have already passed through” (19).

In “Everywhere,” the collection’s most abstract essays move from looking at literal places to a focus on meta-places and question if we can ever really “be” anywhere. Lee Torda also examines the transient and insecure nature of place in the academic profession, specifically in the quest for tenure. Also in this section, Jeffrey Buchanan writes that places are different than spaces. Quoting Kevin Hetherington, he says that a “place is an effect of a labor of division . . . of bringing in and keeping out. Places are relational; they make knowable a space in relation to any other” (269). Indigenous teacher and writer Deborah A. Miranda sees all American land as stolen ground. She complicates the idea of “placedness” by adding that a felt connection to land escapes articulation through words.

Finally those caught “In Between” speak. The final section looks at the sensation of being no place, caught between a connection to the academic and “real” worlds, never completely at home in either. These essays often examine the perspective that can come with distance, both in space and time, from a known place. By examining the role of place in the academy, the writers search for identity, probing topics such as life in the borderlands, traveling, and teaching working-class students in urban areas.

Placing the Academy offers great insight into the philosophy of place-based education, but it is not a handbook or practical guide to instituting place-based pedagogy

in the classroom. The narrative structure of these essays makes the collection compelling theoretically for the reader interested in incorporating place into their teaching, but there is no handy material for the classroom teacher interested in applying the philosophy's concepts. While it may frustrate those looking for practical applications, the book's learn-by-example approach is fitting, since place-based pedagogy is unique to the individual and location. The specific assignments used by a forty-year teaching veteran in rural North Dakota might not work for a first-year teacher in downtown Atlanta, but general exercises and heuristics which examine a student's relationship with current, past, and imagined places transcend geographic specificity. The general advice which carries through the collection is be adaptable, teach in a way which expresses the identities of you and your students, pay attention to both the physical and the intellectual world around you, and learn from the past. This book acts as a first step in the process of conservation, identifying the carelessness with which we pass by natural places and calling on readers to pay attention, which might eventually lead to increased concern and social action. (An interesting book to read in comparison with *Placing the Academy* is *Composition and Sustainability*. Derek Owens uses his classroom as a model for a pedagogy which allows students to explore their place, work, and future through inquiry and writing. Through these writing assignments, he creates a long-range view of students' impacts on environment and society. -

Due to its sweeping scope and diverse contributors, *Placing the Academy* can wander from its focus at times and can seem like it is trying to be everything to everyone. However, Sinor and Kaufman do a great job of bookending the collection with suitably broad theoretical introductions and conclusions. The book's scope allows for a wide potential audience, including university professors in many disciplines, but especially writing professors and those interested in environmental studies and sustainability; place and community-based education; and American studies. Essays from the book could be great resources in a composition classroom. In addition, little knowledge of the subject is needed to understand the text, so readers beyond the academic setting might find the book interesting and enjoyable. This collection is a bit like a hike in the woods: sometimes a path will loop back and sometimes a trail leads to a scenic overlook or dead end. It is not necessarily where you end up that matters, but it is the small things you notice along the way that make the hike worth taking.

Atlanta, GA

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