Placing the Academy

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On January 10, my college town wakes up to a silver thaw. All through the day, oak limbs thunder to earth in a flurry of ice and robins. Ice coats every laurel leaf, every branch of every oak and bundle of mistletoe, every stop sign and sidewalk. The whole world shines. “Warm rain is falling through cold air,” the radio announces, and the university is closed. It’s too dangerous to drive, even if people could open their car doors through a half inch of ice. I pull on a parka and skid out to see. Rain continues to fall, building ice-knobs on the buds of dogwood trees, outlining azaleas with light, transforming rose thorns into glass swords. Even as I watch, the weight of the ice becomes too much for an old Douglas fir in the next block. With a great crackling, a limb falls through the lower branches and smashes into the street, taking down an electric wire in a cloud of sparks and smoke. Still the rain falls. By the time this silver thaw is over, the neighborhoods and campus will be a tangle of split limbs and littered branches.

When I look at a mosaic of Plato gathered with his students under the branches of an olive tree, I can almost smell the rosemary and feel the sun on my shoulders, feel the energy of argument and hear the shouts of the marketplace beyond the garden walls. Because
the hero Academos was buried there, the garden was called the Academy. My discipline, philosophy, began in this sacred grove, a garden of olive trees and myrtle on the outskirts of Athens.

So I have always paid close attention to what Plato is telling his students as they sit on warm stones. Plato has traveled to Italy and studied with Pythagoras, and what he tells his students is that true knowledge aspires to the abstraction and perfection of mathematics. The blue of the rosemary flowers, the blue of the bank swallow or the late afternoon sky are changing and particular—and so imperfect. They only participate fleetingly in the Idea of Blue, the unchanging, perfect color. According to Plato, we should aspire to true knowledge—not knowledge of the particulars (the distractions of a particular place), but knowledge of the perfect (the universal and unchanging Everyplace) (Bks. VI, VII).

Of course, as Plato knew, humans can’t ever achieve this kind of knowledge. We see only the dancing shadows of Ideas, as if they were projected by firelight on the back wall of a cave (Bk. VII, 514a–517a). But at least we know the extent of our ignorance, which is a kind of wisdom, and we know the nature of the knowledge we should seek.

If truth is universal, then everything that is not universal falls off the academic agenda. Philosophers will study Beauty, but not black crows in a green field or a father’s cheek against his child’s. Philosophers will study Justice, but not a friend’s broken promise or her remorse. Attention to place? If truth is universal, philosophers will firmly turn their backs on their own olive groves and rosemary patches—it makes no difference where they are.

2. Pineapple Express

There is no mercy in this rain. It falls hard, it falls loud, it falls for three days and nights unceasing. Low, dusky clouds weigh on the students’ shoulders and rest heavily on their souls. Classroom windows steam, increasing the gloom, and water drains across the classroom floor, fed by streams flowing steadily from black-and-orange umbrellas. The room smells of wet plaster and damp wool. Sidewalks flood, forcing students to high-step through lawns already so sodden that each footprint fills with cold water. Soccer fields flood. Parking lots flood. Storm drains flood. Oak Creek runs high and muddy. I walk to school in the dark, walk home in the dark, and teach with wet feet, raising my voice over the din.
Meteorologists call this the Pineapple Express, because the weather rolls in from the South Pacific, loaded with water, and dumps half the ocean on our campus—a black freight train rumbling past the social-science building with sullen disregard, day after day after day.

For many years, I have struggled to understand my place in this academy. At first, I taught political philosophy and philosophy of law, even Great Ideas, from the perspective of the Western Enlightenment, separated from the times and places where my students lived. We read John Locke and John Rawls, page after page, and tried not to look out the window. When students asked if class could meet outside on the first sunny day, I always said no, asking them if sunshine could teach them anything about Liberty—knowing that it could, but knowing also that they couldn’t tell me how. I taught Thomas Hobbes on weather (The day doesn’t have to be rainy to be threatening, he wrote) but I made no connection to the rain coursing down the window (62). I taught deductive logic, wrote a book on Forgiveness, and everything went fine. As rain-drenched winters brightened to summers, I was tenured, promoted, named department chair.

