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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Teaching Places and Teaching Place

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Folk, Knowledge, Place

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Keith Basso's seminal work, 'Wisdom Sits in Places', explores epistemologies of place used by the people of the Cibecue Western Apache community in what is now called Arizona, US. One of the major conclusions Basso arrives at is that places for the people of Cibecue are active repositories of wisdom, as embodied in narratives connected to those places. Engaging with the places in a particular way leads to wisdom. Using this book in an academic classroom provides interesting layers of opportunity, in that students can be said to be at university on a similar path, a pursuit of wisdom. This paper will explore the complexity and value of using 'Wisdom Sits in Places' to simultaneously teach about the people of Cibecue and their way of finding and making wisdom, and also give students their own set of tools as they attempt to find and make wisdom. Using an epistemological approach from an undergraduate course, "Place and Identity", this paper will present what it means to teach about a place, to teach a place, and to teach the concept of place all at the same time. Multiple intersections of place, knowledge, and people (folk) will be explored.

Introduction

Folk, Knowledge, Place kicks off a scholarly exploration of the intersections between and among the three items in the journal's title. Often, those who do research on culture bring their analytical tools to bear on the knowledge of the groups of people that they study. A certain group of people (a folk) have a particular and interesting sort of understanding (the knowledge) about somewhere they live or know (the place). There is enormous value in such research, of course, and I am in no way critiquing those projects. Indeed, I find them intriguing and intellectually stimulating. However, I hope here to shine a little light on another form of knowledge that many scholars of culture are engaged with: teaching and learning. Folklore has by now been perceived and studied as a topic and discipline of teaching for many decades (e.g., Davidson, 1955; Dorson, 1950; Jorgensen, 2021). It is easy enough to simply view a classroom as a folk group: Alan Dundes (1980) would doubtless approve. But by taking a step further, pedagogical value can be found in the intersections of folk, knowledge, and place as well.

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In this article, I want to explore my own use of Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), to teach concepts of place and identity in one of my undergraduate courses. In this class, and with this text, I find a nexus wherein teaching about places and teaching the concept of place interweave and inform one another in ways deeper than I realized or intended when designing the course.

A truly teachable academic book about culture is a rare and precious thing. Many academics are excellent researchers. Many are excellent theorists. Many more are excellent writers. Comparatively few are all of the above, and it takes an intersection of great research, deep theorizing, and clear and communicative writing to produce a book with the greatest potential for the classroom. This issue is even more evident in the undergraduate classroom, where students likely do not have a wealth of disciplinary experience or knowledge to bring to bear on interpreting a text. In such cases, the writing becomes especially important in making a book teachable. Happily, there are many, many examples of eminently teachable books on culture: *Friction* (2005) by Anna Tsing, *When Species Meet* (2007) by Donna Haraway, *Making* (2013) by Tim Ingold, *Eating in Theory* (2021) by Annemarie Mol, *Being Human* (2001) by Anna Peterson, and scores more. Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* is another example of an incredibly teachable book.

The Course

The course in which I use *Wisdom Sits in Places* is a third-year undergraduate course titled "Place and Identity." The course's main aims include teaching students to think critically and theoretically about the concept of place, and how it intersects with and informs people's understandings of who they are. The course is part of my institution's general education sequence, the Core Curriculum. The Core is a four-year, completely interdisciplinary and integrative liberal arts and cultural studies curriculum. Every course is designed to draw on multiple disciplinary frames to explore various topics and equip students with a full set of competencies such as analysis, global and cultural understanding, and communication. Arcing across all the Core courses is an effort to teach students to think critically and theoretically. "Place and Identity" fits into that sequence in the third year, first semester, when students have gained a significant ability to analyze texts, formulate theorized understandings, and should be ready to combine conceptual tools to build deeper analyses, as well as stretching to turn those analytical tools onto themselves, and critically evaluate their own identities.

This turn, from using tools to analyze someone or something else to using those tools to analyze oneself, is a higher hill to climb than is often given acknowledgement in higher educational settings. There are several layers of bravery involved. In a US setting, the first bravery is transcending the standard American primary and secondary education norms, wherein the student's role is to replicate content. Students are mostly trained to point at correct answers in varying ways, while to goals of "Place and Identity" involve

students making their own knowledge, rather than seeking information and pointing to it. Learning to take on the power and responsibility of being a knowledge maker requires one step of bravery. The next layer of bravery required of the students is to become exploratory, to embrace process rather than product. Much of the educational norm, as well as the general cultural norm, my students have experienced is a very US-centric, goal-oriented norm. The rise of the "creator," the "maker," as an identity badge to display is predicated on an end product being produced as a fully self-justifying end. I make, therefore I am, or more accurately in their cultural context, I make, therefore I am valid. The students are steeped in a cultural norm that to produce something is the best and maybe only way to find validity. Delving into a university course where their goal and purpose is to engage in a process rather than produce a product requires another step of bravery, especially as higher education becomes increasingly commodified and product becomes paramount. A last step of bravery is needed to turn analytical tools onto oneself, as the insulating layers of studying some other (a classic trope in studying culture and historically) provide a sense of safety, a comfort of distance.

