# Parents, crises and beyond. Towards school as a shared place and a more-than-human world

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**Genitori oltre la crisi. Verso una scuola come spazio condiviso e un mondo "più che umano"**

This paper presents an attempt to describe parents' activities, in which context it is puzzling that – on the basis of a negative assessment of the current reality (current crises, including the privatization of what is public) – parents seem to be searching intensively for new solutions that would make better not only the school but also the world it is a part of. Their focus, in this, is on the local dimension of activities that refer to sustainability and emphasize place. In this approach, place is a field of confrontation and constant becoming. Parental activities in one sustainable community school in Chicago is the point of departure to introduce a pedagogy of the vital place that pays specific attention to how the heritage of these places makes them (partially) resistant to capitalist capture, and somewhat ready to take on the challenges of the crisis in which we live on the planet today. The reflection presented in this article is guided by the assumption that, in these times, when the survival of humankind is at stake, we desperately need a more-than-human format of world.

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Questo articolo costituisce un tentativo di descrivere le attività dei genitori in cui ciò che sorprende — sulla base di una valutazione negativa della realtà esistente (dalle crisi in atto alla privatizzazione dei servizi pubblici) — è il fatto che i genitori sembrano intensificare la loro ricerca di nuove soluzioni che riescano a rendere migliore non solo la scuola ma anche il mondo di cui quest'ultima è parte. Il focus delle loro attività è la dimensione locale in cui centrale diviene la sostenibilità e i luoghi sono enfatizzati. Nell'approccio qui adottato, il luogo è un campo di confronto e in costante divenire. Le iniziative genitoriali portate avanti in una scuola di comunità sostenibile a Chicago costituiscono il punto di partenza per introdurre la pedagogia del luogo vitale. Quest'ultima presta particolare attenzione ai modi attraverso i quali l'eredità di questi luoghi li rende (almeno parzialmente) resistenti alla conquista capitalista e, in qualche modo, pronti a raccogliere le sfide generate dalle crisi che interessano oggi il pianeta. La riflessione qui presentata si radica nella convinzione che in questi tempi, quando è in gioco la sopravvivenza dell'umanità, abbiamo un disperato bisogno di un modello di mondo più-che-umano.

**Keywords**: Parents; Crisis; Sustainable community schools; More-tan-human world; Vital place.

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# 1.  Introduction: On assumptions and contexts

This essay is to be a reflection on the actions of parents presented in it, who clearly work to transform their children's schools into a place that not only responds to current crises (neoliberal urbanism, gentrification and climate change along with other consequences of human destructive actions on Earth), but also permanently changed in line with the understanding of the world as more than-just-human. I have noticed that parents are the important driving force behind school changes towards a place in a more-than-human world, and in this reflective paper I keep them in the center of my attention.

As a bricoleur (a *reportagist*), I first describe the local, community schools in the USA. In the name of improving the quality of education, schools embedded in the life of the local community and constituting a saturated place of its cultural heritage, intentionally ruined and consequently communities — along with their heritage — are scattered, and people deprived of places lose their roots and dignity.

In the next section, I present sustainable community education postulated by parents as the basis of a sustainable community school. Then I focus on the example of sustainable community school, describing the Little Village Lawndale High School in Chicago, the creation and sustainability of which was contributed by the parents and the teachers, among others, David O. Stovall, whose experience I reconstruct. This is one of the places that can be said to bear traces of multi-component subjectivity. In these approaches, the sustainable community school means a common, shared place which turns out to be a battlefield, but also a field of conversation, mutual arrangements of the elements that co-create it, which are and are not human. In the description, there are "haunted places" and others where subjectivity is not only a human domain, and agency is achieved in strict human and non-human configurations.

On this basis, seeing how today's — in a crisis reality — a perspective opening to more than the human world can be, this essay introduces the concept of a radical, sustainable pedagogy of the common place, which is vital, constituting a space of tenderness, sensitive to vividness, and activity of matter. In such a more-than-human place, not only is its subjective agency noticed, shared by all (we are all in this together), but also the form of ethics is realized in which responsibility for the world is shared, resulting from the assumption of sustainability, which is the unlimited life of matter (not only we parents along with our children, but we are all in this together).

The context of the paper is the current, crisis condition of the world. Some researchers, such as Pierre Rosanvallon, see its source in the deepening deficit of equality, which is acute for all social actors (2013). Referring to the collapse of climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic for the world, it can be said that the problem of the equality deficit, resulting in this overwhelming crisis today, does not only concern people.

> We live in times of multiple global crises brought to the surface by Covid-19. We face an economic crisis that has been brewing for a half-century of neoliberal policies, creating the exponential growth of inequality and the polarization of classes. Neoliberal policies have left us defenseless against global warming and all its unexpected reverberations, and defenseless against the era of pandemics. Across the planet, education and health are caught in the grip of privatization (Burawoy, 2021, p. 545).

