'This is not my story...or is it?: Map- and meaning-making in an urban, post-industrial community

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Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

Overview
This paper is a case study of an on-going project begun in the later-half of 2008, involving the development of a community-based reading group and a subsequent map-making project around Thomas Bell's historical novel, *Out of This Furnace* (1976). The project, conducted in Braddock, Pennsylvania, USA (the site of Bell's novel), was designed to encourage local residents' reflection on their current social, economic and political realities in light of Braddock's not-too-distant and not-to-different past.

The SCUTREA has had a strong interest in urban, post-industrial communities. This work expands the discussion to include the use of local historical fiction (an abundance of which exists surrounding the steel industry in the northeast US) as a catalyst for community-building. Furthermore, this work was been enhanced by tangibly documenting the community's history with the creation of a literary map using Google Maps on-line application; as well as by holding discussions concurrently with the working-class Unseam’d Shakespeare Company’s stage production of *Out of This Furnace*.

This work utilises Freirian problem-posing and reflective questioning to encourage project participants examination of their own positionalities from a socio-historical frame. In short, it instigates a more lengthy reflective process by asking participants, 'Is this your history'? and if not, 'what and where is your story'?

Freire in Braddock
The town of Braddock, Pennsylvania (unofficially renamed 'Braddocc' by local youth who dropped the 'k' replacing it with a 'c' to affirm the town's connection to the Crips street gang) is the quintessential post-industrial community. The website for Braddock mayor, John Fetterman, describes Braddock as 'malignantly beautiful' (braddocc n.d., para. 2).

Home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, the massive Edgar Thomson Works, Braddock was at its earliest a destination for Irish and Eastern
Europeans seeking 'the American Dream'. Oppressive working conditions resulted in the struggle for labour organisation and, ultimately, led to the community's glory years of the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, Braddock boasted a vibrant downtown and a population of some 20,000 residents. Oddly, however, this prosperity--embodied in the automobile and the union's ability to negotiate high wages--resulted in residents leaving Braddock, moving to the newly formed suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. But while this outmigration wounded the town, its death blow came in the 1980s with the full-scale collapse of the US steel industry. All along the Monongahela River, mills closed, including the Homestead Works, just downriver from Braddock, which terminated all its 12,000 workers.

Braddock's population currently stands at about 2,000 residents--lower than it was before Carnegie and his mill arrived in the 1870s. The community has a large minority population and a reputation for violence and drug use. Recently, however, Braddock has been the site of some interest--interest inspired by both its devastation and its possibility. Since his election in 2005 (by the margin of a single vote), Mayor John Fetterman has been a powerful presence in the community. An imposing man at 6-foot-8, 325 pounds, with shaved head and black goatee, Fetterman has actively promoted the community as a 'laboratory for solutions to all these maladies starting to knock on the door of every community' (Streitfeld 2009, para. 5). As a result, Braddock is now home to a small but growing artist community, a burgeoning bio-fuel business and an urban farming project done in conjunction with Pennsylvania's Cooperative Extension Service.

Our reading project was designed to remain as free as possible of non-community demands beyond the broad goal of discussing Braddock's rich past as a means to better understand and more effectively participate in its very uncertain present (i.e., it was conducted without institutional affiliations and the structures of time and definitions of 'success' they typically impose). To that end, Freire's (1994, 1996) problem-posing strategies appeared to offer a logical means for moving beyond the mere accumulation of historic fact toward 'a critical consciousness of one’s place and potential in the world' (Findsen 2007, p. 546). Such work is 'a process of inquiry and creation, an active and restless process that human beings undertake to make sense of themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two' (Gordon 2009, p. 53). It is a process of meaning-making.

About the text
Thomas Bell's Out of This Furnace chronicles three generations of Slovaks as they struggle to build lives in the shadow of Andrew Carnegie's mill. While working only a short time in the steel industry, Bell (born Adalbert Thomas Belejčak in 1903) was, however, immersed in the culture it produced--ethnic communities crowded into tenement housing constructed in the shadows of massive steel-making operations and heavily traveled rail lines; the
cacophony of languages, smells and traditions; the suffocating heat of summer and penetrating cold of winter; the vulnerability of work and health. Yet Bell was also conscience of the shared strength these communities developed--the pride of work, the love of family, the responsibilities of friendship and kinship, and the promise of a life that could be improved through struggle, organisation and no small measure of luck.