All this time, I lived in two worlds: the world of Ideas, which thrilled me and paid my bills, and the world of rain and wind, which I loved. Weekdays found me in my office, where even the plants were dead; weekends found me out in the weather, carrying a waterproof journal, paying real attention to rain bouncing off rivers and running down creeks, sluicing past shining rocks, carrying the doomed little boats my children carved from sticks. For many years, it never occurred to me that the academic world and the wet, wild world could be—in fact, should be—the same place.

I can’t say what prompted me to examine this divided life, to wonder if a life that lacks wholeness may ultimately lack integrity. It might have been the freedom that tenure provided me to define for myself what philosophy really is and where it ought to take place. It might have been articles written by other philosophers who were recoiling from Plato, arguing that there is no one Truth, but many truths; that every claim grows out of some grounding; that scholars should pay close attention to the situatedness (god
forgive us for this word) of knowledge; that personal stories in particular places have truths no formula can begin to express. On the other hand, it might have been sadness, as I sensed that I wasn’t doing the job I wanted to do; or it might have been guilt I felt, turning my back so decisively on a world I loved so much.

Or maybe it was rereading Dostoyevsky. “One must love life,” he wrote, “before loving its meaning.” One must love life, and some meaning may grow from that love. “But if love of life disappears, no meaning may console us.” I began to wonder, sitting in the prow of a boat in steady rain, what meaning could grow from my love of the low light, the tracks of otter and mink, the smell of salmon, the golden floating leaves?—all this spinning, sliding world. What meaning can grow from a deep, caring connection to a place?

What if I tried to teach students to be attentive to what is beautiful and true in their own worlds? What if I tried to teach them to see, really see the place they live: to hold it in their hands, to learn everything about it, to listen to what it needs, what it seeks, what it sounds like at dawn? To learn the connections between places—between us and them, between near and far, between the mundane and the sacred. To appreciate the interconnectedness of people and places and the moral wholeness—the integrity—this calls for in us. Wouldn’t this be important work? I believe that this kind of seeing, this kind of attentiveness to place is the first step toward caring. And caring is the portal to the moral world. Isn’t this a professor’s job, to lead students to this open door?

I knew I was moving onto contested ground, and at first I was frightened. Academic blood is shed in the dispute over whether knowledge is universal or place based. Take the losing side on this issue, write about crows in a department that writes about Beauty or write about Beauty in a department that writes about crows, and your work will be dismissed. All my professors taught that there are only two kinds of meaningful statements: those that can be deduced from first principles and those that can be disproved by empirical evidence. Despite their lessons, it was gradually dawning on me how much I lost when I banished stories, personal experience, even the landscape, the very ground I stood on, everything I really loved on the actual earth, from the philosophically meaningful world.
3. Squall

A squall has blown into campus from the coast range, a short-lived commotion of wind-driven rain. This is the kind of rain that moves in fast and hits hard, almost always during the time between classes. From my second-story office window, I watch one student running awkwardly through sheeting rain. Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, he gallops with his head down, his notebook clasped to his chest. Another student strolls along the brick walk, completely oblivious to the rain. Two women cut the difference, hurrying across the space between buildings, their backpacks bouncing, their arms crossed, annoyance in their stride.

When you’re caught in a squall without a parka, it’s hard to know if you should walk or run. If you walk between buildings, the rain has a longer chance to soak you, flattening your hair and running in rivulets down your forehead. If you run, you shorten the time you’re exposed to the rain, but you collide with the raindrops full force, driving them down your neck and wetting your pant legs, and this is especially miserable—jeans sticking to your knees, cold and clammy all through class.

Even as I struggle to find my place in the university, the university’s relation to its own place has become more and more of a quandary. In its strategic plan, a goal of my university is to place in the top tier of American land-grant institutions. Placing requires nationally ranked faculty, lured from other universities around the globe. It requires successful students, placed in positions of national prestige—New York, Cambridge, Bethesda, Palo Alto. In this heady world, time and space are pulled and chopped like taffy. A successful faculty member is far more likely to talk to a colleague in Washington than a neighbor in the next block. She is far more likely to fly to a conference in Prague than to float the river that flows by her town. The academic world is ridden with wormholes, shortcuts in space and time that transport ideas and reputations to Beijing or Berlin.

