

'Placing' Caring Relationships in Education: Addressing Abstraction and Domination

ANDREW RUSHMERE
Simon Fraser University, Canada

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to underscore the possible dangers of abstraction, objectification and reification as roots of human domination over other human and non-human beings; and to suggest that, as one possibility, place-based education can counter these dominating patterns by pulling up their roots through fostering relational ontologies based on care and emotional/sensuous experience. The author will foreground the work of Henri Lefebvre, Neil Evernden, and R. D. Laing in the abstraction discussion, while the discussion of place-based education will draw largely on the writings of David Gruenewald.

Introductory Notes

It is time, I believe, for an educational "perestroika," by which I mean a general rethinking of the process and substance of education at all levels, beginning with the admission that much of what has gone wrong with the world is the result of education that alienates us from life in the name of human domination, fragments instead of unifies, overemphasizes success and careers, separates feeling from intellect and the practical from the theoretical, and unleashes on the world minds ignorant of their own ignorance.¹

I am deeply concerned that not only does mainstream modern North American education not amply and readily offer a meaningful framework for living a life of ecological and social integrity, but worse, it supplies a framework that ultimately undermines our ability to healthily relate, socially and ecologically-speaking, with our fellow human and non-human beings. The specific problem to which I am referring in this paper is that of domination by humans over fellow beings, and the mainstream education system's complicity in perpetuating this relationship. Two critical constructs central to this exploration are *abstraction* and *relational ontology*. I will use the first as an entry point to argue what undergirds the problem and the second in a proposal for place-based education as one possible way to understand and work to overcome abstraction, and consequently, domination.

The importance of the theme of domination in our time is paramount. Indeed, Freire deems domination—which implies its dialectical opposite, liberation—the most fundamental theme of our epoch. In examining this theme, abstraction is a central consideration. Listen to Freire's words: "education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [*sic*] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world. In these relations

¹ David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: DC: Island Press, 1994), 17.

consciousness and world are simultaneous.”² Tracing the problem of social and ecological domination back to its roots, a number of scholars have arrived at Descartes’ mind/body dualism³ and Galileo’s privileging of the scientific analytical mind over perceptions derived from more subjective and sensuous lived human experience.⁴ These worldviews implied that life could be conceived of as a set of life-deprived mathematical relations. Both men laid the foundation for dualist tendencies that radically alienate one half of any given binary from the other, generally resulting in neglect and/or exploitation of the “inferior” half (i.e., nature) by the “superior” (i.e., humans).⁵ The dangers of dualism are significant and many, but I would argue there is an epistemological *process* that’s both at the root of dualist conceptions of the world *and* of other worldviews that lead to enacting a dominating ontology.

Abstraction and Reification

The process I am referring to is a human propensity for abstraction: an act that severs, separates, fragments, removes and reduces, creating a chasm between humans and the object of abstraction, thus hindering our ability to relate to, wholly know, and care for the thing abstracted.

The dictionary definition of abstraction – “To do with or existing in thought rather than matter”⁶ – does little justice to the damaging practice of excessive abstraction to which we as conceptualizing creatures are prone. We must probe deeper and wider, for abstraction takes many forms. For French Marxist Philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, abstraction as the prerogative of thought (mental space) is violent, even lethal when manifest in language and signs at the hands of those in power.⁷ According to him, signs, written and verbal, take on the properties of the things they signify, thus reifying them, forcefully converting the abstraction into the thing itself, and thus holding “the power to construct a new world different from nature’s initial one.”⁸ To draw on an example from Evernden, when a tree is abstractly described solely as an “oxygen-producing device,” or as any other type of resource, the main value of which is reduced to its utility,⁹ the idea of the oxygen-producing device takes on the properties of a tree. We begin to mistakenly conceive of “tree” as resource to be used primarily for human benefit. Evernden also sees this process as an explicitly violent one.¹⁰ As

² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005), 81, 103. I acknowledge that our violent treatment of both human and more-than-human others is not only due to a dominating relationship with an objective world, but also perhaps because of personal traumas that filter into our interactions with ourselves and other beings, for example. My choice to focus on domination in this paper is in an attempt to focus the discussion on just one important element in this process.

³ H. Bai, “Challenge for Education: Learning to Value the World Intrinsically,” *ENCOUNTER: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 14, no. 2 (2001): 6.

⁴ Orr, *Earth*, 31; Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 17-18.

⁵ Such binary, essentialist thinking is not only applied to human-nature relationships, but also to justify the socio-cultural domination of female, black, lower-class, old, disabled or homosexual “base bodies” by male, white, upper-class, young, able and heterosexual “analytical minds”. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For space efficiency, I have focused on ecological domination, but I acknowledge, as does Evernden (*Alien*, 25) that social domination operates by similar processes and can be addressed, at its conceptual root, in similar ways.