*Out of This Furnace* was first published in 1941 to little acclaim and had been many years out of print when in 1976 David Demerest, a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, resurrected the text and convinced the University of Pittsburgh Press to reissue it. Since that time, *Out of This Furnace* has grown in popularity, particularly among local residents interested in Pittsburgh’s industrial past. The demise of the US steel industry in the 1980s resulted in local attempts to preserve the area’s industrial landmarks as redevelopment projects crept into the Monongahela Valley. Such tension continues to this day, as post-industrial communities like Braddock struggle to remember and honor their pasts while remaining open to continued opportunities for growth and development.

*Out of This Furnace*, in chronicling the roughly 60-year period from 1880 to World War II, captures a Braddock struggling with equally powerful changes, expressing them through the individual decisions of its characters and their subsequent collective actions. In the text we see Mike learning English to advance at the mill, Dobie heading off to work in a Michigan car factory only to return and help build the union, the gradual movement of Irish and Slovak residents away from the ‘First Ward’ (to the suburbs of Pittsburgh) and their subsequent replacement by African-Americans and 'scabs' who crossed picket lines in search of work. These images of struggle, risk, failure and success provided fertile ground for discussions of contemporary Braddock.

**Convergence culture in Braddock**

As this project was being discussed, two interesting events impacted its structure and outcome. First, was the Unseam’d Shakespeare Company’s resurrection of a 1970’s stage production of *Out of This Furnace*. Originally staged in 1978 and 1979 by ‘Iron Clad Agreement’, a local, non-traditional theater company that performed their rendition of *Out of This Furnace* in union halls throughout the northeastern US (Carter 2008, para. 7), Unseam’d would be offering an adaptation of the production in Pittsburgh’s theater district during the tenure of our project.

Second was our 'misreading' of a call for proposals from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for the creation of 'Literary Maps'. NCTE was looking for maps pointing out the hometowns of famous authors (Kindkead 1994). What was envisioned for this project, however, was a detailed, street-level map of an actual story. The NCTE request raised the question of whether such a detailed map had ever been attempted and a search yielded something similar developed by the *New York Times* and published as a
'literacy map of Manhattan' (Cohen 2005). Since then, GoogleLitTrips, using its sister application Google Earth, has plotted works of literature throughout the world (Burg, 2009).

Both the Unseam’d production and the concept of developing a literary map for Out of This Furnace allowed for the tangible expansion and enhancement of ideas being presented, sometimes more subtly, in the text. For example, during rehearsal for the Unseam’d production, the audience was encouraged to offer suggestions for improving the performance—to comment on what a 19th century Slovak immigrant might do to gain good luck (a physical expression of which was called for in the scene) or how the phrase ‘is with another’, used in the text to refer to pregnancy, might be altered so a more contemporary audience (many of whom would likely not have read the book) would understand the reference.

In particular, the mapping exercise allowed for an exploration of the relationship between the characters and their geographic space—‘the relationship of person to environment that is evolved, often in a communal way, by particular settings’ (Hutchinson 2004, p. 14). Since the mapping of past events was plotted on a contemporary satellite image, it prompted reflection on the political, social, and economic factors that underlie demographic shifts and changes in land use; how communities see one another and segregate/aggregate themselves around geographic forms, both built (roads, schools, hospitals) and natural (rivers, mountains, lowlands).

**Process**

The majority of participants were recruited to this project through fliers placed in the lobby of the Unseam’d Shakespeare company’s production of Out of This Furnace. One participant came after hearing about the group through her ethnic benevolent society; another after learning of it through the Carnegie Library in Braddock where all our meetings were held. While the group ebbed and flowed, the number of participants never exceeded ten.

