

The Trouble with Mono-Naturalism in Place-Based Pedagogies

“De-composing” naturalness and the purpose of schooling

Samantha R. Shafer

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Advisor: James D. Proctor

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Preface

This thesis arose out of a fascination with the idea of naturalness. I am perplexed by it. Naturalness is not a static idea or a stable thing; it is a dynamic collective understanding, a rhetorical tool, a loaded social imaginary. In a way, this was a *natural* progression of ideas: a capstone to my four years of thoughtful interdisciplinary work ought to culminate in a piece that is as *me* as possible. I embrace my tendency to overwrite and overthink and fixate on details, and I cherish the results that are sometimes shocking to me when I look back after meeting a frantic deadline and find excitement in my own ideas. Scholarship ought to be reflexive, and it ought to be fun. In this thesis, I am trying to have fun! I am embracing the complexity, messiness, in-progress-ness, and collaborativeness of my academic experience. This is a work in progress. While I seek to be gentle and supportive in my critique of systems that confuse me, acknowledging the hard work that so many teachers, writers, and activists do when they feel they are doing all they can, I want to urge us (and myself) toward things that we can all do better. I would also like to preface my thesis with an expression of my deep respect and appreciation for the amazing educators at Bolton, NAYA, Sunnyside, and Lewis & Clark for the individuals who have committed their precious time and effort to refusing to settle. I have witnessed the extra hours and above-par commitment that is required of educators dedicated to change and I do not wish to undermine that reality for the people out there daily, doing this work. I hope that by playing with theory and by my own refusal to settle that I can participate in the reflexive process of changing with the times, accepting opportunities to grow, and being humble in doing so. So, I invite the reader to suspend their disbelief to engage in ideas which we cannot always see, and to continue this work, as I surely will, of envisioning new possibilities for what the future can look like and how we educate young people to be in the world as we wish it to be. This thesis is a labor of love, of seeking connection and letting go of the ties that bind us to thinking that does not help our progress toward *something* radically different. When I was little I learned to count to ten, and as a young adult I now find it is more important than ever to go back and to learn to “count beyond two.”

“Give yourself to it critically, and with ever-expanding curiosity”
Paulo Freire

Introduction

Scholars, educators and activists love to be critical—I love to be critical. We ask tough questions of things that are generally taken for granted and stress the importance of this task as not only a thought exercise but an imperative to address systems that cause harm and to create meaningful change. In the growing bodies of literature on radical criticism, with regard to race, gender, ability, nationality, language, sexuality and so on, there has been movement toward unsettling common-sense narratives to expose how systems privilege some and oppress others. They illuminate how institutions, particularly schools, are tied to historically specific, hierarchical, patriarchal, and capitalist inventions, and that none of these is inevitable but rather (re)created and reinforced over and over again by the decisions of real people. One area that remains relatively untouched by this kind of scholarship is the idea of naturalness.

Unsettling naturalness begins with rethinking the dichotomy of *nature and non-nature*, and one space in which to do this is the theory and practice of teaching. Place-based education (PBE) is a pedagogical form that has made great strides in reconsidering traditional education by working to incorporate the lessons of social-criticism with ecological awareness. PBE is fertile ground for this inquiry because it is consciously calling into question many things that are taken for granted by other mainstream pedagogies, and especially challenges neoliberal trends in education. The idea of naturalness, however reshaped, remains generally unacknowledged in this pedagogy, as in critical scholarship more generally. In the spirit of place-based education and continuing the building process, we can look closely at what conceptions of nature and naturalness pervade without distraction because much of this ideological work is already part of its form and function.

The question framing my inquiry is, *How is nature naturalized in place-based education?* To move closer to answering this I ask, *How does place-based education function in relation to neoliberal forces in education and to what extent can PBE be a tool for pursuing radical changes toward social-environmental justice?*

To trouble naturalness in place-based pedagogy, I argue, would allow it to work toward *radical* teaching, with serious potential to effect change that is earnestly being called for by scholar-activist-liberationist-educators from many disciplinary backgrounds. What I will define as *mononaturalism* in place-based education creates a barrier to resisting oppression or challenging simplistic notions of what is nature is, both of which are necessary to invite creative (and urgent) forms of problem solving in our world that is changing without precedent.

This is not a critique but a *de/re-composition*, in the spirit of Bruno Latour's *Compositionist Manifesto* (2010). Latour's methodology of compositionism "underlines that things have to be put together while retaining their heterogeneity."

Above all, a composition can *fail* and thus retains what is most important in the notion of *constructivism*...It thus draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* composed. What is to be composed may, at any point, be *decomposed*.

In addition to being an alternative to critique, Latour explores how compositionism could begin to offer a "successor to nature." Latour identifies a pernicious theme in the way nature is described, invoked, categorized as one singular thing, that even if everyone interacts with it differently, remains as something unified and true—a reality hidden beneath the many delusions of culture: *mononaturalism*. Not only is this nature singular, but it is *essential*, elemental, at the base of everything. This idea of nature is empirically validated in a perfunctory way by experience and observations to such a degree that it is unquestionably common sense. However,

as Noel Castree (2014) puts simply, “*nature* is not a given...it’s a way of categorising and labelling the world, one that’s best understood in the context of its collateral concepts and the wider discursive ‘rule book’ characteristic of Western societies.”

Latour refers to new and confusing disease outbreaks as moments when the fracas around trying to comprehend the situation is strangely productive because “it adds a source of discontinuity forcing all of us—scientists, activists, and politicians [*and educators, I would add*] alike—to compose the common world from disjointed pieces instead of taking for granted that the unity, continuity, agreement is already there, embedded in the idea that ‘the same nature fits all.’”

By finding such discontinuity in place-based education, I seek to unravel the way mononaturalism is reproduced through pedagogy. Perhaps this can also open space to continue to transform how educators engage with difference from *multiculturalism*, which can too easily become a shallow, aesthetic practice, into a project that actively works against systems of oppression and seeks equity. Though the stated goals of PBE are to learn through place by blending ecological and socially-critical learning, I consider what outcomes could arise when we interrogate these binary categorizations and decompose the “naturalization” of nature.

Defining Nature, Naturalness, and Mononaturalism

It is one of the first lessons of Environmental Studies to read nature as a Big Word. It shares this category with the likes of *environment*, *green*, *sustainable*—and dozens of other related terms that seem to refer to *something*, but ultimately refer to nothing in particular at all. These are the keywords, as Noel Castree prefers to call them, of an area of study. They are rich words for the value that one can reveal by untangling them, but they are also aggravating and empty for the ways they are tossed around without specificity, nuance, or regard for their implications. Nature, as a keyword, means many things to many people; it can be invoked to suggest a range of ideas, images, sensations, and values, which Castree (2014) distills into four primary usages. Nature is principally used to mean “external nature, universal nature, intrinsic nature, and super-ordinate nature,” elaborated in Figure 1 below.

Fig. 1 The principle meanings of the word nature in contemporary Anglophone societies (Castree 2014, 10)			
The nonhuman world of living and inanimate phenomena, be they ‘pristine’ or modified.	The physical world in its entirety, including human beings as both products of natural history and present-day biological organisms.	The defining features distinguishing quality of living and inanimate phenomena, including human beings.	The power, force, or organising principle animating living phenomena and operating in or on inanimate phenomena.
External Nature	Universal Nature	Intrinsic Nature	Super-ordinate Nature

“Their differences notwithstanding,” Castree clarifies, “a common semantic denominator is that nature is defined by the absence of human agency or by what remains (or endures) once human agents have altered natural processes and phenomena.” Castree further unravels these sometimes contradictory meanings to conclude that “there are degrees of naturalness (in the third and fourth senses of the term), and a grey area between what is deemed natural and ‘unnatural.’” Furthermore, these meanings of nature are of course not limited to this one name. There are

many “collateral concepts,” or other keywords, composing a cluster of signifiers for different aspects what nature means. The result is that “Nature is something of a ‘ghost that rarely is visible under its own name.’”