An important ground on which the concept of this paper was created is the thought of Michael Burawoy. Paraphrasing Burawoy's approach (2021, p. 552), in which he emphasizes the current necessity of the recomposition of sociology, I make the following assumption: in these times, when the survival of humankind is at stake, we desperately need more-than-human format of world (that can be achieved especially by understanding and accepting the fact that we share our subjectivity with the places we live; that places show subjective agency) — not to dissipate but to recompose pedagogy.

Parents seem to play significant role in it. Their grass-root movements towards place-conscious education and sustainable community school indicate the need of a new direction of educational thought which should be focused on the vital place. With this urgent need in mind, I introduce further to the pedagogy of the vital place in the non-anthropocentric sense and undertake its initial conceptualization from the perspective of the idea of sustainability and the ethics resulting from it.

## 2.    Methodological issues

I start with the impression that while describing such dynamic issues — parents' strikes, etc. — I write the paper which may resemble a bricolage in which the bricoleur describes and interprets the world, finding the grounds in the snippets of the surrounding reality (*cf.* Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). On the one hand, my reflection is based on long-lasting research and analyses, and some of its elements have already been published in various papers and chapters (Mendel 2017; Mendel 2019). At the same time, I keep being inspired by the present, and the paper refers densely to "hot" material as well: to Internet sites, to magazines, as well as posters, leaflets, and the like. Their content is used as part of a broad, and hopefully vivid description of lively places like the gentrified city and the local school.

In the description I have also included data from incidental empirical research that I conducted during my academic visits and conferences in the USA. Another set of data comes from my field observation and from consultations—oral and electronic—with persons capable of supporting my understanding of culturally foreign, for me, phenomena, like charter schools in the USA. I cooperated with several persons who acted as consultants and local experts for me. I want to give my sincere thanks to them, to all colleagues who preferred to stay anonymous.

Why — apart from the Polish reality — did I choose the American reality for the analysis in this chapter? The growing tendencies in education and public schools in the USA seem to be prophetic in view of what is happening in Poland, my home country. Once, I analysed the convergences in the directions of changes and watched how what developed in the USA as a process of "charterization"[1] of public education, with a certain temporal shift and local specificity, began to appear in Poland (Mendel 2017; Mendel 2019). Regardless of the experienced return to nation-states, globalization continues and constantly means Americanization, and the problems and changes we experience in different parts of the world often originate in the American reality (Rosanvallon, 2013). My paper can be seen, in this context, as a kind of intervention writing capable, as I hope, of setting a point of departure for the pedagogy of common, vital places as the site for both theoretical reflection and place-engaged more-than-human sustainability education everywhere. I hope this is an encouraging point of departure, engaging and initiating shared thinking and cooperation for new ways of understanding being together in a place (place togetherness), where "together" refers to more than human, and "place" to school that needs to be rethought.

## 3.    Parents Towards Sustainable Community School as a Shared Place

In this paper I write about parental involvement or parent engagement. Let's explain its meaning here. Researchers, noticing the need for ties and cooperation between the school and the local community, perceive the parental milieu as important and deserving of attention in meeting this need (*cf.* Borg, 2021; Dahlstedt, 2009; Epstein, 1995; Ferlazzo, 2011). Research in this area allows for concluding that parent engagement happens as 1/parent involvement, 2/community involvement, and 3/parent engagement. Community involvement can be seen as the interpenetration of involvement and engagement, when parent involvement — which happens beyond the school, in a more broadly understood public space — is also parent engagement. Community involvement thus resolves the dilemma of involvement or engagement, often formulated by researchers of parent involvement (Ferlazzo, 2011). The parent engagement happens and takes place where parents are involved at policy level; where they participate in or

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1.    The term "charterization" comes from "charter schools", which are public schools run by non-public bodies. They operate within a special legal status that allows them a great degree of autonomy and on the basis of an agreement constituting their statute, including negotiated rules of operation. They enjoy various kinds of freedoms that distinguish them from traditional public schools, but, like them, they draw on public funds for their activities. Charterization, as described by Buras (2015), Lipman (2011; 2017), and many others, is a deep systemic transformation to diversify education and restructure school networks, which displaces people and capital outside of democratic standards and reorganizes social reality toward strengthening inequalities (many contend that, based on populist rhetoric, this is about the aggressive privatization of public education in the USA). Charterization is a for profit, ongoing reconstruction of public education in the USA that uses charter schools and the like in a broader perspective to effect structural changes that are clearly negative from the point of view of social development and are an expression of the dissolution of democracy.

support initiatives that are often professionally designed, going beyond the school. It is a way to build public support for public education (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002). Due to the meanings resulting from scientific descriptions, community involvement / engagement "happens" in certain spaces and situations and it can be seen from the perspective of a course of action which has a political dimension, because it takes place in the public space (*cf.* Davies, Burch, & Johnson, 1992). One could say that the parents I describe operate from this perspective.