In this folded space, it’s hard to know where a university is. Maybe the university has become a paradox, a place with no particular place. More likely it exists in a universal place—in a familiar geography of classrooms, restrooms, computer networks, and
labs, where uncomfortable table-chairs and library shelves are an iconography recognizable around the world. This global University has a common language, shared ethical codes, standardized measures of status, and ingrained methodologies, economic systems, and taboos. What the University doesn’t have is a meaningful relationship with a particular place—its absence the final achievement of the goal implicit in the word university.

Professors live simultaneously in two places. They inhabit the global University, while they live lightly in their own neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the people who proofread their papers and empty their wastebaskets, the students who take their courses, and maybe even their own children live in Albany or Lebanon or Salem—surrounding towns a twenty-minute commute away. There, rents are low, churches are thriving, and airport shuttles pause to pick up passengers on their way to the airport, where rain streams off the planes as they lift into the clouds—something many of my colleagues are unlikely to notice, waiting impatiently to reach ten thousand feet, where they can turn on their laptops and be back at the University again.

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\textit{place v: to find a position for, as to secure remunerative employment}
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As for the students, the most important address in the university is often the Placement Office, whose mission is to place students in positions of “responsibility and promise.” Place is a fast-paced verb. It connotes strategic and narrow focus, a rapid pace, head down, looking neither right nor left. It connotes a kind of worry and self-consciousness, anxiety about measuring up for the right job. Students seek skills that can go anywhere, as the job requires. So for many—not all—of them, the university is not a home as much as it is a vehicle by which students move into the corporate world from the ranches and suburbs, their families’ cigarette- or Polo- or juniper-scented houses. Not all, but many, students choose classes that will get them where they are going—to the extent that they can, bypassing the detours. In the express lane to economic success, students have no incentive, no time or occasion, to notice the complicated, richly populated and forested communities where they go to school. They are in training to become the new homeless, moving from place to place as the global economy requires.
4. Soft Rain

In other college towns, soft rain might be called drizzle, but that ignores the kindness of this rain. Soft rain falls at exactly the rate that can be absorbed by green mats of moss and sweet layers of pine duff; exactly the rate that Douglas firs and Sitka spruce can pull it into their shining needles, growing all winter in this soft rain; exactly the rate that water evaporates from a person’s hair. You can stand in soft rain and never get wet. Meanwhile, all around you, grass fields grow green, trees lengthen and put on girth, frogs sing as if their hearts would burst, and along the roads, Scotch broom blooms in yellow heaps. Soft rain smells like apples. It tastes like pine trees. In class, against the windows, it sounds like somebody shushing a child.

You can lie on your back in soft rain, licking moisture off your face. When you stand up, there will be an outline of your body, light against dark pavement—a rain angel. Watching students—how they gather in small groups or sit down to wait for a friend—you won’t know if it’s raining or not. Soft rain doesn’t quicken their pace or drive them indoors or bow their heads. Soft rain doesn’t warp their books.

Even as it aspires to be a global University, Oregon State University, where I work, sits in the southern quadrant of the largest temperate rainforest in the world—or at any rate, in the stump-studded remnants of what once was the largest. Reminders of the ancient forest grace campus: giant Douglas firs, rhododendrons high as the rooftops, a grandmother maple with gardens of licorice ferns and lichens in the crooks of its branches. The College of Forestry manages the forests that ring the town and shapes forest-cut policy for the state.

