

## CHAPTER 1. LOCATING SELF: THE RESEARCHER AS A BORDER CROSSER

*“An ecotone is a...junction zone or tension belt ...[with] the tendency for increased variety and density [of life]...known as the ‘edge effect’.”*

*(Odum, Fundamentals of ecology, 1966, p. 278)*

*“The concept of border suggests something very subversive and unsettling. It means moving into circles of uncertainty, it means crossing into different cultural spheres, it means recognizing the multiple nature of our own identities.”*

*(Giroux, Disturbing pleasures, 1994, p. 167)*

I am a border crosser. My position as a border crosser is located in multiple life roles: employment as a biologist with state government environmental and conservation agencies, an educational background as a scientist, and as an activist with a history of civil disobedience and arrest. The trope that I use for those of us who dwell in the borderlands between multiple discourses is taken from ecology. Ecologists speak of an “edge effect” in nature. By this they mean that a greater variety and density of life exists in the tension zone between two or more distinct, diverse biotic communities, than is found in any of the communities alone. In this pressure belt, or ecotone, organisms from each of the overlapping communities, and in addition, organisms that are characteristic of and restricted to the ecotone, co-exist. The ecotone is a metaphor for cultural dynamism. Wayfaring in the cultural ecotone produces a greater variety and magnitude of dynamic interactions. Transitional values, beliefs and behaviors, paralleling the biological organisms described by Krall (1994), mingle in heightened richness, contradiction and struggle. Thus, I find myself at times dwelling along a faultline, “moonlighting” as an environmental activist, gainfully employed as a government bureaucrat, and engaged in pedagogical liberatory enterprises--hopefully an example that power and authority are leaky and definitely displaying that life is disordered. I grapple with ethical dimensions of what it means to

be both an educationist and environmental researcher in an unjust world. And, I question what it means to wander in the ecotone of manifold alignments, inhabiting “intersections of multiple, contradictory, overlapping social positions” (Ellsworth, 1989). Recognizing that my positionality is not reducible to a monolithic locus, I honor that others too are situated in multiple locations.

My space is marked by a radical, emancipatory discourse premised on the value-laden nature of education, inscribed by a complex “orienting theory” (a term used by Whyte, 1984). I use the descriptor “radical” intentionally, despite the vagaries that attend it (Listo & Zeichner, 1987). For me it not only codes for equity sensitivity, but also answers the demand that the researcher articulate his/her biases in a deliberate fashion.

I subscribe to the type of education and educational research that seeks not only to understand the world, but to become a part of it, and to actively transform it, in the mold of Highlander and Freire. I believe that being a scientist should not preclude an individual from also acting as a scientifically knowledgeable, active citizen in controversial democratic processes. Being critically literate about the world informs my position as a citizen activist and is the basis for my sense of social justice. It is my stand that advocacy is not inimical to objectivity or life in the academy, but is ethically mandatory for public intellectuals.<sup>1</sup>

My research interests have taken dual tracts. As a gay man, I have investigated the injustice of heterosexism and homophobia in American culture, especially within the field and practice of adult education (see Hill, 1994; Hill, 1995b; Hill, 1996). I have also explored environmental justice issues and the educational discourse surrounding toxic exposure of communities (Hill, 1995a; Hill, in press). As such, my work is dedicated to the formation of a more just society.

Educators (Imel, 1994) have identified different types of adult learning, including subject-oriented, consumer-oriented, and emancipatory (commonly known as transformative). It is the latter that drives my interests and research. Equally important to me is the necessity to engage in research that is conscious of the power relations that are established by field work. During this study, I attempted to be aware of the asymmetry of my relationship to community

members. I was an outsider, an urban, academic, white, male, experienced scientist, activist, and educator (self-descriptors). It was my intention to engage in a dialogical process in the construction, design, and execution of this study. It was my ambition to build a relationship to the point where I engaged the adults, who as cultural workers and intellectuals were employed in conflicts over making sense out of their exposure to toxics, in a mutual process of reciprocity wherein the researched and the researcher constructed the project together.

