

Thoughts of a Place That Once Was Home: Reflections on hooks, Almahdi and Angelou

Chris Ryan

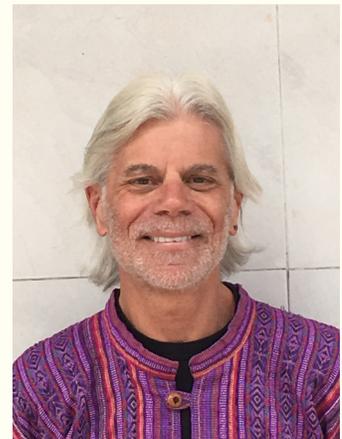
I don't use the word *home* loosely.

In fact, all of my life, I have tried to understand the meaning of home in my changing world. Even when I lived in the land of my birth, I was always looking for what bell hooks calls "home places" . . . where folks were content . . . Mama's mother made soup, dug fishing worms . . . made butter and wine and sewed quilts . . ." (hooks, 1992, p. 41.).

I have learned in my travels, my studies and my teaching that home is wherever I am loved - á table with my Québécois host Mom and Dad, in the classrooms with my students teaching in Japan, Peru and Ecuador; and in my graduate community at my alma mater in Cheney. In these "home places", I fell in love with language learning, and this love, in turn, very positively affected my feelings towards my first language as well. But the effect was bigger than this; these times were the genesis of my broadening and deepening respect for and appreciation of other cultures, as well.

Towards "radical openness"

I want to stress here that this combination of openness to other languages, to other identities, to other values, to other beliefs – to other cultures – these I believe are a critical prerequisite for an ESL teacher. This is what bell hooks calls "radical openness" (NCTE.org, 2004). Such openness does not sanitize us from the effects or the positionality of our cultural perspectives which have been formed over a lifetime of sociocultural, socio-historical, sociopolitical or socioeconomic circumstance or privilege; but it does offer us a valuable perspective from which to reflect upon differences and commonalities we meet between



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Ryan is a second language French speaker with a Bachelor's degree in Foreign Language from Central Washington University, 2008, and is currently immersed in the acquisition of the culture and language of Spanish in his home town of Cotacachi, Ecuador.

While teaching and language learning are his greatest passions, the author is also a poet and an essayist whose other activities

a host culture and the ones we bring along with us.

Another lesson we quickly learn is how different our own country begins to look from abroad, that is, through the perspectives of other languages, other media and other cultural norms. To experience our culture through such lenses can disrupt our perceptions of reality . . . and of our selves. Having now taught abroad for two and a half of the last three years, I can see with hindsight that this nearly imperceptible change has begun to radically transform my perceptions of both “home places” and epistemic spaces. The languages and the cultures of Québec, France, Japan, Peru and Ecuador have nudged me towards even more “radical openness”.

Many times, I have found myself alone, vulnerable and far from home.

Sometimes, I have been at the mercy of a language I could not bridge. Sometimes, I have been in classrooms as a student where the pedagogy and the teaching philosophy was the antithesis of that which I had experienced in the country of my birth. Sometimes, I have been expected to teach in ways which were irreconcilable with the teaching philosophy which I had cultivated in my own culture. And sometimes, I have been sorely missing trusted colleagues and mentors worlds away.

As an ESL teacher in the process of immigrating to another “home place,” I am reminded of my love for the people and the greatness of the country of my birth:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
(**Emma Lazarus**, 1883)

In a world riddled by random acts of horror, in a world where personal liberty and privacy are routinely sacrificed in the name of “public safety” and in a world held captive by fear, I call out to the country of my birth to renew its commitment to radical openness because any other choice allows fear to triumph.

include Yoga, meditation, biking and hiking in the northern Ecuadorian Andes.

Having benefitted from the guidance of Dr. Reeves, Ryan’s teaching philosophy is a natural outgrowth of the one he learned under: a student-centered approach to teaching informed by bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Carl Rogers and others, as well as, a philosophy of classroom culture and community building uniquely her own.

From the friends I have made and the teachers I have met abroad and in the land of my birth, I have learned that people are more alike than they are different. I have learned that even for me, another immigrant upon the sea, homes and hearts could open to welcome me. And I have learned that other cultures could become my home, if I could believe that home is where one is loved . . .

Bigotry, hatred, lies, misogyny, racism and xenophobia must, at every turn, be resolutely and openly dragged out into the light of day. These are not the values which have made our country great . . . these are attitudes of intolerance, divisiveness and fear. As ESL teachers and cultural brokers, we are well positioned to celebrate openness towards and tolerance of difference, and with our individual acts of resistance, we can set an example of how to reunite the discord which flows in the wake of the rhetoric of fear with our collective example.

In a recent graduate seminar at my alma mater, my colleague, Ghader Alahmadi, presented a rhetorical analysis of the poem, *Human Family*, by Maya Angelou. In her project, Alahmadi applied bell hooks' rhetorical theory that we create "symbols that resist and transform structures of domination" (Foss et al., p. 267), that is, Angelou's rhetoric of resistance with which she analyzed the prose.

Human Family

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.
Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

....

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.

We love and lose in China,
we weep on England's moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.

....

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

(Maya Angelou, 1990)

In her verse, Angelou resists the rhetoric of disunity and “structures of domination” by showing us that in spite of surface differences, the human family shares more than the genome might reveal at first glance (Angelou, M., as cited in Alahmadi, 2017). A truly great country, like the one in which I was born, must now renew its commitment to “the homeless” and “the tempest-tossed” by embracing and strengthening its own historical roots of “radical openness” in such a time of discord and uncertainty.

Acknowledgements

I would like to applaud and to thank my colleague, Ghader Alahmadi, for introducing me to this wonderful expression of hope from Maya Angelou. There will never be enough words to use, even in all of the languages in this world, to thank my mentor and my friend, Dr. LaVona Reeves, for her patient guidance and for her loving example for us as the consummate professional educator.

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