The campus is Kalapuya country, a broad valley that the People burned each year so that camas would grow in broad blue fields and deer could fatten on acorns under spreading oaks. The meadows are largely replaced now by laser-leveled fields of grass grown for seed, a crop introduced to the valley by the College of Agriculture professor who once lived and died in my house. Campus edges up to the Marys River on the south and the Willamette River in the east, a mighty river now contained between walls of riprap but once spreading silver in braided gravel streams and marshes all across
the valley. This is the Salmon Homeland, where red salmon crowd the streams to spawn—or did once, before the hatcheries and dams designed in part by OSU grads. Now Department of Fisheries faculty struggle to save the last of the salmon runs.

Corvallis, home to Oregon State University, sits in the midst of timber towns, or so they were, when there was timber. A person can’t make a living from logging when the forests are gone, so the towns are ragged at the edges, sad Wal-Mart towns. The college town itself is a green, well-gardened place, an overgrown village of small white houses ringed by new, million-dollar homes in the hills. Retirees move here because of the rich cultural offerings of the university, even as the university hires fewer and fewer young profs who might create those offerings. So the elementary schools gradually close, and the population grows steadily older.

But enough. The point is that, no matter how the university might ignore or deny the importance of the fact, of course the university is in a specific place. That place is thoroughly shaped by the university. Moreover, the university is thoroughly shaped by the place. You can see it in the curriculum, the rangeland management and forest recreation and marine ecology and electrical engineering. You can see it in the plummeting budgets, cut year after year after year by taxpayers who don’t understand why local people should pay the bill for the global University. You can see it in the students: Children of a green and gentle land, they are homesick maybe, maybe lost, but never cynical. You can see it in the buildings and the lay of the land, the covered bike racks and windowless classrooms, a campus so responsive to the rain that there is no place a class can meet outside. You can see it sometimes in the truth-claims of professors in service to the Western Cattleman’s Association or Weyerhaeuser Company.

You can see it in an administration in various stages of denial and confusion, bouncing from the mission of a thoroughly located university putting its resources to solving regional problems to the vision of a thoroughly disengaged Cyber-university, existing in some ethereal, perhaps more profitable plane. Clearly, this is a university struggling to find its place.

5. Broken Sun
Here is the rain that falls like light through trees just beginning to green up. On a rare day of sunlit sky, white clouds ramble generally eastward, trailing showers. These are the days of rainbows, double
Six Kinds of Rain

rainbows, triple rainbows, arching over the entire campus from the grass fields in the south to the fir-clothed hills to the north. Sidewalks steam. The cupola of the music building glows white in storm light, and every fleck of rain shines like glitter, floating. I can hear a trumpet climbing the musical scales, up and up, and when a car goes by, the music is the Beach Boys.

The Weather Beaver, the little icon that forecasts weather in our local paper, calls this broken sun. I don’t know why. It might mean that the sunny expanse of the day may be broken by showers, but these showers do no damage to the sun. I like to think it means that on a day like this, the sun, expanding, flies apart into a million flecks of light that drift onto the sports fields, the fir trees, the uplifted faces of the students.

So what is my job as a teacher in a university that both is and is not in this place and time? Against all the forces that would uproot them, I have resolved to teach students to be acutely aware of where they are. Aware of the physical and temporal place, the rain and the ancient stones, the forests, the passage of time. Of the cultural place, the communities and libraries and histories—all the stories. Of the ecological place, which is to say, the relation of people to the great cycles of water and air, the great cycles of living and dying that sustain them. In the University, so far from home, it is easy for students to forget that they are part of deeply interconnected biocultural communities. This forgetting is a lonely and dangerous thing. Lonely, because it allows students to forget that they are created and sustained, one might say cradled, by long cultural traditions and ecological systems. Dangerous, because it encourages students to forget that their acts or failures to act have consequences in this place and future times.

“All ethics so far evolved,” Aldo Leopold writes, “rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts,” a community that includes “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land,” and the people, their hopes and fears for their children, their prejudices and practices (203). By reminding students of their membership in the community, by helping them understand it and rejoice in it, perhaps I can engage in a kind of moral education.
If I can help students understand the deep and complicated and comforting ways in which they are in a place, a community of interdependent parts, maybe I can help them acquire a necessary condition for the skill of moral imagination, the ability to imagine themselves in another’s place. Empathy, sympathy, caring have their roots in moral imagination: Without knowing the biocultural context for their own hope and despair, how can students appreciate the hope and despair of others?—different from their own, but equally rooted in complicated, beautiful webs of relationship that grow from the place they inhabit.