Latour (2010) asserts that “nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory. It is...a way of organizing the division...between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability. A fully transcendent, yet a fully historical construct, a deeply religious way...of creating the difference of potential between what human souls were attached to and what was really out there.” Highlighting the multiplicity of natures, and the need to recognize this incongruence, Swyngedouw (2007) cites just a few of countless potential examples that test the limits of what we are willing to call nature. These, he explains, “are radically different things, expressing radically different Natures, pushing in radically different directions, with radically different consequences and outcomes, and with radically different human/non-human connectivities.” Following this acknowledgement of “radical difference,” should these many natures not be treated in specific ways that may also be “radically different” from each other? This begins to point to Bruno Latour’s method of confronting mononaturalism: *multinaturalism*. What would it mean to acknowledge many kinds of natures, or to expand the definition of what is natural to account for radical—that is, at the root—difference?

In addition to being situated semantically, there is also a spatial and temporal connotation to nature. A brief look back to the nineteenth century can help explain. Emerging in the nineteenth century and documented by writers like Emerson and Thoreau, the Transcendentalist view of nature as a gateway to the sublime was heavily painted by an entire generation of artists, and inspiring movements in art, literature, philosophy and science. Take a glance at tourism

brochures or national parks postcards, or talk to someone who has just visited the Grand Canyon or the Columbia River Gorge, and you will find that the sublime is not dead, and that the language of the Romantics is alive and well in much of our discourse today. Even in the simple notion that nature is *outdoors*, literally out-of-doors, though not a direct result of Romanticism, illustrates the degree to which nature is elsewhere and how humans are painted as absent from nature.

Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) centers Romantic literature as the material for his analysis because it is a prime example of a genre that "commonly seen as crucially about nature" which "still influences the ways in which the ecological imagination works." Further, Romanticism and Transcendentalism marked an influential shift in how nature is understood in the popular imagination. In the American Northwest especially, the language and values of Transcendentalism strike a familiar, if often subconscious, chord. They play a deep baritone note that reverberates throughout Anglo-American history, ideals, and myth and remain unexamined in many contexts. In this a-religious "none-zone" of the Pacific Northwest, nature religion and connection to wilderness have had a profound impact on industries, city zoning, valuation of land and resources, among other practical and aesthetic features of Pacific Northwest culture and values.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one prominent American writer during the Transcendentalist movement. His collection of essays entitled *Nature*, originally published in 1836, was a comprehensive treatment of a newly emerging philosophy, politics, spirituality, understanding of the body. At their foundation, Emerson's musings about nature and man's¹ relationship to it

¹ The explicit gendering of this relationship is one of but many problems with the Transcendentalists and just a piece of why it is confusing and troublesome that this language still permeates our interactions with what is deemed as wilderness.

depend upon an oppositional tension. His own ideology of nature can be traced further back as in conversation with Puritan beliefs about order, morality, and asceticism, and even further to the fundamental building blocks of Judeo-Christian belief. From Genesis, where the world is divided into humans and other, comes natural and unnatural, good and bad, subject and object— or, as Emerson later articulates, “my soul” versus “all that is not me.” This dichotomous view is a crude simplification of the complexity of things. “What in the history of thought may be seen as a confusion or an overlapping” Raymond Williams notes in his 1980 essay *Ideas of Nature*, “is often the precise moment of the dramatic impulse, since it is because the meanings and the experiences are uncertain and complex that the dramatic mode is more powerful, includes more, than could any narrative or exposition.”

Emerson, Thoreau, Wordsworth, and the many other authors of the Romantic period each brought to Romanticism a certain nuance, but a binary tension is a common thread. The impulse to categorize in such a way makes sense historically, as does the fact that an ideology that separates nature from non-nature in this way is full of gaps and reductions of the messy details. There is a substantial body of literature that critically treats topics of nature in Romantic and Transcendentalist compositions, (see Williams 1980; Cronon 1996; Morton 2007; Castree 2014) but critique of nature beyond the Romantic influence nevertheless remains a marginal topic. Similarly, a growing number of thinkers across disciplines have taken to uprooting dualisms in the realms of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, (Ray 2013; Ahmed 2006; hooks 1994)² but the area of “nature” remains largely settled and confined to a small niche of subject matter (Morton 2007; Latour 2010; Proctor 2009).

² Other notable authors include Judith Butler; Michel Foucault; Assata Shakur; and Gloria Anzaldúa

Sarah Jaquette Ray (2013) examines the harm of essentialization in mainstream environmentalism which either paints nature on an impossible pedestal or as a source of disgust. “The ecological other is the antithesis of these empowered ecological subjects,” (5) and “by constructing normative notions of the kind of body favored as good for nature and its antithesis, the ecologically other body, the green cultural discourses[...]ultimately craft an environmental ethic that is neither ecologically nor socially healthy, much less sustainable.” (5) Whereas Romantic essentialism is ingrained in environmentalism, these ethics are as well, which in turn underlie later iterations of environmental pedagogy.

Like Williams (1980) “I begin from this ordinary problem of meaning and reference because I want this inquiry to be active, and because I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.” As this word *nature* has changed in usage and meaning over time, one use has not directly replaced those prior. Rather, they have piled onto each other, creating a layered, highly nuanced word that in many ways has lost all specificity. “This singular abstraction” of the word nature to describe the essence of the multiplicity of all things “was a major advance in consciousness. But I think we have got so used to it, in a nominal continuity over more than two millennia, that we may not always realize quite all that it commits us to” (Williams 1980). I do not necessarily propose that we excise nature from our vocabularies (and seeing as I will use it often in this thesis, this would not serve my purposes very well). I do insist that we must think carefully about how, when, and why this word is invoked, and be conscientious of the political economy and semiotics behind it. Castree and I agree that “in seeking to denaturalize nature, [we are] not advocating for the

demise of this signifier or its collateral terms. On the contrary, [we] think is here to stay—at least for a while longer.”

In the context of place studies within geography, a greater selection of authors have given attention to complicating understandings of nature, specifically by seeking to address the meaning of space and place (Cresswell 2004/2015, Massey 1991, Hayles 1995, Proctor 2009).

Hayles (1995) has written thoughtfully on the need for a new paradigm for conceptualizing the “flux,” and Proctor (2009, 2014) has written on what it would mean to consider a shift in focus from *nature* to *place*, highlighting the fatal flaw of nature as too nebulous a concept to serve as somewhere to “situate.” What these critiques only begin to do is consider the ripple of ramifications for people who embody what many would call “unnatural” characteristics, and the violence that is inflicted by such an exclusionary idea as nature.

I envision a kind of inner and outer circle of meaning. In the inner circle, we have the physical things to which nature refers: trees and dirt and bugs, all that which is studied by ecology, biology, etc. This is often the content of environmental education, as well as of others pedagogies, even those that hope to stray from the limitations of dirt-nature like place-based or critical pedagogy of place. Then there is an outer concentric circle which encompasses the first: the *naturalization* of things, ideas, power, hierarchy, and difference. And, I argue, nature itself—the contents of the inner circle. This outer circle of nature/naturalness/naturalization is synonymous with *common sense*; they are ideas or institutions that are taken for granted and left unexamined because “it’s just the way things are.” Which came first is less important than how each supports the reproduction of the other. Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemonic

oppression brings what is common sense to the forefront. Exposing uncertainty behind what is assumed to be true invites an unsettling of ideas, and this is uncomfortable because it exposes a dissonance that can get confusing.³ This confusion is a necessary part of the project, though, because it means that nothing is taken as a given any longer. It means that we can see the composition for what it is and begin to de- and re-compose.