Besides, I will highlight one more aspect of parental involvement which is interesting due to the content of this essay. Parents are often understood as partners in a triad with the school and the surrounding community. This approach finds its representation in Joyce L. Epstein's concept, developed in the early 1990s, which strongly emphasizes the role of parents as partners, warning against a "false" partnership that seeks secret domination (Epstein, 1995). The school is usually a dominant "partner" of subordinated parents who are especially weak as political actors (*cf.* Crozier, 1999; Crozier, 2000; Dahlstedt, 2009; Vincent, 2000). The parenting activities I describe further create a new solution that — perhaps — can break this dominant relationship framework. Concentrating on the school as a shared place produces a sense of a shared world, possibly free from subordination.

How do they do it? To answer this question, I propose an analysis of the parents' activity concentrated in the movement under the name AROS. In the very name of the AROS mentioned in this section, The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools — there is an assumption that "our", local schools are lost by "us", local communities; that local communities are losing their own schools. This loss occurs because of disrupting the locality of the school — the natural connection between the school and the place of life of students and their families; and because of progressive privatization, as well as the practical loss of the right to universal, equal education, which goes along with these processes. AROS is created by many American organizations, representing over seven million citizens, among them there are mostly parents, organized in various associations. AROS is an expression of the action of a grassroots social movement, in an alliance that pursues the goal of cooperation for the recovery of schools. This recovery explicitly points to a place that the reclaimers do not want to lose and are ready to fight for. The political dimension of this struggle indicates the importance of the ideological discourse engaging the issues of equal society, public education, sustainable development etc., but basically everything that happens under the banner of "to reclaim our schools" can be reduced to specific points on the map, to precisely defined places where everything that is local intersects in such the places. Ideas, thoughts, words, the whole symbolic sphere of the school recovery movement makes sense in place. It doesn't exist without it. This is reflected in the basic principle around which AROS is organized:

> Strong public schools create strong communities. Schools are community institutions as well as centers of learning. While education alone cannot eradicate poverty, schools can help to coordinate the supports and services their students and families need to thrive. Corporate reform strategies ignore the challenges that students bring with them to school each day, and view schools as separate and autonomous from the communities in which they sit.[2]

Parents *via* AROS are against ignoring challenges that "students bring with them to school each day", which tell about the unity of the school and its surroundings. They are against separating the schools "from the communities in which they sit", from the local space, without which it loses its essential meaning. AROS thus, opting for the necessity to transform American education away from the corporate model that promotes liquidation rather than the development of local community schools, introduces a place for public debate. It doesn't just do it rhetorically. The local community and its school — literally — takes place and it is a subjective place.

The subjective character of the place is clearly visible in the "sustainable community school" model, developed as part of the school reclaiming movement, contrasted with the "corporate model of educa-

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2.    The Alliance To Reclaim Our Schools. The Schools All Our Children Deserve: The Principles That Unite Us, Retrieved: October 26, 2021 from https://web.archive.org/web/20210123212942/http://www.reclaimourschools.org/about/principles

tional reforms."[3] The reclaimed school, that is, sustainable and communal, is not a place brought from somewhere and applied elsewhere; this is not a format like charter schools. A sustainable community school is placed by AROS in a system of publicly funded, local schools that are fair and democratically controlled. This means that it is a place for the practice of democracy and the joint "production" of the public good. The public good is not limited to accessible and equal education, but also extends to other spheres, such as public health. A sustainable community school is a place where medical, health and many other social services are available. It is a school that — literally — is open and alive, responding to changing conditions, including crisis conditions, such as pandemic etc. As such, it constantly enters into subjective relations. Subjective, because it is a place with its active physicality, which in a shared space is rather not smooth and conciliatory, but "angular" (e.g., a building allows you to do something in it or not, something will or will not fit in it, etc.). Besides, it has its own name, history, traditions, political representation, etc.

A sustainable school is a subjective common place, unlimited to what is human. It is also manifested in the "green programs" of the school, spatial development plans which are an expression of careful co-existence of people with things and other elements of common, not only human, space. This is also visible in the classes on school campuses, bringing together children, teenagers, and adult residents of the area, who literally and figuratively bring to these campuses their present, but also the ghostly past of the places where they live. All this meets in such a school, and it works for local identity. As in the sustainable school described in the next section.

## 4.    *Little Village Lawndale High School*: A Sustainable Community School or a Fighting Place

The *Little Village Lawndale High School* functions today, but its beginnings were problematic.[4] This school was created in opposition to the plans of the municipal education authorities, offering the local community a charter secondary school. It was designed as part of an undertaking initiated by parents and consolidating a wide group of people and communities interested in the school. Its course has been described in detail by the participant of this group, David O. Stovall, who interpreted it in a theoretical meta-reflection as an expression of the "politics of interruption" inspired by Jacques Rancière's philosophy; in this case, interruption, as a disturbance to the continuation of the harmful, socially unjust state of affairs (Stovall, 2016). Stovall presented it in the perspective of Paulo Freire's critical thought conceptualizing the social and at the same time his own, individual experience of co-creating the Little Village Lawndale High School in Chicago. This political and — as I argue further — pedagogical interruption was an expression of a fight for a place, which was also a fight with this place (it was subjectively significant in this fight) and a fight for this place as a shared and common place — sustainable and good, not only for humans.