Ultimately, "Place and Identity" when done right provides students with a theory toolkit to understand how place as a cultural concept is useful and used to shape people's identities, and then requires students to turn those tools onto their own senses of place and their own identities. Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* is particularly suited to this task, as it provides entrée into a wealth of theory tools and then walks the reader through a group of people's use of those tools to pursue self-knowledge and contextual understanding. The pursuit part is vital, as the book does not present wisdom as a destination. Rather, it shows us many times how the process of traveling toward wisdom is more important than any arrival. In that way, it reflects the goals of the course.

The Text

Wisdom Sits in Places is an ethnography of the intersection of narratives, place, and wisdom among the people of Cibecue, a Western Apache community in what is now called Arizona in the United States. The book is made up of several separate essays that Basso wrote over a period of years, which have been edited and molded together into one, coherent analysis of the book's topic. The four main analytical chapters each follow the author's interactions with one member of the Cibecue community, and relate one incident or episode that highlights a particular aspect of the relationships among narratives, place, and wisdom. Through the chapters, the reader discovers various ways that the Western Apache people use places, place names, and stories to help them become wise. The land in and around Cibecue is peppered with named places. The names of the places are descriptive of the physical landscape and referential to stories that are widely known among the community. To name a place can simply be to index that location, but depending on the cultural context, naming a place can

also convey the story, and any meanings that story can carry. Because of the intimate relationships among place, place name, story, and meanings, the places are viewed as a sort of repository of those meanings. But according to Basso, the idea of a repository is too static, as the places and stories inhabit one another, and the real work of meaning making rests with the person who names a place and the person who hears the place name. It is a dynamic process, one that relies on the human making of the meaning of the story and applying it usefully to the situation at hand.

Originally written separately, it is remarkable how thoroughly and thoughtfully the four chapters flow together and build on one another to make for a complete analysis. One of the elements that conduces to this coherence and sense of connection is a progressive tour through Basso's own learning process. In essence, he takes us along on his own journey from comparative ignorance to knowing a bit more of how the Western Apache think about place, narrative, and meaning. His humility and upfront presentation of his own growth from unaware to aware to understanding models a student's own process of learning.

Being intellectually humble is not as common as it should be among academics, and actually writing oneself in a humble way is far less common, so for students to read Basso's self-effacing presentation of his own ignorance is a refreshing jolt. To then see his narration of being taught by the Western Apache, putting himself explicitly into their shoes as learner, provides the validation that many students (and teachers) are not aware is at the heart of student resistance to learning. They see themselves in Basso and several of the people of Cibecue that we meet in *Wisdom Sits in Places*, and so their journey to seek wisdom becomes relatable. The relationship between Basso and the different people who are the focus of each chapter is not clearly structured as top-down teacher to learner. It is undeniable that the four people in the chapters (Charles Henry in the first chapter, then Nick Thompson, Lola Machuse, and finally Dudley Patterson) know more than Basso. There is a very definite hierarchy between the author and each of them, in terms of who has information, knowledge, and wisdom, and who does not (Basso, in every chapter). The hierarchy is not structural or aggressive though, and the relationships more closely resemble a mentor/mentee situation than a teacher/student. This is, of course, always the case in ethnographic research, but it is all too rare for the ethnographer to make the relationship so explicit on the page, let alone weave it into the fabric of the ethnographic presentation as thoroughly and powerfully as Basso did in *Wisdom Sits in Places*.

As each chapter passes, the book builds a narrative of progressive learning. Basso learns about some new aspect of names, places, and wisdom within each chapter. Over the course of the book, these aspects build onto one another to become more than the sum of their parts. By seeing how the different aspects interact with and inform one another, Basso learns important elements of how the people of Cibecue understand wisdom and

what it means to be wise. Each chapter, each lesson, builds onto the last, rather than just sitting side-by-side. In pedagogical terms, this is called scaffolding, and it is an intentional design element of a course when used. The fact that the chapters of *Wisdom Sits in Places* started as separate essays and were brought together later makes the seeming intentionality of the scaffolded learning presented through the course of the book remarkable.