The boundaries of these circles are permeable, but the inner one less so. Ideas of what counts as nature, once solidified as natural, are not easily uncategorized. The inverse, for unnaturalness, is also true. Both represent active processes of meaning-making.

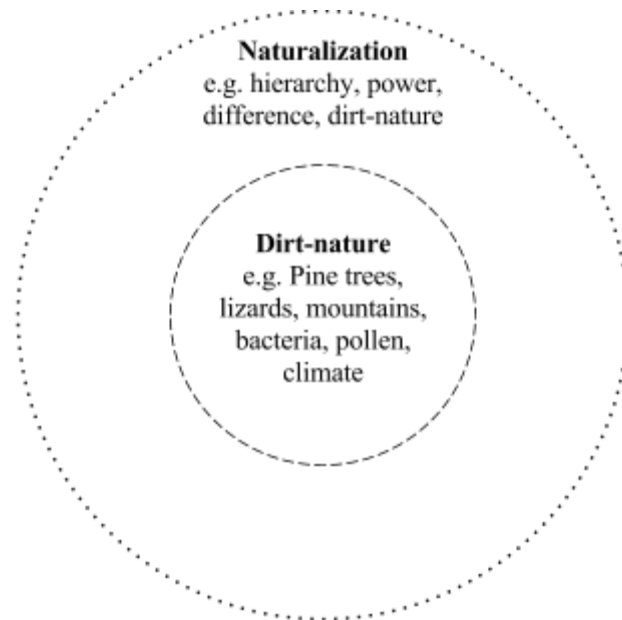


Fig. 2 Concentric circle model of the naturalization of nature

So why is *naturalization* the problem versus simply saying normalization? The two ideas are the same if we consider that *natural* is *normal*. That the norm, the baseline for existing is nature, and that the way we understand what is natural is equated to what we understand to be normal, acceptable, justifiable. Pointing out that naturalization means conforming to *nature* as what is normal is thus key to pointing out the object and its category in the same instance. Though all of these examples are intuitively examples of nature, consider the instances when they may not be. What would make these things *unnatural*? How does this change the value of

³ It is in this state that I have been living for the past many months while writing this!

that object? On the one hand, my project is to expand what is understood as natural, and simultaneously, to point out the arbitrary nature of nature and begin to do away with it as a guiding idea. Maybe we can consider these short and long term goals, respectively, because as Williams plainly proclaims, “We need different ideas because we need different relationships.”

Neoliberal Ideology in Education

A guiding ideology of the twenty first century has been neoliberalism: “a particular, historically-generated state strategy to manage the structural crisis of capitalism and provide new opportunities for capital accumulation” (Lipman 2011, 6). Neoliberalism functions through a set of policies, forms of governance, discourses, and ideologies “that promote individual self interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (Harvey 2005). It began as an economic project in the period of 1978-1980 to fight inflation using “free market” principles. Gaining traction in the United States with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, this project to “revitalize” the U.S. economy went on to thoroughly transform the world in which we now live. Popularizing an idea that had been stirring since at least the 1960’s,

neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (Harvey 2005)

In practice, this operates through mechanisms of deregulation, privatization, and “withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision”—most notably resulting in a withdrawal from social programs like welfare in favor of a reliance on the market over government interventions.

This logic undermines programs for public welfare by presuming levels of equality, freedom, and tendency toward a fair equilibrium that are simply not substantiated by reality. The image of utopia for a neoliberal state is formally race- and difference-neutral, intensifying the bootstraps mentality that has long undergirded American idealism. It places the burden of one's failure in the global market on the individual rather than on the government or economic systems that are supposedly in place to serve the people. Neoliberalism empirically proves that people—rather than the state—fail, granting immense invincibility and invisibility to state mechanisms of control.

Harvey contends that “neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.” This common sense endorses specific economic values and prescribed ways to interact with each other and participate in systems, and the implied consensus of “common sense” makes this exceptionally dangerous. Common sense impels decisions, manipulates systems, but generally remains imperceptible as a causal factor.

Pauline Lipman expresses a similar sentiment in *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (2011). Neoliberalism “has developed a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it.” Further, “education policies are both embedded in a neoliberal social imaginary and are a means to reshape social relations and social identities.” In other words, the common sense of neoliberalism reproduces itself by being empirically verified in a never-ending tautology.

Crucially, “education is both shaped by and deeply implicated in globalized political, economic, and ideological processes that have been redefining cities over the past 25 years”

(Lipman 2011, 3). Neoliberalism “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” (Harvey 2005) This directly contradicts any approach that seeks to educate “the whole child” or to approach bell hooks’ formulation of the liberatory classroom.

“Education is open territory for neoliberal experimentation,” Lipman laments, as in the quintessential cases of Chicago and New Orleans where an increasingly popular form of neoliberal intervention, the public charter school, is quickly replacing entire public school districts in the lowest-income, most segregated parts of the city. This is a movement driven by corporate philanthropists, business executives, and politicians (who are no doubt mutually benefitting), perpetuating the trend toward privatizing public education.

Slater highlights the serious, longer-term consequences of this move by regarding neoliberal reforms as *enclosures*. The language of enclosure refers to the cordoning off of a commons, the physical and ideological delineation of who is entitled to space, resources, or ideas, which “encompass a wide array of violent forms” (Slater 2014, 539). Neoliberal reforms “seek to privatize education for profit accumulation, foreclosing the possibility of education operating as a commons, or a collective process of sustainable, democratic, and ethical social production” (537). In doing so, they “entrench ideologies of human supremacy and reproduce capital in exponentially damaging ways” (538). He considers the effect on subjectivity—individuals’ ways of enacting their own agency—and how this too is enclosed. Neoliberal education produces subjects to participate in the neoliberal world. “In this sense, the goal of neoliberal education is to enclose the worldviews of students within a narrow

conceptualization of life in which value has primacy, violence and dispossession are normalized, and ecological degradation is considered the collateral damage of ‘human progress’” (545).

Lipman carries this argument further by affirming the relationship between “transforming subjectivities” and “restructuring social policies” (Lipman 2011, 11). More tangibly, in the short term, “advocates of the neoliberal way now occupy positions of considerable influence in education,” Harvey (2005) adds. From the Secretary of Education, superintendents, and district leaders, as well as prominent philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli Broad. Such companies as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple. These corporate foundations give their money to districts who run their schools like they run their businesses, with the new buzzwords of efficiency, achievement, accountability, and an unrelenting focus on improving the bottom line through standardization of school management and curriculum.

Where does the child fall in all of this? Despite these business savvy leaders’ best intentions to address the multitude of issues facing education in America, they are funding models of schooling that are harmful to those on the margins, acting as catalysts for the further privatization of educational system that formalizes oppression as the common sense way of the world. Neoliberalism is by definition neo-colonial in that it is formally race-neutral and rejects the notion of “special treatment” for anyone, thus assuming a norm that is invariably white, able bodied, neurotypical, cisgender, and english speaking.

In *Toward a New Common School Movement*, De Lissovoy, Means, and Saltman acknowledge the epistemological implications of these movements, and the ways students are marginalized by neoliberalism along many axes of difference. “The liberal tradition tends to approach schooling, knowledge, and curriculum as the pursuit of universal truth and the

accumulation of neutral knowledge. Power struggles over claims to truth and their relationship to the claimants are not part of the liberal view.” Collateral consequences of this liberal view are that education is treated as largely apolitical, the pursuit of “good schooling” is measured by “student achievement,” knowledge is understood as static and transmissible, and ultimately, that it seeks to maintain American empire (De Lissovoy et al. 2014, 6-7). *Neoliberalism* reinvigorates these educational paradigms, and uses a shift toward market principles as its primary technique. The ethos of individualism at the core, in addition to the multitude of indignities, also makes it unproductive for seeking liberation, “given the manner in which neoliberal logic erodes our communal sensibilities, while it camouflages behind a whitewashed façade of gendered and racial inclusiveness” Antonia Darder reflects (2016, xi).