Parents have consolidated in resistance to the form of neoliberal urbanism that turned out to be Chicago's "Renaissance 2010" policy, a brutal expression of accumulation by dispossession and resulting in physical and mental deprivation residents of the poor neighborhoods of their places and the liquidation of their local schools (Lipman, 2017). The project team, composed mainly of parents, teachers, and future school principals, in consultation with the city's educational authorities, was to prepare a proposal for a public community school. As a result of this team's work, a unique concept of a sustainable community school was created, as a group of four schools operating together with culture, sports and recreation centers within a common campus. In terms of its program, the idea was explicitly part of the idea of social justice and the concept — in the face of the reality in which its co-creators lived — strongly exposed it, also in the name: Greater Lawndale High School for Social Justice.

The team claimed to have learned a lot about society, freedom, and democracy, and that their contribution to the city's educational culture proved to be significant, socio-political, and experiential knowl-

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3.    The Alliance To Reclaim Our Schools. The Schools All Our Children Deserve: Uniting to Win Sustainable Community Schools, Retrieved October 26, 2021 from http://www.reclaimourschools.org/sites/default/files/AROS%20Community%20Schools%20def_1.pdf

4.    Little Village Lawndale High School, Retrieved October 27, 2021 from https://www.lvlhs.org

edge. As Stovall writes about himself, from his participation in the team he slowly learned that "solidarity is a controversial phenomenon and he understood that collective is beyond individual desires to tell the truth for the sake of authority" (2016, p.75). However, the neoliberal policy of the "Renaissance 2010" stood in the way of the project implementation (this policy, while privileging charter schools, emphasized the "choice" and "option" made possible by their expansion within the "education market" (Stovall, 2016, p. 85).

However — despite everything — the local community project could be successful, coming from the Mexican immigrant community — mothers and grandmothers of young residents of Little Village — went on a hunger strike. In the conclusion of one of the Chicago action research projects regarding this hunger strike staged by parents and grandparents, its author stated:

> [this strike] vividly demonstrated that the contest for the soul of public education is also a contest for, as Kevin Coval asserts, "A new city, a city anew, a city for all." Education is a strategic pillar of the neoliberal project to remake the city for capital accumulation and racial containment and exclusion. At the same time, the persistent organizing campaigns and counter narratives of an emergent grassroots movement have opened cracks in neoliberal hegemony. In the process, Chicago teachers and parents and students have inspired others who are facing a similar education landscape in other places (Lipman, 2017, p. 21).

The contest for "the soul of public education" is indeed a contest—in accordance with the essential meaning of sustainability—for a new city, a city for all. One could say that the soul of public education could render the city "haunted by the common good" and, as such, resistant to gentrification. This is in Lipman's findings in her observations regarding mutual inspirations and building city commonality (Lipman, 2011; Lipman, 2017).

For David Stovall, a participant in this strike, the fight continues. As he writes in the introduction to his book,

> Not trusting CPS, we still were not ready to call an end to the hunger strike until we received a definitive timeline for construction. Simultaneously, the same community 'stakeholders' that were resistant were now front and center, speaking to the media, setting up back-room deals manipulating the truth and pushing us to end the strike. A vote was taken by the hungers strikers to end our efforts after nineteen days without food. We called an end to this phase of the fight with the commitment to continue to fight for the construction of the Little Village/Lawndale Multiplex. Thirteen years later and as a parent of a freshman at the Greater Lawndale High School for Social Justice, I can honestly say the fight did not end with its construction, as the school continues to face many challenges (Stovall, 2016, p. xv).

A sustainable community school is a fighting place. A place that fights for exactly that, and just as every day one fights for the public good, which is fragile by nature and simply falls apart easily. Stovall cheers on to the fray, concluding with his recollection of the strike and experienced interruption policy: "The only fight we lose is the one we don't fight" (Stovall, 2016, p. xvi).

Researchers analyzing the activities of community schools generally say that — in line with their founding idea — they are a kind of hub, offering a supportive environment in which and thanks to which students and their families have access not only to education, but also to social services, health, etc (Heers, Klaveren, Groot, & Massen van den Brink, 2016, p. 1018). In terms of academic performance, students' achievement in these schools is higher than that of students in other schools, while in terms of risky student behavior and dropout, community schools pull downwards (Heers *et al.*, 2016, p. 1037). So they fight — in the most general sense — with poverty and neoliberal urbanism which bases on the marketing of places. The city schools are mostly lucrative in this perspective (Lipman, 2011). This is why the fight continues. First of all, the school-hub, occupying a considerable and beautiful space, is attractive in the place marketing process conducted by the neo-liberally managed city. Secondly, each school failure and poorer student results become a factor in the appropriation and sale of such places. In this struggle, great support comes from a past; the ghosts act. In fighting for its survival, the Little Village Lawndale High School constantly refers to the heritage shaped in this part of the city by the