Moreover, if students can learn how deeply, essentially connected they are to a place, maybe they will begin to question the consequences that their own decisions have for that place. This questioning is the beginning of moral responsibility.

I believe that this, at least, is my place in the university: to teach students that because their decisions (what to eat, where to live, how to get to campus, what to care about, what to love or despise) fundamentally affect the people around them and influence the well-being of the systems that sustain them, they have the moral responsibility to make decisions that are wise, caring, and deeply informed.

6. Mist

When I zip open the tent, I find that although bulrushes still nod and drip at the edge of the lake, the lake itself has vanished in mist, along with the reflections of the mountains and the sky. Soon, the mist will rise like stage curtains from the lake, revealing a sunlit, steaming world and fifteen students gathered for PHL 436—the Philosophy of Nature. Carrying Walden and a cup of tea, I will join them on the beach then. But for the moment, I settle back into my sleeping bag and let the morning mist do all the teaching. There will be time for words.

I’m not clear about where mist comes from, whether it falls from the sky or rises from the lake or materializes in place. Whatever its origin, it’s a moisture thick and milky that softens what you can see, as it sharpens what you hear. From my sleeping bag, I hear mist sizzle against my tent, the pump handle creak, the thump of the outhouse door. A slosh as someone launches a canoe. Wood snapping, sticks breaking, and then the smell of woodsmoke on damp wind. Two women talk quietly by the fire. Gravel crunches as a jogger sets out on the trail, alert—I hope—for bear.
So now I teach Philosophy of Nature. We go to the mountains for this course, camping beside a lake, a flotilla of students in little boats adrift in moonlight, asking what it is exactly that we value in this wild place and how we can find or create those values in our campus lives. I’m about to teach Environmental Ethics, and I’ll teach this in the community. Don’t know exactly how, but I’ll give it a shot, sending my students into the suburban streams and soup kitchens. I teach Native American Philosophies, or I should say I raise the funds to invite other people—Native poets, musicians, storytellers, scholars—to lead students to examine what they most deeply believe about who they are in this place and time and what sustains them, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I’m signed up to teach Critical Thinking in the winter term, and maybe this too will be a course in listening and seeing.

I’m insecure in this teaching, as you might imagine, wandering so far from the usual path that I wonder sometimes if I’m lost. I constantly ask myself, is this what students need? Is this what the world needs? But I find myself answering, yes and yes.

We are creatures of place, and our beginnings, our hopes, and our destinies rest on the health and wholeness of those places. Gary Snyder reminds us that spreading savannahs gave us our far-seeing eyes, “the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears” (29). Does our ability to sing praises come from the beauty of the rain, our capacity to grieve from the short span of human life relative to the hills? And our ability to learn, is this a gift of complex and mysterious patterns of place and time that create the present in which we make our lives? If so, then our great educational systems should honor this gift in its entirety, protecting it and celebrating it in all its dimensions and with all our powers—not just to learn, but to listen, to imagine, to hope, to question, to celebrate, and to care.

As I finish writing this essay, I look down from my office window onto the flat roofs of campus—the Geosciences building, the Bioengineering labs, the porch of the Philosophy building. Water collects on those roofs, so each one is a lake, reflecting the brick buildings adjacent. Yellow rubber ducklings float on the water pooled above Philosophy’s porch. I don’t know where they came from, I don’t ask. A robin is taking a bath in the Bioengineering
lake. The bird shakes from its shoulders to its tail, lifting a chop on the water. Elm seeds drift onto the lakes, each seed with a hole where an evening grosbeak has neatly clipped out the nut meat. As the wind rises, the reflections of Biological Science and History shift and sway.

Notes

This paper grew from a long-term partnership exploring the topography of knowledge. Here, the complicated product of our comparative academic experiences is represented by a single voice speaking from a particular place.

1. All definitions are adapted from *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*.

Bibliography