What would happen if the discourse of countering neoliberalism, as in the context of race, gender, or sexuality and the way that neoliberalism encloses the commons of was of being, was applied to what is generally kept as a sacred ‘other’ category of Nature (capital N)? What does nature mean in the neoliberal state? What is naturalized through models of learning that emphasize high stakes testing, teacher/district accountability to these tests, and “choice” in schools rather than holistic assessment, teacher support, and making school adapted to communities rather than the other way around?

A Call to Action, Identifying Oppression

At a talk in March 2016, historian, artist, and writer Reina Gossett⁴ outlined the “five-I’s of oppression.” Ideological oppression is the root, where morals and common sense logic set the stage for **I**nstitutions to mandate and regulate the bodies, minds, and spiritual lives of those deemed unworthy of self-determination. These institutions include laws and law enforcement, education, government services, among other things. Ideological and institutional foundations then mediate **I**nterpersonal relationships, inciting conflict when people must regulate each other. Interpersonal oppression is then **I**nternalized, where the oppressed person comes to believe the fictions that are told to and enforced upon them. Shame and guilt often power this form of oppression, which then leads to **I**solation, the result of ideology, institutions, interpersonal relationships, and the self all driving away connection and criminalizing community. “The Five-I’s” are a model passed down through the Black radical tradition, as shared by Gossett, and provide a powerful framework around which to structure liberation work.

My reframing of naturalness as it is cemented by neoliberalism means to join and be in solidarity with resistance efforts within education. It is aimed at the Ideology stage of this cycle. From ideology, perhaps this shift could lead the institution of public education away from being an oppressive force and toward serving to liberate students. This tragically misses the point that these principles have always been guiding tenets of “Ameritocracy”(see Akom 2004) and have historically justified the subjugation of people and exploitation of their labor. It is these exact principles that uphold the prison-industrial complex and further American imperialism because a formally “color-blind” and equal-access market inherently favors the white, able-bodied, English speaking, cisgendered man. The market is not free; it is rigged to favor only a select few. So,

⁴ Visiting Scholar: Reina Gossett on Trans Feminine BIPOC History, Resistance, and Prison Abolition, March 17, 2016

neoliberalism as a way out of the very problems that neoliberalism has manufactured is bound to fail. As Audre Lorde put it in the oft-quoted adage, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Or, to consider this consequence within the educational context, Assata Shakur (1987) states it frankly: “The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the tools you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.”

Critical Responses

Critical and environmental pedagogies represent two, of certainly many, parallel lineages of educators seeking to disrupt the dominant ways of interacting with the world, specifically intervening in the way children are educated. These traditions evolved as they defined and redefined the purpose of schooling and the role of the teacher and student. Widely-known critical theorist bell hooks writes, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” This sentiment rings true for both, though they diverge in the types of “possibility” envisioned, one for social liberation, the other for ecological salvation.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy begins with the assertion that “education is always political” and that the purpose of schooling ought to be to educate students to be “cultural workers,” (Freire 1998, qtd. in Gruenewald 2003) “capable of identifying and redressing the injustices, inadequacies, and

myths of an often oppressive world.” Paulo Freire is the author of dozens of seminal works on centering critical theory in education, and over the years a large following of educator-scholar-activists have joined in this work. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire’s final work before his death in 1997, he writes:

One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love. (Freire 1997)

Another preeminent scholar who follows in the lineage of critical pedagogues is bell hooks, whose own scholarship and praxis as an educator is motivated by Freire. Hooks articulates an educational model to strive for, and in the process identifies the manifold ways in the practice of teaching must change to create what she calls a “liberatory classroom” (hooks 1994).

I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This “lived” experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, because a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place” (61)

Hooks illuminates what it means for teaching practice to be liberatory, and the conditions that are required of a truly transformative classroom space. This is an important idea to carry with me as I not only unsettle the role of neoliberalism and nature in the classroom, but as I try to reimagine what education can look like.

This canon of Black and “Third World” liberationists of which Freire and hooks are a part, developed out of civil rights and intersectional feminist movements, emerging parallel that of environmental education. It includes critical activists, theorists, and radical imprisoned intellectuals such as Assata Shakur, Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, George Jackson, among so many others. Writing in 1994, hooks’ idea of the liberatory classroom pinpoints the

flaws of traditional education and even the most culturally responsive pedagogies. Even more than twenty years later, her analysis and recommendations could not be more astute and applicable to the current state of education. “The banking or transmission theory of school knowledge, which Freire identified more than thirty [now, forty] years ago as the culprit standing in the way of critical consciousness, has returned with a vengeance” (Aronowitz 1998). And this enclosure, to return to Slater’s framing of neoliberalism in public schooling, “poses a threat to educating for liberation and sustainability” (Slater 2014, 542).

A flaw worth noting that has haunted critical pedagogy is the sexism that has existed since its origins. Keenly aware of the erasure of discourse on gender, the trajectory of critical pedagogy since Freire has been to find accord with intersectional feminism. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks does so with elegant power. Jennifer de Saxe and Antonia Darder (2016) note, however, that this evolution has been stagnant, with all of the key works of critical feminist attention to education being more than twenty years old.⁵

The world looks very different now, but the relevance of what hooks and Freire wrote two decades ago has persisted, even intensified (see Slater 2014; De Lissovoy et al. 2014; De Saxe 2014, 2016; Akom 2013). Educators still struggle to resist neoliberal, hegemonic oppression that is imposed with increasing strictness, and they still struggle against their own schools, districts, and lawmakers for the respect, autonomy, and creative space needed to implement anything that remotely resembles liberatory pedagogy. The ban on Mexican-American Studies in the Tucson Unified School District, federal “wars” on teachers’ unions, standardization and accountability measures that seek market “efficiency” from teachers

⁵ In other words, in my entire lifetime, there had been few/no works on critical feminist pedagogy produced (and at the very least, none that have received the same kind of acclaim as those prior).

and learners, and the relentless de-professionalization of teaching through consistently low wages, replacement by under-qualified volunteers, and general distrust of the majority female teacher workforce.

Forging emancipatory praxis “entails a critical pedagogy that embraces both the power of difference and a collective democratic vision of an empowered commons.” (Darder 2014)

“When nourished with the strength of critical feminisms, this revolutionary pedagogy of love extends seamlessly across both personal and political spheres of existence—destabilizing the capitalist patriarchal binary of the public versus private self” (Darder 2014). How can this destabilization of binaries extend into other facets of identity and belonging? Can we apply the lessons and methods of critical feminism to seek revolutionary restructuring of the many intersections of identity, including (or, especially) the way that we interact with phenomena or aspects of ourselves (and others’ selves) that confuse the binary of natural/unnatural? I understand the mission of critical feminist pedagogy to be waging a parallel struggle as the one taken up here, and there are powerful ways these can be intertwined.

Environmental Pedagogy

In a wave of educational reform in the 1990’s-2000’s, environmental education (EE) was starting to take hold as teaching and learning that stress the importance of learning outdoors, and of fostering a connection between children and the “natural places” they inhabit. Environmental education seeks transformation in a different way. Up against the heightened ethos of individualism, globalized competition, standardization, environmental education provided a compelling counter-imaginary to the rigidity, efficiency, and detachment that educators were

observing. The emphasis on the great outdoors as a site of learning was an important moment of bringing environmentalism into people's everyday lives and spreading a specific kind of concern for the biophysical environment. At the same time, it put only a limited scope of what counted as environmental concern at the forefront of the public imagination, limiting other kinds of actions that could have been construed as "anti-environment" even if they were working against similar forces of capitalism, white supremacy, and domination.