multicultural communities inhabiting it, and it does so in the name of justice (Lipman, 2017).[5]  As in New Orleans, where after a disastrous hurricane, schools were massively separated from local heritage under the banner of promoting charter schools, here too parents put slogans on banners about a place that has deep roots; about a school whose local heritage is significant and subjective, and empowering (Buras, 2015; Lipman, 2017). This is reminiscent of Hamlet's father's ghost, analyzed by Derrida, who came from the past to act in the present to achieve justice. Referring to the philosophy of Derrida, I present a contribution to the pedagogy of the vital place where, acting together, both ancestors and those who have already received or will receive an inheritance live.

## 5. From Parents' Fighting for Sustainable School to Introducing the Pedagogy of the Vital Place

### 5.1. Radical Pedagogy of Place and Beyond

As David Abram stated, "humans are tuned for relationship and our eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils — all are the gates where our body receives the nourishment of the otherness" (1997, p. ix). In a sustainable community school, the otherness — understood in Abram's "more-than-human" way — shapes it as a fighting place. Sustainable community school is a physical place where relationships are created by humans and non-humans, where non-humans are specific buildings and things, and their dynamic configurations with and without humans, a unique topography, etc. People who contribute to the school together with all this — as David Stovall stated — fight and this is the essential feature of this place. Paraphrasing this author's thesis it can be said that it is a constant struggle in place, for a place, with a place, fought in the perspective of sustainability. The local community through its school wants to last; persist, developing in a specific territory, "here", with a sensitivity to everything that "here" is. In a school that is a locum for such a desire, a unique configuration of sensitivity to otherness is established, in which the locality is the basis. For David Stovall and other striking parents, the city council was not "from here", and the school the CPS (Chicago Public Schools) was trying to implant from the corporate format of charter schools was not a community school for them. The city is made up of such local communities and bearing in mind the phenomenon of sustainable community schools, it would be possible to redefine the urban space accordingly. Cecily Maller described the city as a sustainable, common space, shared by humans and non-humans, and healthy and good for both. As she claims, having the crisis in mind, "now, more than ever before, we need to understand, see and treat cities as more-than-human" (Maller, 2018, p. 2). Sustainable community schools are elements of the city, especially neoliberal city understood in this way. And although Maller emphasizes sharing urban space with animals and plants, adapting her thinking is not impossible here. It is about recognizing the fact that the local community school is a place in a unique, only "here", which in itself is an expression of sharing space by humans and non-humans, where the latter are both school buildings, playgrounds, boards and benches, but also the ghosts, past and heritage of the local community that make this place haunted.

In this section, in accordance with my assumption, that in the times of crisis we desperately need more-than-human format of world and that the parents seem to show it by their striving for sustainable community schools (always "local", "here" etc.), I introduce to the pedagogy of the vital place. I do it to recompose a bit pedagogical thinking, making it not only open to the more-than-human world, but also drawing power from it. With my conceptualization of the vital place, I want to show that pedagogical thought benefits from going beyond the humanistic framework in which it has stabilized.

The basis for this for me is what I described in the previous parts. Sustainable community education and schooling, and the related research, clearly show that the place is not only significant as a participant in human agency but is subjective in itself. Humans cannot do without a place that co-creates them. On the other hand, places can do without humans, regardless of the fact that they keep their various traces. When entering relationships with humans, places are mutual towards them. People change places and they change people (*cf.* Gruenewald, 2003; Mendel, 2006; Mendel, 2017; Mendel, 2019; Ruitenberg,

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5.  *Death by a Thousand Cuts. Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage,* Retrieved October 3, 2021 from https://www.j4jalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/J4JReport-final_05_12_14.pdf

2005). The potential hidden in this can fuel not only pedagogical thinking, but also (mainly because of the profound sense of ethics not limited by anthropocentrism) be a salvation for the human world plunged into crisis. In what I have described as parental engagement towards sustainable community schools one can see some grounding for it.