The Theory Tools

There are several theoretical frames woven into *Wisdom Sits in Places*. The first theory that the reader encounters in the book is the concept of place-making, which Basso (1996) refers to as a "type of retrospective world-building" (p. 5). Using an anecdote from the life of Neils Bohr, Basso explains that the physical structure of Kronborg Castle in Helsingør, Denmark, which was the basis for the setting of Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, is a separable entity from the literary Elsinore. Basso is not arguing that they are separate because one is a literary fiction and the other a physical reality. Instead, the two entities of Kronborg and Elsinore are both there as Bohr walks around the castle, but it is his application of the idea from Shakespeare's play that turns the physical location, the stones and halls, into a *place*, a thing made by the human mind.

In his explanation of place-making as a theory tool, Basso puts the emphasis on making, on the human activity of taking a location and *doing* something with it. This focus on the human activity, the experiential, transforms the approach to place from one that is about places as static object or even location, and shifts the emphasis to a diachronic and perpetual process. Places are not simply somewhere. They do not exist in any meaningful way outside of the people taking those places and making meaning of them and with them. An emphasis on human process is fundamental to Basso's discipline of cultural anthropology, of course, and the framing of it as making is well known (*e.g.*, Ingold, 2013). Ingold's book, *Making* (2013), delves deeply into culture as a design process, demonstrating that important parts of what humans have and do takes place in their conceptualization and interpretation of those things had and done, that the two processes are inextricable:

> We cannot make the future, however, without also thinking it. What then is the relation between thinking and making? To this, the theorist and the craftsman would give different answers. It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that the one *makes through thinking* and the other "*thinks through making*." (p. 6, emphases in original)

Because thinking and making are so intimately tied into one another, in order to fully understand what the Western Apache people do with their places, we need to explore how they think of, and think with, their places. Therefore, in order to make sense of the paradigm of culture as design, one

cannot ignore the next theory that is vital to understanding (and teaching) *Wisdom Sits in Places*, epistemology. The social scientific understanding of epistemology is that it is a frame, a perspective, a viewpoint through which knowledge is made. Different epistemologies (what sometimes get called epistemes to differentiate them from the use of the term epistemology in the field of philosophy) shape not just what we know, but how we know, by providing shaping boundaries and influences even before we attempt to make the knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus* comes into play here, in his description of the *habitus* as a set of "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (p. 72). Peering through Bourdieu's French sociological writing style, we can see that the *habitus* is a set of norms, values, experiences, education, knowledge, etc. that we use when we decide what something is to us. Any new phenomenon encountered by someone needs to be given a meaning, a definition or at least an understanding. The set of things we carry around with us is all we have as potential frames of reference, so the *habitus* becomes the referents, shaped (structured) by our previous experiences, and then used in turn for shaping (structuring) what we encounter next.

Some neuroscience research has suggested that the process of assigning meaning is fundamentally human, maybe even definitional to being human, and that the brain's primary function is to assign meaning. David Linden, professor of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University, argues that the brain is essentially a meaning making machine in his 2007 book, *The Accidental Mind*. Each chapter of this book explains a cultural phenomenon through the neurochemical and electrical processes of the brain, from sensory perception and memory to emotion and dreams. Linden's basic thesis is that the brain takes in stimuli from all sorts of sources (including itself, in the case of dreams), and processes them into some sort of coherent narrative that it then spits back out at us. Coherence does not exist in the stimuli, or even in the phenomena that create the stimuli, but in the brain's narrating, filling in of gaps, making connections whether valid or not, and then presenting that narrative back to us in the form of a dream, a sensation, a memory, or an emotion. Set next to Basso's anecdote about Neils Bohr and Kronborg Castle, it is easy to see the parallels, for they are reflections of the same process – the human making and applying of meaning.

Implicit in the connection between Bohr and Linden is the realization that knowledge and meaning are synonymous terms. To know whether one is standing in Kronborg Castle or Elsinore Castle is to decide which meaning, the geographic or the literary, is more meaningful in the moment. Clifford Geertz (1973) provides the link between knowledge and meaning in his famous phrase, "webs of significance" (p. 5), where he emphasizes the human process of making meaning. If one imagines the webs as something akin to Bourdieu's *habitus*, though, and pictures it as an actual web, the points of intersection among the web's strands become bits of knowledge. We know something the way we know it partially because of what it is (if we grant

that it has an ontological existence outside of us, although that's not even necessary), but largely because of where in our webs of significance it has become entangled. What parts of our *habitus* we bring to bear on assigning it a meaning become the nodes of intersection that surround that particular spot in the web, the strands and intersections that it adjoins. What a thing means and what a thing is become coterminous categories, so knowledge and meaning become synonyms.