Stephen Trimble articulates what he identifies as part of the power of education that occurs in wild places, in reference to the troublesome aspects of gender and wilderness: "The land can empower by providing **neutral** ground for leadership. The earth allows children to be themselves, to be **active rather than passive**, to **take control** of their play, their time, their imaginations. These possibilities **break through some of the walls built around us by gender roles.**" (Trimble 1994)

This brief overview is rich with subtle meaning, which I consider to be exemplary of general trends in environmental education. With each keyword, a flood of common sense fallacies are exposed. First, Trimble express that gender roles are walls, are synthetic; play in nature can break them down. Children learn to be in control by taking control of nature, the passive object to their claiming of subjective agency. Being active is preferred to being passive; people ought to enact, not be enacted upon. Wilderness is neutral, apart from human influence or the chaos of human dynamics.

In this formulation, nature is quite literally neutral (read: colorblind, or blind to difference along any axis.) Trimble self-consciously identifies this gendered bias in EE,⁶ but by contrasting

⁶ Though it is worth noting that there is little acknowledgement of how EE is both gendered and racialized, creating a naturalized ethic of exclusion.

the natural with the built environment in his comment on the socialization of boys and girls, Trimble unintentionally reifies the relationship between these binary points. Finally, nature is decidedly separate from civilization and the structures and hegemonic powers therein. It should ring false to the reader that this could ever be true. As Latour explains, we must become comfortable with the fact that everything is constructed. Given the constructedness, we can look more closely to assess whether something is well or badly composed, and consider its effectiveness as a way of composing the world.

Another key piece of EE, in addition to the reliance on the land as the great equalizer, is the land as a site for development of self-esteem as the key to (individualized) learning. “Before such growth is possible, the bedrock of self-esteem must be solid. The land can help” (Trimble 1994). This may be true for some, and self-esteem/efficacy are important, but this is also a uniquely American concept that self-esteem is the key ingredient to a successful child. It arises from the same sense that the individual is the most effective unit of agency, that has historically inhered in American ideology. The idea that success follows self-esteem is in many ways contradictory to the idea that pride should follow success, and it was an educational innovation (or fad, depending on how you see it) to center this mindset in schools.

It is relevant to note that the content of environmental education also maintains a certain sense of religiosity. It is like a secular engagement with a god, where the man in the sky is replaced with the rivers and trees. In the acknowledgements to *Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Spaces*, Trimble articulates his own background as the mixing of what could be called nature or science and organized religious tradition, and the resulting connection with the land that echoes with spiritual undertones. This deeply personal connection is not one to be

shunned, but it is one to take note of. I notice the way that nature is overflowing with sentimental meaning, and the degree to which just the mention of a breeze rustling a field of wildflowers might inspire a very visceral response—of awe, admiration, or maybe even transcendence. I notice the way that nature is something beloved.

My inquiry is pointed at precisely at this expressive moment: nature is completely taken as given—it is the land, the breeze, the flowers, and the trees, of course. What is natural (nature) is in direct contrast with what is unnatural (the built environment). This is not a shaming of spiritual practice nor a denial of the very real experiences one may have. Rather, I am drawn to question the impulse to react in this way and the proscriptive act of insisting this is the kind of interaction to teach toward. It strikes me as a moment where disbelief must be suspended in order to experience nature in this spiritual way, and where it only makes sense if it is just common sense. It is at this point where I want to intervene and ask, *is that all that qualifies as nature? Who decides? If nature is the stuff that we value, what stuff does that not include? Where is nature? Can this nature be my backyard? Can this nature be in the city? Can the nature be the city?*

I am not the first to ask these questions, and to a degree, later versions of environmental or place-based education seek to address what begins to be exposed as an exclusive practice of environmentalism. But this Romanticism, and the elite whiteness and masculinity (in relation to a very specific kind of femininity) that have been fundamental to the idea of wilderness and nature since at least the nineteenth century have persisted, and are evidenced by the way that nature is invoked as the subject and setting of education. There is much that this practice could gain from an interaction with intersectional feminism, but I fear that the result would be an impasse. The

radical aims of critical intersectional feminism, or of applying a compositionist lens, is to make visible how it maybe that nature is not actually what is being valorized, but the white, masculine, spirituality-tinted filter through which wildness is viewed. It is the fact that it is *wild*, that nature is Other, and that it is something that supposedly provides refuge from the messiness of humanity that it really being valued. But what happens when it becomes evident that nature is just as composed as New York City sewer system? What does that mean for environmental education or the deeply personal spirituality that Trimble experiences and hope to share with his children?

Critical Pedagogy of Place: A “Conscious Blending” of Pedagogical Traditions

Throughout the development of critical and ecological pedagogies, practitioners and researchers of the traditions remained exceptionally siloed, with relatively little communication or blending of praxis. In 2003, David A. Gruenewald authored *The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy Of Place*, formulating a critical pedagogy that “emphasizes the spatial aspects of social experience” (Gruenewald 2003, 3). The addition of *place* would not only bring to the forefront issues that environmentalists have grappled with, but the hope was that it would also provide a useful angle to approach issues of difference and power. Whereas critical pedagogy has been noted as being too focused on urban contexts, ecological is often regarded as too focused on the rural.

Place-based education (PBE) is part of an educational movement that took root in the 1990s, generating from the energy of the American environmental movements of the 1950s-70s. The term “place based” encompasses many pedagogical forms, including environmental or ecological education, outdoor education, community based pedagogy, and is related to constructivism and story or narrative based learning. When referring to place-based education (PBE), I am referring to a specific form of pedagogy which is centered on *place* and learning through local networks and systems.

CPP, as a particular kind of place-based learning, expands on ecological models of place-based education with its critical lens, still remaining true in many ways to each one separately. Gruenewald’s goals are made clear: “This pedagogy seeks the twin objectives of decolonization and “reinhabitation” through synthesizing critical and place-based approaches”(3).

As a challenge to neoliberal influence, author-educators like Gruenewald (2003, 2014), and Smith (1999, 2002, 2014, 2015) revise these traditions in ways that are crucial to opening stronger dialogues and teaching beyond the bounds of the classroom, rightly observing the potential to foster revolutionary thinking.

This kind of place-based education is striking for the way it integrates many different teaching traditions, and seeks a balance between what are often conflicting goals of learning about what is *here* and what is *over there*. Gruenewald, in partnership with Gregory A. Smith, later compiled the edited volume *Place Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity* (2014). Immediately apparent in the title is the fact that it will treat the local and the global, curiously as opposing forces. The implied (and later, clearly articulated) goal of connecting the local and the global, of connecting people to nature, inherently presumes a disconnect.

Place based education is understood as the “educational counterpart of a broader movement, ‘the new localism, toward reclaiming the significance of the local in the global age. Responding to patterns of globalization that disrupt, rather than cultivate, community life” (Gruenewald and Smith 2014, xiii).

As I consider this idea, that maybe we are too immersed in what is *over there* to have a strong sense of what is right here, many questions come to mind. First, is this true? Who is it that is lost in the global? What ultimately makes hyperlocalism any different from hyperglobalism? At any one moment, I am interacting with forces and political economies that are explicitly global in scale, right from where I sit. The parts of the computer on which I type are composed of the labor and materials of at least a hundred different people in probably more than a dozen cities and countries. Does place-based education, with its focus on the local, shun technology? Does it

seek a connection with lifestyles of yesteryear, real or imagined, which supposedly were less attached to global influence? How does (or can) *place*-based education acknowledge the ways a sense of place can be negative or harmful; that is, how can it avoid essentializing place in the same way that environmental education essentializes ecology?