Let's start with the position of Ruitenberg (2005), who calls on Derrida's thought in her demand for a radical pedagogy of place, which effectively breaks with previous thinking about the pedagogy of place. First, Ruitenberg points to the essential themes, which are absent in David Gruenewald's (or Greenwood's) thinking. This concept is still probably the most frequently cited in the field of pedagogy of place, although following Gruenewald several thinkers have productively contributed this field, especially in the contexts of the environment and settler colonialism, such as C.A. Bowers (2008), Dolores Calderon (2014), and Kate McCoy (2014). They criticize "critical pedagogy of place", unlike Ruitenberg, emphasizing the oxymoronic nature of this construction (Bowers) or the need to keep a distance from colonized versions of the understanding of place (Calderon and McCoy). Ruitenberg accuses Gruenewald of the lack of a theoretical analysis of key concepts in the pedagogy of a place, such as place, topos, locality, or the insufficiently developed and objectionable (especially in the perspective of Derrida's thoughts) concept of community, local community (Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 215–217). While Gruenewald (2003) speaks of "critical pedagogy of place", placing it at the meeting point of place-oriented education with critical pedagogy, in Ruitenberg's "radical pedagogy of place" the essential difference is and — in particular — the distinction between criticality and radicalness in pedagogical thinking about a place. Just as — by analogy — in hermeneutics it is important to distinguish between these approaches, because the first (critical hermeneutics) is represented by Habermas, the second (radical hermeneutics) — Derrida (Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 213). Interestingly because of my search here, the author opts for the second approach and, consequently, uses the thought of Jacques Derrida around the area of pedagogically oriented reflection about a place. Let's stay in the circle of such oriented thought.

## 5.2.   More-than-Human, Haunted Places

Ruitenberg's approach is tempting here, especially considering that Derridian deconstruction, introduced into an area centered on the concept of place, can guide meaningful solutions in the field of pedagogy of the shared place:

> radical pedagogy of place is a pedagogy of place in deconstruction, a pedagogy that understands experience as mediating; which understands what is local as producing and produced by what is trans-local; pedagogy, which understands the social community as a community that is constantly being created, remaining in a hospitable openness to those outside the area of its familiarity (Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 218).

*Among others, to the spectral forms of presence and being together.*
"The spectral" refers to Derrida's hauntology ("haunted ontology"). Explaining the concept of specter more precisely, one can say, following Derrida (1994), that it is something "out of joint," functioning outside traditional time; it is an anachrony, a disconnection in the very presence of what is present and present, a kind of non-contemporaneity in the present tense. Derrida suggests understanding the specter by referring to the Latin *spectris*, a word meaning spectral light, light in time, a light leaving behind "spectral leftovers" or "ghostly remnants". The past does not disappear immediately but remains in the present like a light in a room when turned off, leaving behind ghostly remnants. The past is gone, but its ghostly residue persists, being present and active, illuminating and making it possible to see a lot of things and to act.

Introducing the concept of a vital place I used a Derridean perspective but I understand the specter differently from the anthropocentric Derrida. I argue that the specters are not only and not entirely human, as are the haunted places where they act. They — the humans who live, who died, and the spectral remnants of them and of material things — are all part of those haunted places composing the "more-than-human world".

"We are fighting for the soul of the city". This was Pauline Lipman's (sustainable community school ethnographer) flagship statement, which one could say confirms the haunted nature of the struggle she

writes about and the school and the city she presents (Lipman, 2017, pp. 17–19). Kevin Coval's comments in "Tale of Two Cities" on CNN in 2014 clarify what the soul of the city is (Lipman cited this as a motto):

> Rahm Emanuel is building a Second City. Two cities really... one white, one black. One for the rich, one for the poor. One for private schools, one for closed schools. A new Chicago for the saved and the damned. Gold coast heavens and low-end hells. It's biblical, binary.... As Chicago goes, so goes the country. And we are here fighting for freedom, for all, for every person from every zip code. We are fighting for the soul of the city, the soul of the country. We are building again, indeed, a second city, as we derive our nickname from the ability to rise after the ashes and great fire of 1871. Chicagoans have the ability to rise like a phoenix. This is a testament to the resiliency of hard working people everywhere, not the backroom dealings of a millionaire mayor or his posse. We are the city of the eight-hour workday and the Haymarket martyrs. The home of Margaret Burroughs and Fred Hampton, home of Jane Addams and the mothers of Whittier Elementary School. A city of genius and gangsters. This is a writer's and fighter's town as Nelson Algren would say. And this is a fight to counter the mayor's vision of a future city, of two cities. We are trying to write and fight for a united city, a different city. A second city. A new city, a city anew, a city for all. For real (Lipman, 2017, p.17).

One could say that Coval and other Chicago parents fight for the soul of the city and at the same time they fight side by side with the ghosts of their local school sites. These ghosts remind them of the power of a will, a testament, give them their voice and strength to fight for a shared place. As one might say, haunted places are the loci of duration, especially duration, which is education sustainability and relates not only to what is specifically living and specifically human. Therefore, I want to devote more attention to the spectral leftovers in this essay, but focusing on the most important matters for educational thought, i.e. the conditions of the possibility of ethics.

## 5.3. Ethical Basis of the Pedagogy of the Vital Places: Towards Sustainable Transformations

Haunted places last when they teach, teach through their duration, and do so through specters whose principle is to return (like — often invoked by Derrida — Shakespearean Father Hamlet's Ghost). Importantly, this spirit returns in the name of justice; intervenes in the present so that the future can be formed more ethically; so that the world could be better. Specters are not phenomena present in human experience, but "appear" as if from beyond it, existing and finding also material expressions in various traces, our various signatures representing the known and the unknown; "scraps of memory". For Derrida, ethics is always key, and in his philosophy the past works in the present for justice or democracy to come. It is an ethics that can be seen in a sustainable community school where local heritage and sustainability are essential. It is an ethics based on practicing an active relationship with the inheritance received from previous generations and, therefore, shared responsibility for the world to come.