⁶ *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, ed. Katherine Barber (New York: Oxford University Press Canada, 1998), “abstract.”

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 134-135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹ Evernden, *Alien*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

such, abstract signs serve power and authority because they can move us emotionally and to action, while they leave the actual things they replicate vulnerable to violent disassembly, manipulation and reassembly by the will to power.¹¹ To explain by further weaving Evernden through Lefebvre's ideas, I will highlight that it is not the economist, in Evernden's example, who invokes the tree as an oxygen-producing device, but the environmentalist. Moved to emotion and action to save "tree" from becoming lumber, the environmentalist grabs onto the sign, "oxygen producing device," in an attempt to appeal to the will to power by drawing on its own resourcifying use of language. This move actually betrays the environmentalist's cause by devaluing "tree," trading in tree's inherent value for its object-utility, and essentially condoning similar devaluing, utilitarian behaviour by developers, government or other powerful economic players who can destroy, manipulate, and reconstruct tree in different forms. For Lefebvre (and, indeed, Evernden), this process is nothing less than the power to transform nature by means of destruction and domination; the restructuring of the world according to the dictates of knowledge, science, technology, industry and imperialism.¹²

David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, provides an excellent and detailed argument for how language, and specifically, the written word, was a major step in a long process of humans distancing ourselves from nature by privileging an abstract conception of homogenous, featureless space and linear time. Writing down previously oral stories that were morally rooted in intimate sensuous interaction with the living world renders the particular places and natural relationships that triggered those stories incidental to the telling; only the written word is now needed to tell those stories, and this can happen anywhere. Space, freed of its felt value, could abstractly be conceived of as valueless, featureless and amenable to exploitation.

The written word, furthermore, facilitated the conception of linear time so prized by industrial societies. Whereas in oral cultures, observed changes were accommodated into cyclical notions of time that corresponded with, and connected people to, natural cycles, writing allowed humans to see events with a discreet beginning and end. Overall, the sense that the earth was alive and animate in each place with its lifecycles gave way to a mechanical notion of time and empty notion of space that served to disembody humans from our intimate relations with the natural world.¹³

Similar concerns have been addressed by R.D. Laing who saw the same process of abstraction and reification in the creation of the scientific mind. He states:

In order to begin to be a scientist, the pre-scientist, the prospective scientist has to perform a number of entirely subjective operations on his own subjectivity. These entail an attempted de-subjectivization and objectification of his scientific domain. This requires (1) the ablation or elimination of some or all sense data; (2) the temporary suspension of any subject of cognizance; (3) the cutting off of any relation of intersubjectivity, or interiority; (4) the de-realization of any subjectivity out there.¹⁴

Reification is the process wherein the abstract becomes the concrete. For example, map becomes territory. Evernden reminds us that we learn to take on dominant social paradigms (that are necessarily abstract and reductionist, leaving out realities and experiences that are important to folks on the fringes), or maps as whole realities, or territories.¹⁵ The sense that something is a (subjective) representation ceases, and we begin to respond to representation as if it were (objective) reality. If we translate these ideas to our dualism discussion, we find that language and reified images of dualism

¹¹ Lefebvre, *Production*, 134-135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134-135.

¹³ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 183-187.

¹⁴ R.D. Laing, "What is the Matter with Mind?" in *The Schumacher Lectures*, ed. S. Kumar (London: Abacus, 1980): 9.

¹⁵ Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 25-26.

become so real for us that we consider them as objective and real. But how does abstraction/reification play into domination? What is their relationship?

Simplistically put, domination can be conceived of as a relationship in which one party is construed of as lesser and marginal in value (say, nature) in relation to another party (say, humans). Generally one party privileges itself and devalues the “other.” Abstraction and reification provide the vehicle for moving toward this devaluing subject-object relationship by taking something that is whole, breaking it up into smaller pieces, and then leaving those pieces open for use in a hierarchical ordering of the world, wherein one piece becomes less worthy than the other.