The framing of knowledge and meaning as synonyms rankles many because it crosses a perceived boundary between known and felt, fact and opinion, ontological and epistemological. That boundary is an illusion, though, and the dichotomies false. As Lange (2023) argues in a special issue of *Digest* on pedagogy:

> any ontology is rooted in a culturally and intellectually situated frame, an epistemology. It is not that pursuits of ontological understanding are useless, just that ontological truths of any value always fall down when moved around enough cultural contexts, and inevitable variations or violations of their ontological truth value are found. Ontological universality is limited in its useful scope; it has a boundary, which sort of ruins its sense of universality. Epistemology, with its lack of reliance in universality and the concomitant power struggles of whose reality is really real, offers a chance, a faint possibility that we might try to say something interesting and useful about people without needing that interesting and useful thing to carry the weight of universal truth. I've long found the search for universality in knowledge to be a bit needy and insecure. It is like the loudmouth at the end of the bar or on the campaign trail, who is not confident enough in what they say and so keeps saying it until everyone else nods along. It is a weak position that constantly needs external validation. Epistemological approaches, which care about knowledge and meaning as human activities and artifacts, do not need the validation from everywhere else that they really are real, and are therefore freed from the craven insecurity of ontological universality. (para. 1)

Anna Tsing, in her brilliant book, *Friction* (2005), explores some of the roots of ontological universality, particularly in the hard sciences. Her contention is that the ontological universality present in the sciences is a leftover, patterned on the perceived universality of deity: "The universality of God and the universality of Nature are historically connected; in the European Renaissance, the stirrings of modern science conceived the latter on the model of the former" (p. 88). One of the foundational assumptions of Tsing's book is that universals exist, at least as cultural constructs that are widely used. Humans are "stuck with universals created in cultural

dialogue" (p. 1), so instead of rejecting them as a notion, we should explore and understand what they are. And universals are cultural, framed and understood through epistemological lenses. So again, the supposed line between fact and feeling blurs, as the facts that science gives are completely real and valid...within the frames that science sets up. In other words, they are universally true within the bounded universe of that particular epistemology. The bits of knowledge are meanings made and applied.

When reading through *Wisdom Sits in Places*, all of these theory tools can be brought to bear to make sense of the Western Apache understandings of place and meaning. Because of the emphasis that the people of Cibecue place on the participants, the namer of a place and the receiver of an uttered place name, which can both be the same person, as the Western Apache often will internally reflect on places and names, what one person describes to Basso (1996) as "rid[ing] that way in my mind" (p. 46), the process by which those participants make meaning must be explored. So, *habitus* and epistemology, universality and cultural context, and webs of significance all come together to reveal that places are the result of making. What several people described to Basso as places and their associated stories "working on you" (p. 59) is the internal process of meaning making being made explicit and conscious. Locations become places when people make and assign meaning and knowledge to them. And the Western Apache people's awareness of these connections is at the heart of Basso's text. The people of Cibecue are expected, in whatever capacity they have, to make and apply meanings to the places that surround them, and in so doing, to become wiser. For them, to teach and learn wisdom is to teach and learn places. As one of Basso's friends and ethnographic sources of wisdom, Dudley Patterson, told him, the country around Cibecue contained "many good places. Try to hold onto them. It's good. You could learn a lot" (p. xvi). As Dudley Patterson presents it, holding onto places provides an opportunity to learn. It is precisely because the places are repositories of meaningful stories that holding onto them gives such an opportunity, but as any classroom teacher knows, providing the opportunity is not enough – the student must also actively engage, run what is available through their *habitus* and epistemologize it, in order to learn. The human process of meaning making remains at the fore.