In Derrida's mind, justice must remain a specter. This does not mean that its character is lame, ephemeral, or weak. On the contrary, only saving justice as a specter that constantly demands an ethical gesture from us can become a leaven for the action of another, ethical, politics — and deconstruction is fighting for such. For Derrida, justice is a deconstruction in which ethics is understood as sensitivity to the specters.

Developing Derrida's thought in a non-anthropocentric and educational perspective, I take ethics as an educationally developed ability to perceive behind each being — more-than-human — a certain spectral leftover that cannot be functionalised within conceptual, normative or political systems (Mendel, 2020; Mendel, 2022). Specters, "paradoxical incarnations", are and are not human. Specters intervene both in the relationship of human with the "world" (i.e., the places that create it) and vice versa, and the life of which they are a part lasts without a horizon. Specters exist through returns and visitations, they occupy and seduce, as well as mediate and teach — as such they are "edu-specters" (Mendel, 2020; Mendel, 2022).

Contrary to Derrida's, educatively understood specters manifest a type of subjectivity that can only be described through the prism of relationality in the shared, more-than-human world. Sustainable education in haunted places, i.e. those that are formative in identity and where one can learn from ghostly remnants, is education that creates various articulations of an ethical call, focusing on staying in a community of life, and the challenge of not breaking this community, which is easy to find when the specters are denied a voice. If local communities fighting for "the soul of the city" by their sustainable community schools did not give a voice to the ghosts, they would have no chance of winning. The Lawndale High School continues to struggle, and this is its victory. It continues, constantly referring to the legacy inherited from its predecessors who, as a multicultural community, had to deal with inequalities and now — spectrally — cry out for justice. And this cry is heard.

This type of education is primarily about sensitivity to the ghostly remnants that stand behind undefined "everything" which is more-than-human, and education itself, every educational activity, every educational interference in the relations between the elements of the world of living matter. The ghostly remnant cannot be functionalised within conceptual, normative, or political systems. Thus, the ability to see it behind all that is somehow accomplished funds a free, just, and deeply ethical education. This can express the ethical position of place pedagogy based on sensitivity to the ghostly remnants of every element of the more-than-human and education.

Going beyond the frame of Derrida's thought, who linked ethics with deconstruction, that is with his understanding of difference, one can pay attention to the theses of the new materialism. It may be the ground for the thinking about place presented here, and ethics in this trend does not come from relying on the notion of difference. According to Rosi Braidotti, who feeds post-human feminism, new materialism is not interested in difference as a dialectical engine of social change and analysis:

> analyzing the ways in which "otherness" and "sameness" interact in an asymmetrical set of power relations. This is analogous to Deleuze's theories of Otherness; his emphasis on processes, dynamic interaction and fluid boundaries is a materialist, high-tech brand of vitalism. (...) In Deleuze's thought, the "other" is not the emblematic and invariably vampirized mark of alterity, as in classical philosophy. Nor is it a fetishized and necessarily othered "other," as in deconstruction. It is a moving horizon of exchanges and becoming, towards which the non-unitary subjects of postmodernity move, are by which they are moved in return (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012, pp. 22–23).

The haunted place, that is local sustainable community-oriented school, "becomes" always and it happens in a never-ending struggle. For this reason, the concept of materialistic vitalism is interesting for the pedagogy of place, built on ethics and concerning the more-than-human world. One could say that such pedagogy is "pedagogy of the vital places". Under this banner, basing on parents' activism, I propose here a certain outline of the concept, an introduction to the vision of a common, ethical world, formed in relationships of an educational character, consisting in mutual, unlimited and infinite learning; a world where both the space of life and life itself are shared.

Ethicality, understood through the prism of shared responsibility for the common world, which continues uninterruptedly in endless transformations, perfectly expresses the following position: "We are in this together". It is the label representing vital materialism's understanding of sustainable development and posthuman ethics (Braidotti, 2013).[6] In short, Rosi Braidotti explores the re-compositions of a vulnerable sense of pan-humanity ('WE') in the context of the Anthropocenic climate change discussion ('this'). She focuses on three main considerations: convergences around the posthuman turn and the shifting understandings of 'the human' in contemporary scholarship; complex and internally contradictory effects of economic globalization as a bio-political, information-driven system that capitalizes on all that lives; and the necro-political governmentality that instils managed devastation and extinction, through wars and conflicts and the new forms of discrimination they engender on a planetary scale.[7]

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6.   Planetary Poetics Workshop: "Are 'WE' in this together?" Keynote lecture with Professor Rosi Braidotti, 2017. Retrieved October 30, 2021 from https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/events/2017/sep/planetary-poetics-workshop-are-we-together-keynote-lecture-professor-rosi-braidotti