I was conscious of the privilege and prestige of my location--an environmental researcher, an environmental agency employee, a doctoral candidate with Pennsylvania State University--and of the influence that I as a researcher might have on the researched, despite all good intentions to impose nothing on them. For example, during an interview, Kathleen Rehrig (Kada), one of several key respondents in the study, briefly discussed this point. She said, "I think maybe when you stepped into Palmerton, maybe you changed [my perception] of the [community conversation], you know? These were all things that maybe we knew, or maybe I knew, but never could quite articulate" (7/19/96, lines 221-226).<sup>2</sup> Sandra L. Peters (Sandy) vocalized it most succinctly, "It wasn't until I read your [preliminary dissertation draft] that I really had a clue" (7/22/96, lines 1306-1308) about some things occurring in Palmerton. For Tess Roberts, my presence helped to give her a language and a vocabulary, but one that she "wouldn't use outside of anybody who hadn't read [my dissertation] text" (7/19/96, lines 306-312), but when speaking with me she employed them. Tess was able to "code switch," rapidly learning my technical and sometimes esoteric grammar, yet knowing in whose company it could appropriately be applied.

Although I desired to be an active player in the dynamics in Palmerton, I wanted to avoid intellectual neo-colonialism. I recognized that the mere act of overtly studying the community, of itself would alter the outcomes. My presence has been both a positive and empowering presence and, undoubtedly has had some negative impacts. An example of a positive effect, as identified by members of PCCE, was the role I played in pointing to the importance of education in their struggle to procure community subscription to the federal clean up initiative. "Education"--although a main objective--was not an explicit part of the lexicon of

the group prior to my arrival, yet, it assumed an increasingly important formal role in the organization. However, as Miles Horton noted at Highlander, people do not always know how to state what they want *in educational terms*, but they know what they want and need. The grassroots folks knew their growing needs, even if they did not posit these in educational grammar. At one point during the study, an education chair was established to specifically promote environmental education. I believe my presence stimulated this; it also never really developed as a PCCE program since it didn't seem to originate from the heart and soul of the group.

The emotive impacts of my interactions were periodically reflected back to me by such lines as “this [the conversation] is like therapy!” (Kada, 7/19/96, line 1062) and “it was good for me to do this...because this is something, as time goes on, you don't really think things through, what happened...[and] why did I do this...everyone should do that” (Kathryn A. Ozalas [Kathy], 8/16/96, lines 2555-2561). Linda M. Holland offered, “I like talking to people like you who look for things in a different light. It makes us feel more normal....It's nice to talk to outsiders” (7/22/96, lines 1719-1723). Others did not feel so good about reviewing the disturbing history of Palmerton, and their struggle for a voice. For Tess Roberts, “to recall these things is--is painful” (7/19/96, line 1078-1079).

Louise Calvin, president of PCCE, commented on the educational role that my research helped clarify for her. She said, “You helped me [to see] that, contrary to in the past when we said to each other, ‘these people in town really need to be educated,’ we really meant they had been educated for one-hundred years by the industry. Maybe they needed to be re-educated....[This new education] has to include not just my opinions, but all the data that's been generated on the site” (7/30/96, lines 391-400). I found kinship with the women of PCCE, who like me were border crossers. They were agents of cultural production and I was restless to share our journeys.