Let us move from theoretical considerations to a more concrete example of how domination-through-abstraction is operationalized in the “real-world” terms of money, economy and commodities. Simply put: “If it weren’t for general-purpose money, nobody would be able to trade tracts of rainforest for Coca-Cola.”¹⁶ By conceptually turning the rainforest into a commodity, economists divorce it from its materiality which is rooted in local context, and replace it with an arbitrarily determined exchange-value. This swap obscures and renders irrelevant the rainforest’s intrinsic life-value, allowing for “depersonalization” and destruction under the euphemism of economic gain. This example demonstrates how abstraction as a process distracts our attention from the object of abstraction as it exists in relation to its local context, and focuses our attention on the language and ideas denoting that object. By drawing our focus toward the idea of rainforest as commodity or resource, those in power use concepts to erect a mental superstructure above the actual rainforest that acts as a buffer under which those in power manipulate and dominate that object, often with destructive results for nature.¹⁷

A vivid and disturbing rendering of the effects of abstraction as it relates to this discussion is Evernden’s image of “cutting the vocal chords” of the world. He develops this metaphor in reference to ecology students, who, initially drawn to the discipline by a love of the non-human world, become so well-groomed by their abstract education as to grow into perfectly detached vivisectionists capable of killing living, sentient beings. For those who do not become perfectly detached, committing such an act is facilitated by the routine practice of experimental physiologists who remove the larynx of animals before experiments so they are not affected by the animal’s cries.¹⁸ When the metaphor plays out in education, the implication is that through our detached educational experience, we learn to abstract ourselves from our relationship with the world by “cutting its vocal chords” so as to not hear (and risk being affected by) its cries as we learn to surgically slice it, categorize it, and otherwise calmly inflict dominating cruelty on it. By numbing ourselves, we become immune to others’ pain (and joys, too). I will develop this idea further in the following section.

Abstraction and Education

“Children are prone to assume that the world is, like themselves, alive and sensate. Only age and education can ‘correct’ their view.”¹⁹ The dominant model of education in North America is the primary vehicle for perpetuating patterns of abstraction and domination. It succeeds in this feat by means of two main factors: 1) valuing the supremacy of knowledge and ways of knowing that are decontextualized, ahistorical, objective, rational, and as such divorced from students’ contexts and

¹⁶ A. Hornborg, “Ecological Embeddedness and Personhood: Have We Always Been Capitalists?,” *Anthropology Today* 14, no. 2 (April 1998): 5.

¹⁷ If space allowed, I could further unravel abstraction’s monopoly on the human imagination by examining maps, which are often confused with places. Maps only reduce places to coordinates and the distances between them, obscuring the complex, rich, and multidimensional relations that constitute a place which, once surgically removed by abstraction allow for dispassionate extraction. See for example, Lefebvre, *Production*, 140.

¹⁸ Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 16.

¹⁹ Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 14.

actions; and 2) fostering hierarchical, competitive, individualist tendencies in students to fulfill its primary goal of churning out economically productive units in a highly mobile economy. In providing such narrow and limiting ways of knowing and being, education forms a rigid epistemological and ontological framework. This framework undermines efforts to live a life of social and ecological integrity by obscuring the importance of caring relations between people and between people and their places.²⁰

There is ample and glaring evidence of the separation between students and the local community found in factors such as boxed-in classrooms, reduction of knowledge to the accumulation of detached information fragments²¹, and training primarily for mobile economic participation. But more important than these is that education abstracts students from a relationship to Being in the Heideggerian sense of Being-in-the-world (hence from a caring, responsive relationship; a being-for, being-in and being-with the life-world). Otherwise stated, the dominant North American model of education “cuts the vocal chords” of life, transforming the life-world into an insensate material object available primarily for data collection and analysis²², thus transforming our relationship to it, and making it amenable to dispassionate tinkering.

Place-Based Education

How can we do education differently, then, so as to literally create a different world?²³ I would suggest place-based education as a possibility. Broadly speaking, place-based education is an inherently multidisciplinary, relational and experiential practice arising from a desire to learn from and nurture a particular place, and with the explicit goal to engage students as more than just economically productive units. Otherwise stated, the aim is to intimately connect place with self and community – both socio-culturally and ecologically speaking²⁴ in order to better apprehend the intrinsic value of each of these elements.

The importance and imperative of learning from place, specifically as a pedagogical tool, reside in its power as a profound locus of sensuous experience, relationship and meaning-making.²⁵

²⁰ Orr, *Earth, 1994*; D. Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education,” *American Education Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003): 619-655; M.S. Prakash & D. Stuchul, “McEducation Marginalized: Multiverse of Learning-Living in Grassroots Commons,” *Educational Studies* 36, no.1 (2004): 58-73.

²¹ Orr, *Earth*, 94-95. Orr notes that the division of knowledge creates loyalty to abstract disciplines rather than leading to an understanding of systems, patterns, relationships; something that can be reinforced by sustained engagement with people and places.

²² Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 17.