7.   Ibidem.

My descriptions of the parents' activity in (and for) a sustainable community school such as Lawndale High School, can argue about ethics understood in this way and at the same time shared, nomadic subjectivity of humans and non-humans in a place like such a school. The nomadic nature of the subject means the complexity and ambiguity of multiple belonging to many places, many identity categories, social orders, etc. This model of subjectivity — in the light of the theses of vitalist materialism — bases on the assumption that it arises in "zoe", a living, unlimited matter with autopoietic power. Zoe, as a category, appears in an approach that rejects dualism, a binary opposition between what is given and what is constructed, above all the dichotomy of nature and culture (Braidotti, 2006). The abolition of this dichotomy was replaced in posthumanism by the assumption of a nature-culture continuum (*cf.* Latour, 2013; Braidotti, 2006). Instead of the dichotomous nature-culture relationship, there appears a self-organizing power of living matter and a world that is not specifically human. The awareness of this world frees human being from himself, making him abandon the dream of universality. In this perspective, place and man are one, coexisting as elements of infinite (trans)formations and figures of subjectivity, "figurations" — as in Donna Haraway's "cyborgs" or in Rosi Braidotti's "nomads" (Braidotti, 2006; Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012). The human being active in these formations is the subject and the place is the subject, too, as a constellation of things, actively entering relationships, including the spectral ones (Mendel 2006; Mendel, 2020).

The way humans and places live — including those haunted — becomes an expression of multi-element subjectivity, in which the human element is not more important than the element of the place. This thesis may be argued by research around the "educational place", "pedagogical city", or educational haunted and edu-spectral places (Mendel 2017; Mendel, 2019; Mendel, 2020; Mendel, 2022). On their basis, it can be concluded that the place lives sharing life in infinite figurations of humans and non-humans, in transformations of living matter. The pedagogy of the vital place can thus accentuate the educational character of these figurations and transformations, that is, what in Lawndale's sustainable community school has been called the fight.

In this perspective, the pedagogy of the vital place would be a field of theoretical reflection, studies, and research on the fight for form. Today, in the context of experiencing the deep crisis, the Anthropocene "end of the world", hope is of key importance. The words by Rosi Braidotti at the end of this reflective paper seem to aptly express hope, this characteristic feature of the pedagogy of the vital place:

> The future as an active object of desire propels us forth and motivates us to be active in the here and now of a continuous present that calls for resistance. The yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present. This is not a leap of faith, but an active transposition, a transformation at the in-depth level (...). A prophetic or visionary dimension is necessary in order to secure an affirmative hold over the present, as the launching pad for sustainable becoming or qualitative transformations. The future is the virtual unfolding of the affirmative aspect of the present, which honours our obligations to the generations to come. The pursuit of practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micropractices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations. The motivation for the social construction of hope is grounded in a profound sense of responsibility and accountability. A fundamental gratuitousness and a profound sense of hope is part of it. Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures, an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them (Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012, p.36).

The pedagogy of the vital place should be radical in an operational sense, that is in the dimension of deeply political (in the meaning of Latour, 2013), sustainable school performances. Taking the Ruitenberg approach in this sense, I propose that the vital place should bring together the students who

> are taught to see the multiplicity of and conflicts between interpretations of a place, the traces of meanings carried by the place in the past, the openness to future interpretation and meaning-construction. A radical pedagogy of place does not pretend to offer answers to or "correct" interpretations of hotly contested places. A forest is a site of economic benefit to the logging and tourism industry, as well as an ecosystem, as well as land formerly inhabited by Indigenous people. An inner-city neighborhood is a crime statistic, as well

as an architectural site, as well as a social system held together by resilience and solidarity (Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 218–219).

This pedagogy is political because politics is everywhere where the common is shared (Rancière, 2011, p. 1); like parental involvement or engagement that is always political.

## 6.  Conclusions

One could say that the parental activities described in this paper are more than only the point of departure to introduce a pedagogy of the vital place. There is a dialectical relationship between vital, life-sensitive pedagogy and the activities of parents. Parents seem to be using their activities to argue the deep meaning of such pedagogy. They showed how their local heritage and the haunted places, in which they act with their children, families and neighbors, make them more resistant to neoliberal urbanism and — exactly in practiced sharing what is common — more sensitive to the world of life and stronger to face the challenges of this world's crisis. In the case of the vital place, the "common" is to share the condition of life, uniting all the elements of the more-than-human world. Humans and non-humans live, leaving behind them spectral remnants. The vital, balanced place, which I take here in the sense given to it by Braidotti, is the living matter which creates anachronies and spatial anomalies in the acts of autopoiesis, locating a multi-component, nomadic subject beyond the traditionally understood border of death and beyond traditional time (Braidotti, 2013). At the same time, it is a shared ethics based on shared responsibility (we are all in this together) and a constantly becoming place, a sustainable community school that delivers justice that remains a specter (not only we parents along with our children, but we are all in this together).

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