### **The Researcher as an Environmental Activist and Educator**

*“What sparks...protest...is the tangible destruction of the...environment...industrialization and pollution....These are developments that visibly attack the organic foundations of the life-world and make one drastically conscious of criteria of livability, of inflexible limits to the deprivation of sensual-aesthetic background needs.”*

*(Habermas, 1981, New social movements, p. 35)*

*“Toxic exposure is a politicizing and radicalizing experience.”*

*(Edelstein, 1988, Contaminated communities, p. 164)*

I am motivated to engage in radical environmental education for action because of the awareness that, unlike any past period in human history, the synthesis, use and disposal of chemical substances is causing increased exposure and related risks (Infante & Pohl, 1988). The list of chemicals in the environment is legion; environmental degradation results from military, medical, industrial, commercial, household, mining and municipal waste and pollution. National Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) data, issued by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), and based on industry's self-audits, reported 2.8 billion pounds of chemicals licitly discharged into the US environment in 1993 by companies who have permits to pollute. Distributionally, 1.6 billion pounds were released in the air (59.5%), 576 million pounds were injected underground (20.5%), 289 million pounds were placed into landfills (10.3%), and 271 million pounds were discharged into waterways (9.7%). The amount of listed “hazardous” materials released into the environment by US chemical firms, as part of routine operations, in 1991, was 3,385 million pounds (USEPA, 1993).

In Palmerton the zinc industry reported to the federal government that in 1995--fifteen years after smelting operations ceased--they discharged 81,000 pounds of zinc; 3,100 pounds of lead; and 350 pounds of cadmium into an already (historically) polluted environment (Toxic

Release Inventory, 1995). The percentage of lead from the recycling of Electric Arc Furnace dust, a licit on-going activity, has not been precisely determined, but is estimated by USEPA to be about 10%.

The company, like other industries, "purchases the right to pollute" from the government. In fact, "pollution regulation accepts that our system of production creates pollution" (O'Connor, 1993, p. 50). The numbers of toxic waste sites in the US, in part a result of this pollution, is estimated to be 425,000 (Rosenbaum, 1995), of which Palmerton is just one.

As an adult environmental educator, I believe that the field has a vital role in excavating local and global ecosystem problems, and in offering models for arriving at solutions. According to the United Nations Environmental Programme, environmental education situates humanity within the context of nature. A lifelong activity, it begins as a process readying people to live as members of the biosphere, and continues with the transmission of knowledge enabling sustainable life on earth. Education for solving environmental conflicts is critical to it (Meadows, 1989). However, the mainstream discipline and practice of environmental education is most often associated with preparatory learners (non-adults) in grades K - 12 and higher education settings, teacher training, and occasionally within business and industry. It occurs in formal, nonformal, informal, and incidental education. It is nomothetic; most frequently cut off from political, social and economic controversy, and virtually never exposes asymmetrical power relations nor does it identify specific causes of environmental degradation. When problems are addressed, they are discussed at global or regional levels in abstract terms, or as solutions needed for the future. Often mainstream environmental education is non-personal, diffuse, notional and academic, with limited connections to problem-solving for remediation of ills that are actually and directly impacting the immediate lifeworlds of the learner. Only rarely are linkages specified that connect the behavior of powerful institutions implicated in environmental problems and the distressed lifeworld of the learner.

### **Self-location**

*“There’s no enunciation without positionality.  
You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all.”*

*(Hall, Cultural identity and diaspora, 1990, p.18)*

My interest in the Palmerton environmental dynamics began in 1994 when I read several newspaper articles on the contest that was occurring there. At the time, I was an employee of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources (DER) in the agency’s Office of Public Liaison. I was the state environmental Public Outreach Coordinator, which basically meant that I was involved in dialog and conflict-negotiations with citizens in the Commonwealth.