²³ I am acutely aware that in writing a fairly standard academic article, I have perhaps not displayed the courage necessary to “do” education differently so as to create a better world. I thank the anonymous reviewer who brought up this shortcoming and propelled me to think about (re)presenting or pushing the boundaries of the place-based education discussion by using new forms, methods or genres. For now, I hope the reader will accept my commitment to do so in future writings and accept my encouragement to all academics to also push these boundaries creatively.

²⁴ J. Woodhouse and C. Knapp, *Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2000), ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED448012. Place-based education’s pedagogical goals and practices are often allied with those of problem-based, environmental, ecological, ecojustice and service learning education

²⁵ I am using place as Tuan does, not to signify a static point in space, but a dynamic set of constitutive relationships and experiences that imbue our lives-in-place with meaning, evoking an affective response in place-dwellers. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

Furthermore, grounding knowledge and knowing in local experience offers a way to make concrete and explicit the destructive and dominating effects of ultra-mobile modern global economic development on people and their given environments. Sensitivity to experiences in place has the potential to make more abstract knowledge and knowing intimate to students' lives, to tangibly "bring home" the effects of economic domination, for example, and to reestablish the importance of applying that knowledge to make choices for positive social and ecological change in our places.

Relational Ontologies

Along with potentially elucidating a deeper understanding of domination, place-based education counters abstraction and domination by acting as a catalyst for relational ways of being. Place-based educators seek to fundamentally situate learners within (and as an important part of) the complex relational webs that constitute the places where they *are*. When learning in place is based on relation, the primary issue is of necessity "ourselves among others."²⁶ (The meaning of "others" here for me is both social and ecological.) Drawing on the ecological notion of interconnectedness, I would also argue the issue is "ourselves as part of others" and vice-versa: a statement that recognizes our intimate relationship with others as a step toward realizing that damage done to others is fundamentally damage done to ourselves and that nurturing others is also nurturing ourselves. This relation therefore implies caring-feeling. The basis of our existence in the world moves from Descartes' "I think therefore I am" to "I relate therefore I am" or perhaps more aptly, "I care therefore I am."²⁷ Receptivity and responsiveness to the needs of our ailing relationship to the non-human world cannot only be known: they must also be felt through deep engagement in order to lead to action for change.²⁸ While abstraction removes emotion, allowing for empty, care-free action (or domination), feeling born of relation drives care-in-(inter)action.

This isn't revolutionary: As Nel Noddings says, relation is ontologically basic to humans and simply acknowledging this in education would be a great step in the right direction.²⁹ One simple way of starting to acknowledge our relationship to the non-human world through place-based education would be to adopt Arne Naess' idea of an ecological self, wherein self-realization entails a deepening and broadening of the self from the narrow sense of ego, to the more encapsulating sense of self that includes ecological beings: a process of deepening identification with all beings.³⁰ An education system that denies our sensuous and caring relation to the earth constitutes a fatal severing of humans from the world. Fatal because it is a world that fundamentally forms part of us as we in turn fundamentally constitute it. Place-based education explicitly aims to restore our intimate connection to the non-human world, balancing reason with feeling in an effort to actually create a different world based on caring relation rather than domination.

²⁶ Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 72.

²⁷ Evernden quoting Steiner, *Natural Alien*, 70.

²⁸ Harvey, David, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996; Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁹ Noddings, *Caring*, 3.

³⁰ Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).

Concluding Notes

Orr argues the ecological crisis is one of mind, perception and Values.³¹ I would add that it is also one of relationship: specifically, the reciprocal relationship between people and their places, and the feelings gathered by that interaction. To this end, I have reflected here not on the ills suffered by the non-human world, but on the ills inherent in our relationship (or lack thereof) with it. I argued that ecological domination springs from the violent process of abstraction (a certain form of removing relationship), which modern educational institutions nurture as a matter of course. I proposed that the emerging field of place-based education is one possible alternative well-poised to address this problem and set in motion new processes to form our interactional foundation based on caring relation. In these processes, part of the challenge for education, however, is to address the problem of domination without the very thinking that created it. This is not merely an issue of replacing one school of thought with another, since *thought itself* is the instrument of abstraction. Perhaps, then, part of the solution is not only thinking through domination per se, but also feeling our way through it in the double sense of working with our senses and emotions. Thus we are not only engaging in a “rethinking of the process and substance of education at all levels,” but also a re-feeling of it. I would hope we let ourselves be guided in this process by the following words from Evernden: “*It is not about things, but relationships, not about beings, but Being, not about world but the inseparability of self and circumstance.*”³²

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³¹ Orr, *Earth*, 29.

³² Evernden, *Natural Alien*, 142.

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About the Author

Andrew Rushmere is an M.A. Student at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. He would very much welcome comments and feedback and can be contacted at arushmer@sfu.ca.