The Pedagogy

Teaching the concept of place through *Wisdom Sits in Places* is merely a matter of applying all of these theory tools to the text. There are many ways to do so, but however it happens, when students encounter the text and these theories, then a greater understanding of how the people of Cibecue understand place and meaning unfolds for them. My own approach is a sort of "throw the kids into the deep end of the pool" form of teaching. On the surface, it may sound like a lazy form of "tough love" attitude, but what I try to do is a reflection of what Tim Ingold (2013) talks about at the beginning of *Making*, talking about his Saami informants whose approach to learning was to drop him into the deep end, where:

> they wanted me to understand that the only way one can really know things – that is, from the very inside of one's being – is through a process of self-discovery. To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are. Had my companions offered formal instruction by explaining what to do, I would have had only the pretence of knowing, as I would find out the moment I tried to do as I was told. The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of knowledge, let alone understanding. Things, as proverbial wisdom has it, are easier said than done. (p. 1)

The "self-discovery" that Ingold is talking about here is not a discovery *of the self*, but a discovery *for oneself*. What he describes among the Saami in Finland mirrors the need for involvement that the people of Cibecue expect from community members when using places to seek wisdom. It mirrors what education often refers to as experiential learning, although that term is too often confined to hands-on, physical involvements by students. Active engagement can take place within the confines of a walled classroom, too, though, and thinking and theorizing can be experiential.

Simply assigning a chunk of the text and asking the students what stood out as interesting or confusing or important often provides opportunities for valuable classroom discussion. The readability of Basso's writing means that the text itself is not too intimidating, which helps students be brave and clear those hurdles of feeling invalidated. When they read the book, they understand at least parts of it, and so their defenses are not as strongly in place when they come into the classroom. Of course, being explicit about expectations helps, including making it very clear that they are not expected to understand the reading inside and out after merely reading it on their own. Discussing the text together will allow the class to build understandings as a group, and the perception of strength in numbers further affords students some bravery.

As they discuss the text they read, students inevitably bump into the theory tools listed above (and many more). They do not have the terminology or the vocabulary, but the ideas contained within the theories are available to them. The teacher's job becomes to recognize when the students have bumped into a theory by another name ("that's based on her point of view" is a window onto epistemology, for example, or "he was brought up with those values" opens up the concept of *habitus*). Once found, the theory is named, discussed further, and then conversation turns back to the text so the new theory tool can be applied. The emphasis on the process is key. Student perceptions of their role shift from 'provider of correct answer' to 'explorer, player around with ideas'. Divested of the responsibility of using their vocal cords only to provide a right answer, students gain another layer of bravery.

The progressive process of learning by doing, and that the doing is more important than the thing done, is a reflection of the progress toward wisdom for the Western Apache people, and also Basso's progression in the text as

he moves from comparative ignorance to greater understandings. By showing us the process he himself went through to get a little smarter than he was when he started, Basso shows the readers (in this case, the students) that the process of getting smarter has value. By making it clear that for the people of Cibecue wisdom is not a destination but a journey, *Wisdom Sits in Places* shows the reader and student that the process not only has value, but is more valuable as a goal than trying to reach a particular bit of wisdom or spot where they can declare themselves wise. By shaping my own pedagogy around the same assumptions, and constructing a class and classroom wherein those assumptions are reinforced and made canon, I am able to make several tracks reflections of one another: the Western Apache path to wisdom, Basso's narrative of his own learning, and the students' developmental process.

Basso's use of the term place-making shows place to be a result of knowledge making. As discussed before, the places and the meanings attached to them are inextricable for the Western Apache. But they are not static; that inextricability is only visible and useful if a person entangles themselves into that complex set of things too. Through the theory sets that I describe above, knowledge and meaning become understandable as synonyms, so to make a place is to make knowledge, and to make knowledge is to make meaning. Students come into classrooms (at least they are supposed to come into classrooms) to get smarter. The definition of getting smarter that I like to use is becoming more able to make one's own knowledge. If learning about places becomes learning about place, which necessitates learning about place making, then I am learning about meaning making and knowledge making.

The course, "Place and Identity" is nominally about place, at least in significant part. However, by embracing the Western Apache understanding that place is a result of human action, human meaning making, I am able to teach students about place as an epistemological process. I make no claims to the depth of knowledge and wisdom that the people in the book, such as Charles Henry or Lola Machuse, have, and I will not pretend that I am able to deliver anything like that to my students through the course of my semester with them. I merely have found some value in shaping my pedagogy in ways influenced by what Basso has shared with us about the people of Cibecue and himself. The purpose of the classroom is to provide students the maximum opportunity to get smarter, if they engage and do their part, if they let the class "work on them." But, like the people of Cibecue, they have to do their part. By also embracing the concept that places are not just locations separate from human action, and that they are repositories of wisdom and knowledge, but only if we know how to, and then actually do, engage with them, I am able to teach my students about the places in the book, and to teach them theories of place, and to teach them how to learn, all simultaneously. When they let go of the craven need for ontological surety and embrace the value of epistemological exploration, they find their own little path toward wisdom.

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