In Gruenewald 2003, critical pedagogy of place “aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (rehabilitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (9).

In other words, as articulated in the later work of Gruenewald and Smith:

Decolonization: Coming to understand and resist the ideas and forces that allow for the privileging of some people and the oppression of others—human and other-than-human.”

Reinhabitation- At other times, place-consciousness means learning how to reinhabit our communities and regions in ways that allow for more sustainable relationships now and in the long run. (Gruenewald and Smith 2014, viii)

Tuck and Yang (2012) raise a crucial point that calls into question the first of these twin objectives, that *decolonization is not a metaphor*. “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.”

“As important as their goals may be,” Tuck and Yang continue, “social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives have objectives that may be incommensurable with decolonization.” It may at first appear harmless to use this language in metaphor, but Tuck and Yang elaborate how this is a misappropriation of terms that diminishes the agency of those using it in a radical way that threatens, to an extent, the white, settler, colonial way of life. “The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence,’ that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and

complicity, and rescue settler futurity.” The incommensurability of decolonization and the “decolonization and reinhabitation” of PBE highlights an aspect where the narrative and project of white, settler, colonialism has not been fully evaluated. Could this also be understood as a point where mononaturalism is showing and multiculturalism is failing? A reassessment of the way PBE’s objectives may intersect or diverge with radical Indigenous projects could deepen the form of multiculturalism, and would necessitate that relationships with naturalness be reconsidered, refigured to acknowledge the history of oppression that is intimately known by Indigenous people, and is imprinted on the land and all living things that exist with it.⁷ Returning to the kind of ecological degradation that environmental place-based pedagogues hope to counter, Slater identifies neoliberalism as “normalizing human supremacy as a sort of ecological ontology—an inherent condition in which ecological damage and the systemic extermination of species is an unavoidable byproduct of the natural human condition” (2014). Can our multinaturalism de-center humans as the all-powerful subjects, opening space for other kinds of subjectivity?

The need for reinhabitation is a response to a sense of placelessness—that people are not living in places long enough to develop intimate connections to those places, residing rather than inhabiting place. Whose fault is this is placelessness? My mind turns to low-income people of color living in gentrifying neighborhoods, who do not move by their own volition but are effectively pushed out by socioeconomic forces. Or to people living as refugees who were impelled to leave because of imminent violence or threats to their survival. Or people seeking economic opportunity in a slim job market or so many other things, where a connection to place

⁷ There is much more to be said about the equation of nature and Native, and more work I must do before I can say it. Refer to Tuck and Yang 2012, Ray 2013 for a start.

must fall to the wayside in order to secure personal survival— this is not always in pursuit of an entertainment-media style dream even if that is sometimes a factor. “the new localism is not only about creating the economic conditions to make staying possible; it is also about conserving and creating patterns of connectedness and mutuality that are the foundation of a community of well-being” (Gruenewald and Smith 2014). While we can all support the pursuit of such mutually caring relationships, why is it so important to reinhabit—to deepen a sense of ownership or domination over the land? Why can’t someone who moves about in space be gaining a sense of place?

While CPP/PBE can work to rethink the the content of environmental education and put a focus on place, let us consider how they may not challenge the *idea of naturalness to begin with*. It still assumes that there are poles to this spectrum, rather than rejecting these things as polar at all. It does not question the construction that there is that which is *natural*, which inevitably exists in dichotomous relationship to that which is *not natural*. And so the notion of place that they infuse in their structure of Place Based Education is nevertheless bound to these binaries.

Nespor (2008) points out one component of this:

The failure of PBE theory to address the ways education and place are woven in part out of racism, classism, gender, and ability discrimination—leaves it in a position of being able to say little about fundamental place-making processes. This marginalizes the program in relation to key political and educational debates of the day and, in the end, may undermine efforts to make place central to educational theory and practice. (489)

Nespor identifies a failure in the realm of multiculturalism, because without a sincere multiculturalism, little can be revealed about multinaturalism. Thus far, my emphasis has been on seeking multinaturalism for multiculturalisms sake, but the reverse is also crucial. In a review of Smith & Gruenewald’s edited volume, Hayes-Conroy (2008) articulates,

While place in this book is considered a nexus between the forces of culture and nature, there still seems to exist an assumption that anthropocentric forces fall on the side of culture, knowledge, and meaning, while natural forces make up the physical, non-human world... [this] puts the human body in an awkward state of non-belonging... This is problematic given that we experience place in and through our material, interconnected selves.

Hayes-Conroy identifies mononaturalism in action and the consequence for multiculturalism, Further, she determines that this model of PBE does not attend to how places produce people, only how people produce place. I return to bell hooks' idea of the liberatory classroom to recall the framework we are trying to build, and drawing on De Lissovoy et al. (2014) and Slater's (2014) calls to reimagine subjectivity and the common. I want to consider a slight, but important reframing of the kind of place-based education that Gruenewald and Smith map. I think we can further destabilize the sense of the natural that permeates their notions of place in order to continue to seek an inclusive model that works beyond binaries of nature/non-nature, modeling the form and function of thinking beyond other troublesome dualisms restrict identity and belonging.

CPP gets closer to finding a deep multiculturalism, but has yet to unsettle mononaturalism. Does this kind of PBE resolve the issues of mononaturalism that persisted in previous models? In what ways can the ideas of nature that have persisted throughout other pedagogical innovations be found in PBE? In what ways does it rebuke or reframe these ideas? Does an emphasis on community mean an acknowledgement of multinaturalism, or it is just another word for nature (as Castree points out, there are many words in a cluster that can refer to the same idea)? Gruenewald seeks to strike a balance between the aims of both critical pedagogy and place-based pedagogy, with critical pedagogy of place showing how the two can work in coalition. CPP provides a strong basis for undermining tendencies toward Latour's conception of

shallow multiculturalism, yet because both critical pedagogy and ecological place based education take mono-naturalism for granted, the combination of the two does not automatically questions singular ideas of what nature is. However, it *can*. Beginning from a notion of the multiplicity of ways that “the natural” exists is not simply a matter of cut-and-paste to integrate this into praxis. It is difficult and maybe paradoxical to consider what *multinaturalism* actually looks like. It requires that we imagine in ways we have never actually experienced. But that should not stop one from considering it, as that is the work of visionary thinking. How do you conceptualize the phenomenal experience of being in the world without relying on the primacy of nature? What kinds of categories can you use to describe what Hayles terms “the flux” (1995) without the familiar, yet confining, structure of binaries?

Summarizing an idea from Sarah Jaquette Ray’s *The Ecological Other* (Ray 2013), Sze (2014) comments, “the figures of ‘the invalid, the Indian, and the immigrant’ haunt modern environmentalism by reflecting the ways that “environmentalism is complicit in maintaining social hierarchies.” In the same vein, *how does mononaturalism haunt place-based educations, specifically critical pedagogy of place?* In what ways is place-based pedagogy, as a logical extension/elaboration of similar environmentalist ethics, complicit in not only maintaining social hierarchies, but hierarchies of naturalness with regard to ability, race, class, and relationships with place? What starts out as a radical possibility emerging in education may lose its fangs when it stops short of something truly radical.

