

Book Review

Line Dancing: An Atlas of Geography Curriculum and Poetic Possibilities. Wanda Hurren. New York: Peter Lang, 2000, 176 pages.

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Singing Our Way Through the World

In Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (Penguin Books, 1988) the author documents the ability of Australian Aboriginals to travel great distances relying on songlines: essentially landscape maps in song form. As they journey through the outback, Aboriginal travelers literally sing their way through the countryside. This same living cartography can be seen among the Innu of Canada's North. At an early age Innu children are taught mnemonic songs called *oya-yait*, which recall lengthy sequences of distinctive man-made markers or *Inukshuk*. By chanting these songs Innu navigate the harsh terrain of the Canadian Arctic. For both the Innu and Australian Aboriginals, the modernist division that tends to separate self from place does not exist. Instead their songlines and *oya-yait* bind them to an intensely personal relationship with their surroundings, and because these oral maps are handed down from generation to generation, they also represent a kind of living atlas in which communities situate themselves in historic as well as geologic time.

In many ways the same set of observations may be made about Wanda Hurren's fine book *Line Dancing: An Atlas of Geography Curriculum and Poetic Possibilities*. Hurren invites her readers to move beyond the traditional approach to geography education in which the landscape is rendered a neutral and essentially disembodied presence. Instead she urges teachers and students to take up an intensely personal lived curriculum of geography in which geography provides "a space that opens possibilities for poetics and agency" (p. xviii).

It is not surprising that Hurren turns to the arts in the service of what she notes as her desire "to transform the present state of school geography curriculum" (p. xiii). In literature a rich alternate narrative has always existed to the modernist and decontextualized discourse of geography. Works as diverse as Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Men*, the short stories of Eudora Welty, Lawrence Durrell's *A Sense of Place*, Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to name a few, all represent the interconnectedness between geographic location and identity. Nor is it surprising that Hurren's background as a poet has informed her understanding of geography. Indeed, much of *Line Dancing* is

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taken up with an investigation of how geography can become what the author terms “a poetics of the world” (p. 3).

The book is divided into three chapters and a concluding supplement. The first chapter draws on poststructural semiotic theory to point out the relationship between our speech acts and the meanings they impose on the world. In a geographic context, Hurren notes that the contemporary lexicon of geography has created a particular (and constraining) view of both the discipline and the physical and human worlds it describes. In doing so, Hurren suggests the need for an alternate vocabulary of geography grounded in the language of poetry.

In Chapter 2 the author presents an analysis of existing geography curriculum in Canada, as well as recent academic works on human geography. Drawing on the work of curriculum scholars Ted Aoki and William Pinar, Hurren engages in this analysis in an attempt to reconceptualize geography as a culturally constructed “generative space” where “the self and world of curricular lines are shaped by lived experiences” (p. 36).

In Chapter 3 Hurren suggest the possibilities (both personal and curricular) that emerge for geography teaching reconceived in poetic terms. But this reconceptualization should not be viewed as an absolute rejection of existing practices in the field. As she notes,

I am not suggesting that we should erase scientific objective language from geography curriculum altogether and replace it with poetic language, but rather that we should examine the language we (teachers, students, texts) use, and make use of as many genres as possible in order to know and understand and live in the world with a sense of agency and connection. (p. 4)

The final section of the book is a brief supplement in which Hurren engages various forms of poetic writing to deconstruct playfully some of the conventions of academic writing (tables of contents, indexes). But the supplement serves a more important function: it represents in a concrete way the poetic possibilities that do emerge from using other genres to examine how we live with and in the world.

If *Line Dancing* were little more than a radical and heavily theorized critique of the existing state of geography teaching, it would have limited possibilities in terms of the author’s intent, as noted above, “to transform the present state of school geography curriculum” (p. xiii). However, Hurren moves well beyond the postmodern turn that has tended to deconstruct existing curricular metanarratives without indicating what more democratic alternatives may exist. For example, in Chapter 2, under the heading “Cool Memories and Dreams” (Parts I-VII), Hurren provides examples of classroom activities, suggestions for rewriting existing geography curricula, and assignments for preservice geography teachers. These activities, curricular suggestions, and assignments are well thought out and practical, while retaining a poststructural sensibility that celebrates the multiplicity and connectedness of human experience.

Ultimately, Hurren’s work encourages students and teachers to take up geography in its ontological rather than in its epistemological aspect. Conceived of as a way of being rather than as a way of knowing, geography does

G. Richardson

become a “poetics of the world” in which we can sing our way through a landscape of lived experience. And because she presents both an insightful critique of existing practices and sound alternatives to those practices, *Line Dancing* is an original and important addition to the field of geography teaching.