The majority were local, middle-aged, African-American women. One worked as a dispatcher at the U.S. Steel Homestead Works; another had a deep interest in the Carpatho-Russyn culture of most of the text's characters. All participants, however, shared a sense of surprise that a book set in Braddock even existed. Our group met every Monday evening for just over a month, using books donated by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Sessions were typically open and casual, with participants bringing friends, and friends, subsequently, bringing additional friends. For several sessions, three generations of one family participated.

Moving through the book, participants were encouraged to discuss the sections they found relevant, often reading aloud portions of particular interest. Interestingly, the book was initially seen as complete fiction—stories
fundamentally removed and disconnected from the participants’ own lived experience. This is not surprising, perhaps, given the destruction pervasive in Braddock. Many of the book’s landmarks are gone. No longer do crowds gather on Washington Avenue or stroll to Saturday dances at Turner Hall. The mill’s whistle long ago ceased to signal the coming and going of shifts; the clamor of railcars, the voices of children playing in the streets, the smells of halushki, frying pork and coffee have all vanished from the tenements and alleyways.

Such observations of absence provided the perfect opportunity to pose questions regarding Braddock’s present state. They offered logical points of departure for conversations on how and why communities appear and vanish, how the personal and communal play out in contemporary society, and what forces (political, economic or geographic) impact and are impacted by our commitment to collective action. For example, an old postcard of Library Street painted in the early 20th century created an opportunity to discuss how much has changed. Front-and-center within this image was a Model-T Ford car. Our discussion soon narrowed to how personal transportation allowed steel workers to move away from Braddock and commute from outside areas. Two prominent buildings within the painting have been demolished and turned into parking lots, another footnote that chronicled our society’s infatuation with vehicles and mobility.

**Observations**

As noted earlier, this project commenced with a commitment to action and reflection. The planning resonated with Brookfield’s observation that planners are “practical theorists” who must use their intuition to make judgments about what to do in specific contexts’ (as cited in Cervero & Wilson 1994, p. 19). While we had some sense of Braddock and the surrounding area, the commitment was to allowing sufficient flexibility to entertain new ideas, new participants and the possibility that collectively this group would be smarter than any of us would be individually. While Freire’s techniques and our commitment to the power of story and dialogue drove the process, several significant issues also impacted the work.

*‘Is this your history’*

The collective response to our question, ‘is this your history’, was, at least initially, a resounding ‘no’. Braddock has been so profoundly changed since World War II and the participants so thoroughly removed from its pre-World War II past that the novel might well have been placed in another location entirely. Over time, however, Bell’s attention to detail and rich imagery opened the readers’ eyes to the possibility that Braddock had, indeed, been this vibrant, albeit brutally hard place where thousands laboured and lived. Nevertheless, it took some time to actually move conversations away from the text as fiction toward discussion of the text as history. This was particularly so with attempts to meaningfully link the past and present in Braddock. Bell
described the discrimination that plagued immigrants upon their arrival to Braddock. He also wrote about how quick those immigrants turned against African-Americans. This led to discussions of how easy it is to turn on 'others'. The majority of our participants were neither white nor Eastern European, and our talk often centered on the hate and distrust that runs through contemporary Braddock.

The challenge of structure…or lack thereof
Perhaps the most difficult aspect of using story as a means to promote discussion and reflection was the challenge posed by drop-ins and the struggle for inclusion, unity and momentum. As noted earlier, the number of participants on any given night never exceeded ten; nevertheless, a segment of these participants was always new to the group, making references to the novel and past conversations awkward. Much time was spent explaining sections of the text or retelling personal yet related stories—a process that often limited the stories' initial power or the emotions conjured up at its first telling (or reading). The difficulty of incorporating new participants, however, was always viewed in light of the unique voices they brought to the mix and the potential their presence had to unleash dialogue concerning current communal life in Braddock. One such drop-in, a 20-year old female, knew only post-industrial Braddock and had no memories of it as a bustling steel town. Within our group (if not the entire Pittsburgh region), there was a hesitancy to talk about the downfall of the steel industry (1960-1980). Even though she only attended two sessions, her thoughts and observations subsequently focused our discussion on that particular era.