In Practice: Claiming Place, Being Critical

Alternative Pedagogy in Public Schools

At this point in my analysis, I hope to situate these theoretical explorations in a way that the reader can hold on to. Still, the challenge to visualize beyond the confines of our current composition is quite apparent. So, to provide a context to ask questions and envision what a pedagogy of multinaturalism might look like, I turn to two schools that I have come to know personally: Bolton Primary School in West Linn, Oregon, and the Native American Youth and Family Center Early College Academy (NAYA ECA) in NE Portland, Oregon. Each school is making conscious choices every day to seek a departure from the stubborn confines of neoliberal education and revise public school systems that are not always able to give their children what is needed. The theory and practice of each are very different, so I consider throughout this section how we can learn from both. I do not suppose these schools to be representative of anything beyond themselves, but hope that they will allow us to envision connections, possibilities, and ways of working through the trouble with mononaturalism.

*Bolton Primary School*⁸

Bolton Primary School in West Linn, Oregon is located just south of Portland in the suburban-rural district of West Linn-Wilsonville (WLWV). Bolton is an example of a small team

⁸ My role at Bolton began as a practicum student in Ms. Jones' fourth grade classroom, and after a successful term, I returned in the spring, taking on a greater role in organizing, leading, and facilitating curriculum in the garden and the other outdoor spaces. In this time I gained participatory and observational experience in the planning and integration of place-based and environmental education principles into the standards driven curriculum, and I worked closely with Kelley to be thoughtful and intentional about how we engaged the vast resources that exist. In this later part of my involvement, I was loosely titled the "garden specialist," filling a gap which required the help of a full time person. I was able to give specific attention to Bolton, and become particularly familiar with its spaces and students in a way that CREST, the in-district environmental education center, was unable to do with its limited staff and funding along with its district-wide scope.

of experienced teachers working to implement place-based education within a school that is relatively amenable to PBE principles. However, as a district, WLWV is formally engaged in the work of standardization, much to the dismay of many educators. The top-down mandates for how teachers ought to teach and students ought to learn limits, in many ways, the possibilities for creative pedagogy. As most public schools do, it carries the burden of standardized testing that subsequently mandates standardized curriculum. This is one of the greatest barriers to implementation of PBE practices that include getting out of the classroom and situating research inquiries in local community networks and ecosystems. In other ways, Bolton is a thriving community school that is dedicated to a model of teaching “the whole child” and this is visible at school-wide gatherings, in project-based learning, and a good deal of parent involvement. When asked what was exceptional about Bolton, 4th-5th grade teacher Kelley Jones explained,

I would say that teachers are very thoughtful about their practice and that they are always thinking about what's best for kids. This includes thinking of the whole child, not just intellect/academic performance but social, connection with nature, giving them time and opportunity to deal with social justice issues, connecting them with their communities and opportunity to change their world for the better.⁹

In the principal’s welcome letter on Bolton’s website, Holly Omlin-Rubeck praises that,

At Bolton, we intentionally explore our natural outdoor environments and create opportunities to learn in, from and about nature. We understand that interacting with our natural outdoor environment is essential for academic growth and physical and emotional health.... At Bolton all children are understood as youngsters who are engaged in the complexities of human relationships and are naturally faced with ethical dilemmas in which they are supported to make positive choices. Each child, in every grade, is a valued learner and member of our community.¹⁰

Kelley, and fellow teachers in fourth/fifth and kindergarten, along with a handful of others across grade levels, are committed advocates and practitioners of place-based education.¹¹

⁹ Kelley Jones, personal communication, March 2016.

¹⁰ <http://www.bolps.wlwy.k12.or.us/site/default.aspx?PageID=15>

¹¹ Introduced to the pedagogy by Greg Smith, Professor of Teacher Education at Lewis & Clark Graduate School who also taught the class that inspired my engagement with PBE, Bolton teachers are directly connected to the network of PBE.

As such, place based education is strongly rooted in their classrooms, and is connected with the class gardens, recently renewed by volunteers, as well as the wealth of outdoor spaces including a nearby forest preserve, access to the shore of the Willamette River, and many other sites within driving distance. During my time at Bolton, the unit for most of spring term was on biomes. The objective was to understand and engage with how ecosystems function as complex networks and some of the specific processes that go on to create adaptations in living things, climatic variations, and unique geomorphology. Rather than simply bringing the classroom outside or bring nature into the classroom, these lessons intended to facilitate a sense of deep understanding of where we all live. We had the task of trying to situate the students within geologic time, while facing the realities of only so many hours in a day and days in a week. When pursuing lofty goals, the fourteen or so weeks of a school term close in much faster than we might care to realize. I came to understand the difficulty of this task, especially in the context of having numerous other curricular milestones to reach in the time crunch before and between testing weeks. In an interview, Kelley elaborated,

"I'm not always sure—what is [standardized testing] really about anyway? Why do we, you know, if teachers are doing their own formal assessments in the classroom and watching kids as they move from one thing to another, and learning, then why, why do we need that number?"¹²

This standardization gets in the way of following the passions of engaged teachers, or letting classroom dynamics dictate where lessons lead. While it has its merits in schools and with teachers who don't have the kind of training to be able to reach that level of engagement without the rigid guidelines, for those who seek a deeper kind of learning and who have strong visions for their classrooms, the standards become an impediment, Kelley explained further. Teaching other material is technically allowed, but if it doesn't prepare kids directly for the esotericism of

¹² Kelley Jones, personal communication, March 2016.

the tests, it puts them at a disadvantage in terms of those assessments. Even if teachers, like Kelley and many on her team, agree that the tests are generally irrelevant to understanding actual, individualized growth and learning, they become a requirement because of district level politics, and even the most amiable principals must walk a fine line of support and advocacy and following the rules set by higher-ups.

The purpose of standardization is *accountability*, that other hefty buzzword that people love to throw around. As a relatively homogenous community in terms of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background, these measures are not particularly intended for this community. Bolton has a thriving PTA, some economic support for creative ventures, and students arriving to school fed and only distracted by “kid stuff” rather than the harsh realities of an oppressive, unequal world. In theory, a place like Bolton ought to be most amenable to these shifts in pedagogy curriculum. Still, they understandably still struggle for creative pedagogies; as educators they are able to identify what their school and community needs and larger systems of neoliberal influence certainly contribute to the de-professionalization and general distrust of rabble rousing teachers.

The privileges and barriers that Bolton faces are not necessarily unique, but are specific to the demographics the school serves. Some questions that I have considered, but that do not really have clear answer are: As a school that represents a majority white, upper-middle class, English-speaking students, what is the need and use of politics and pedagogies of liberation? And still, though not a majority, there are students of color and low-income students. Plenty of children exist at the intersections of other marginalized identities too, such as learning differences, gender identity, and physical ability, and de-marginalizing these experiences is

integral the liberatory classroom. There is a very convincing argument to be made for the idea that no one is free until we all are, and so it is the responsibility of educators to provide the tools for students to understand their privileges and place themselves in relation to others and communities they may not be a part of. I want to affirm that Bolton does this well, and also assert that there is always room to grow. Finally, the issue of age-appropriate approaches is all important. There are developmental limitations to the age range of Pre-K through 5th grade, and still immense possibilities for fostering mutual respect, care, and admiration for the experiences of one another. Bolton, as all schools surely do, works diligently to balance these needs, and it is continually worth questioning what is developmentally and culturally appropriate.

Finding inspiration in Sunnyside Environmental School, a relatively new K-8 public charter school in SE Portland, the school tries to foster a sense of wonder about nature and complicate it by engaging with place and community in a more nuanced way. It is a special thing to beauty and wonder in the whole world around oneself, and especially to foster that for children. The sensual parts of learning, and the imaginative and animated ways of making meaning can (and probably should) be integral to school. So why can we not broaden the range of things we deem valuable, and find value in them beyond their aesthetic qualities? This means loving ugly vegetables and bizarre invertebrates, as well as understanding the variations among people and human-nonhuman interactions that may also at first appear off-putting, strange, alien, or scary. This too, is the work of troubling mononaturalism and multiculturalism that stops short of liberation.