Although Palmerton was largely a federal issue, and I worked for the state government, news clippings of the Palmerton struggle crossed my desk on an infrequent basis. I was intrigued by the contested terrain that was reported in the press. I read the community discourse on children’s health as a cultural text. There were citizens who dismissed the elevated blood levels of heavy metals circulating in children’s bodies. There was great debate over both public and private spaces: homes, gardens and lawns; the Borough Park; the Blue Mountains; and the air, soil and water. The news stories were accompanied by several haunting photographs of the situation. One particular article (Fried, 1994) depicted Ellen Colangelo, with whom I would later have the pleasure of working, together with her daughter Lauren, peering out of their door, seemingly at the viewer of the photograph. In the corner of the portal was a sign the stated “Thanks EPA. PCCE Proud.” To me the mother looked scared, and the child forlorn. The same press report showed Teresa (Tess) Roberts, noted as one of the founders of PCCE, surrounded by dead trees on the mountain top, with the industrial complex situated in the valley below. Tess simply states, “I felt victimized and rather than turn the victimization into fear, I decided I would do what local government had failed to do” (p. A12). The article spoke about the 36 members of PCCE campaigning against the powerful alliance of 200 members of the Pro-Palmerton Coalition, the Chamber of Commerce, zinc industry executives, and others. I asked myself, “What must it feel like to be in such an asymmetrical

power relations with the privileged of the community?” PCCE members were folks who were moving against the grain. What little I could grasp from the press clippings that filtered across my desk begged for answers to questions about citizens’ abilities to mobilize their desires to protect their community from pollution. A small group of individuals appeared to be attempting to restructure and democratize the public sphere in an effort to redefine life in Palmerton. In their struggle to produce meaning, they seemed to model a pedagogy of articulation--one of possibility and risk. To me, this was exciting since I, too, had for most of my life “painted outside of the lines.” Palmerton raised perplexing questions about what it meant to be critically reflective, to be critically literate (eco-literate) in the world.

So, I made several brief visits in the autumn of 1994 to first reconnoiter the terrain of Palmerton, Pennsylvania, a community contaminated by past and present industrial activities. A local teacher once wrote of Palmerton, “In neat and well-built houses on her streets/Live friendly folk, hospitable and kind/Within whose family circle, callers find/A gracious welcome” (Brookmeyer, 1962). By some, I received a gracious welcome. Others were less generous in their availability and candor. In fact, on one of my first visits to the community, an employee of the zinc industry after a brief explanation of my presence in Palmerton, advised me that the New York office didn’t look kindly on unflattering publicity. Although I would have liked to discuss this and numerous other topics with community members of cultural standing, such as the corporate officials and the public school board, I was unsuccessful, but not for lack of trying. Letters, sent with return receipt cards remained unanswered, as did telephone calls. Petitions to the company headquarters in New York City also produced no response, despite assurances from an official at Horsehead’s New York City office that someone would call.

On the other hand, numerous citizens affirmatively welcomed me into their homes to share with me their wealth of knowledge and experience. It is largely from this storehouse of information, independently confirmed, that this study is written. Especially salubrious were the members of PCCE.

---

---

<sup>1</sup> See Shrader-Frechette (1994b) for tightly developed arguments on the need for environmental advocacy based, in part, on the notion that environmental goods are both public and indivisible. She constructs her position from a consequentialist standpoint (without advocacy greater environmental harm is likely to occur), and from a deontological standpoint (it is neither objective nor neutral to remain voiceless in the face of environmental devastation; an important argument for public intellectuals' ethical advocacy is that objectivity does not require us to treat a questionably ethical position and a more reasonable one the same).

<sup>2</sup> All formal interviews were tape-recorded, with respondent's consent, and subsequently transcribed. Transcriptions were entered into the computer program, *The Ethnograph v4.0™: A Program for the Analysis of Text Based Data* © 1995, J. Seidel, S. Friese, and D. C. Leonard, Qualis Research Associates, P.O. Box 2070, Amherst, MA 01004. When quotations are used in this study, they are cited with the date of the interview, and the lines from the transcript as they appear in the *Ethnograph v4.0* output. Note that the first occurrence of a respondent's name is fully listed where permission has been granted. Subsequent quotes by her or him are abbreviated by the use of the person's first name only. In some instances, interviewees requested pseudonyms, which were either offered by them or applied by me. All subjects reported herein were notified of the purposes to which our conversations could potential be used. All formal, tape recorded interviews were conducted after respondents supplied signed release forms, approved by the Pennsylvania State University Office for Regulatory Compliance.