In addition, Freire’s problem-posing method required a patience and persistence that was not fully anticipated. Like any technique, it was expected that our skills would improve over time, but this first attempt was particularly slow-going and forced. With only five, one-hour sessions, it was often difficult to juggle book discussion, new participants, and serious reflection on the community. With such a transient group, issues of safety (Vella 1994) also changed the climate. It appeared that with new faces attending each week, participants were less likely to speak their minds. Freirean dialogue also takes enormous patience and facilitation skill. Asking hard questions of strangers about their own environment requires a level of confidence that was not fully realized.

The power of mapping
Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this project uncovered the power of map-making as a catalyst for discussions of power and community. Maps (literary or otherwise) have historically been used by the powerful to create images that are typically free of conflict and feign equity and unity (Sen 2007). Maps in the hands of those seeking to physically represent lived experiences can be a powerful and sobering tool.
For this project, we found that maps offered a truly profound way of juxtaposing Braddock’s industrial and post-industrial eras. The majority of structures discussed in the text are now gone or in shambles. Using Google Map’s ‘map’ view of Braddock presents a town much like any other town, with little more than named and numbered streets. The ‘terrain’ view reveals Braddock’s proximity to the Monongahela River and the elevation changes that stretch away from the mill and up into North Braddock. The ‘satellite’ view, however, offers more. From the air, we see vacant lots, roofless buildings, and the environmental assault caused by the mill and its subsidiaries. This is the view we used for our work—the view not often used for literary mapping…an uncompromising view…a cluttered and angry view. Braddock in all its malignant beauty.

Much to the dismay of professional map makers, practitioners of what is being called ‘radical cartography’ (Mogel & Bhaget 2007) are wresting the power of mapping from its staid and institutional moorings. Fueled by access to applications like Google Earth and Google Maps and a vast array of cultural data available in electronic form, visual artists, activist educators and community groups are creating images of the world as they exist in all their messiness; documenting in powerful ways the social and environmental changes that often lay hidden in more traditional communal representations. Such map-making provides adult educators with a powerful tool to instigate reflection and action.

The Google Maps application, both free and easy to use, was suggested by a local map maker as the best way to complete our work. This application allowed for photograph uploads, satellite imaging, and a public comment section. All plotting participants found it easy to use after little practice. Zeroing in on exact points using the book alone proved difficult. Since the book’s publication, the mill overtook 12th and 13th Streets--areas where much of the book took place. Fire insurance maps and old business directories supplemented passages in the text. We walked Braddock’s alleys and streets in an attempt to find buildings (sometimes only finding foundations). This allowed all participants to become familiar with not just the paper and computer models of Braddock, but also the physical structure of the town.

Outcomes
This work helped to impress and enhance our understanding of:

- Historical fiction as a reflective tool for community-based discussions of current experience—it’s challenges and opportunities.
- The power of current mapping technologies to provide visual representations of social and environmental changes that, in turn, can spur discussions of political power and potential communal action.
- The power (and difficulty) of using Freire’s problem-posing method to enliven community discourse and instigate individuals and communities to reflection on and resistance of oppressive structures.
Currently, discussions are underway to offer a second *Out of This Furnace* reading group. In addition, various community organizations have voiced an interest in using other local authors, including playwright August Wilson and novelists John Edgar Wideman and Michael Chabon to form reading groups and mapping projects in the Hill District, Homewood, and Squirrel Hill sections of Pittsburgh where their respective works are set.

The 'really useful research' contained in this project is that literature, geography, and education can come together to begin the process of rebuilding community. These beginnings are humble, but they allowed neighbors to get together and look at their community in a different light. It also allowed those participants who had left the community to look at their own history within Braddock, past and present. Thomas Bell described a part of our history; the remaining pages are ours to write.

**References**

Bell T (1976) *Out of this furnace*, Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press.


*This document was added to the Education-Line database on 23 June 2009*