NAYA Early College Academy

The NAYA ECA is an alternative school within the Portland Public School District which “enrolls youth ages 14-20 who have struggled academically and or behaviorally in a traditional school setting” (PPS 2014). Started as a private school which was then incorporated into Portland Public, there are many advantages to NAYA ECA’s status as an alternative school. Small numbers of enrollment allow for highly personalized learning and attention. Founded with the aim of centering Indigenous ways of knowing, the school uses the *relational worldview model* to inform its pedagogy and reliance on community. In an interview with Lisa Otero, Coordinator of Curriculum and Instruction at NAYA ECA, she elaborates:

It’s a Native-based model, which looks at things in a circular pattern rather than a linear pattern. And so you’re looking at wholeness as an individual becoming more whole or addressing parts of a whole, whereas I think more traditional public education addresses one or two parts of any person, that being mostly the intellect [...]. I think academic achievement comes with personal transformation, but it isn’t the end. It isn’t necessarily what we’re going for always. Where I think in a lot of traditional public schooling—well, I don’t think, I *know*—the most important thing is the achievement. The test score.
(Lisa Otero, pers. comm.)

There is also great emphasis on being “trauma informed,” listening and learning carefully from students own experiences, recognizing the emotional burdens they bring with them to the classroom, and viewing school as a place to try to mend those wounds. The ECA website describes itself as, “committed to creating a positive education that emphasizes student empowerment and academic excellence. We value the integrity of core American Indian and Alaska Native values in partnership with parents, families, elders, and community members.”¹³ Not all students identify as Native, but all of them come to school with baggage, as individuals for whom “traditional” public school (read: normalized neoliberal models that institutionalize

¹³ <http://nayapdx.org/services/early-college-academy/>

oppression) was not created. “Our students are given the culturally-specific supports that help them achieve their goals, graduate, go to college, and become successful community members,” the website continues. This goal, of supporting kids through the system, in other places can turn into giving students the bare minimum required to earn a piece of paper with the district seal. At NAYA, however, they pride themselves on the thriving community and sense of purpose that kids graduate with.

How can we see in NAYA a kind of place-based pedagogy? What makes NAYA’s education different from PBE at Bolton, Sunnyside, or any of the other schools profiled by Grunewald and Smith? An obvious answer is their students and community—PBE should not be one size fits all, and it should reflect local differences. It does not actively call its pedagogy “of place,” and I was curious to understand why, because on the surface it would appear to do just that. But after interviews, personal experience, and my analysis thus far, I wonder if it can be said that the traditions of geography that coalesce into place studies, the whitewashed and gendered history of environmentalism that invigorates much of what Grunewald and contemporaries, do not apply in the same, prefixed ways to a model that centers the way Indigenous tradition makes meaning in the world.

Because in almost every way, NAYA is an act of resistance. The NAYA community articulates their ten primary values at length: “Respect, Balance, Pride, Giving, Community, Tradition, Kindness, Accountability, Diversity and Leadership.”¹⁴ If we consider the Five-I’s of oppression: community disrupts isolation, pride counters internalization, kindness, respect, and accountability undermine interpersonal oppression, giving and diversity debase oppressive

¹⁴ <http://nayapdx.org/about/values/>

institutions, and balance and tradition resist ideological oppression. As praxis, these values embody a community advocating for itself and resisting the colonial pressures to conform, to standardize, to pursue market efficiency as a model of education. “During the last decade, schools that insisted on their difference committed and unholy violation of the new common sense that the highest mission and overriding purpose of schooling was to prepare students, at different levels, to take their places in the corporate order” (Aronowitz 1998). NAYA ECA nevertheless insists on their difference, and that is perhaps their greatest service to their students.

Part of the shift from earlier practices of environmental education to place-based education was the addition of “community” and inclusion of the urban landscape as a valid landscape for engagement with place. While there are probably more practitioners of PBE, nearly all of the core authors of this pedagogy are baby-boomer-aged white men.¹⁵ In that, an unavoidable tension arises: is it appropriate to use the pedagogy and ways of knowing of a composite of Native cultures while most practitioners and often times students of PBE are white, upper class folks? Is it wrong to incorporate those ways of teaching and learning while places like NAYA are communities by and for Native peoples doing that work for their own communities? We may like those models, but are they *ours* to incorporate into otherwise white-centric curricular forms? I don’t think there is a solid answer to these questions, but they are questions we must take care to ask before using Native things (that is, ideologies, practices, arts, history, etc.) in ways that depoliticize those things; that strip them of their symbolic resonance and power as forms of resistance to colonial, paternalistic hegemony.

¹⁵ No less than three of them are also named David. (Gruenewald, Greenwood, Sobel)

“Native American students have the lowest graduation rates of all minorities in Portland with a 29% four-year cohort graduation rate. Additionally, our students are overrepresented in behavioral issues that lead to more suspensions and expulsions, and are often singled out for cultural differences that are not represented in mainstream curriculum.”

* * *

It would be easy to essentialize these two schools, Bolton and NAYA, one as “ecological” and the other as “socially critical” to align with the false binary that already permeates alternative pedagogies, as I have outlined. However, this would deny their complexity and the ways they do function outside of these linear pedagogical traditions. Reality is much messier than the abstractions I have discussed and so our theory must account for that. Real circumstances and educators’ intentions may be aligned at times, but I have seen far more often that the work is more about doing what is needed for individual children than trying to align 100% with a pedagogical form, a state-standard, or even a daily lesson plan.

So why do pedagogies suppose we should seek a utopia where circumstances would never get in the way? Why can’t educational theory *presume* unpredictability, daily variation, and children with unique needs and learning styles? I hope that what I am doing makes this more possible, rather than adding an extra constraint of words we cannot say or topics we ought not teach. I want to support those teacher who find a groove, and continue to be mindful of the way that common sense guides snap judgements and curricular trajectories.

Considering multinaturalism, as a means of supporting what it means to practice multiculturalism, means recognizing now, rather than waiting until some idyllic circumstances

are achieved, the ways that individual students, teachers, schools, and districts are complicated and do not fit within these boundaries of naturalness. It means rejecting the common sense that nature is out there and that there is some way we could possibly be *not* engaging with it at all times.

Seeking Multinaturalism at the Root of Pedagogy

Nature is a thread of our heartstrings that is never touched. People are not deconstructing nature in the same way that they are talking about race, gender, sexuality, ability, language, nationality, and so on. It is one of these taken for granted ideas, even by folks in the most radical circles I know. Why is nature so untouchable? Why don't we think it's a problem? The idea of nature plays within a binary that is inextricably connected to all of the above facets of identity, and would do us *all* good to think about more deeply. To envision the invisible, that is, expose common sense as less common and less sensical than we once believed, it is helpful to think in analogy and metaphor.

Gender is a composition in which the trouble with binaries has already been well established. It is apparent to most that in the world there are men and there are women; masculine and feminine. In this dichotomy, one must be either/or. And yet, we can acknowledge that there are women in the world who embody what are labeled masculine traits, and men who embody what are called feminine traits. An early solution to this dissonance was to say, well of course, there is a spectrum. On one end is the male/masculine, and one end is the female/feminine. This allows room for a *blending* of the binary categories, and validates many more possibilities. And yet, this still does not account for the complexity, and ultimately arbitrary line drawn between the endpoints of male and female.

On this line, gender can only move in two directions: toward one category or another. Still, this does not account for the individual who is gender non-conforming, who identifies with neither of these genders. If man and woman are two points, and a “spectrum” is a line that one can travel to pass between the two, then the gender of someone who does not conform to the binary is another point over in the distance. That point is incomprehensible if we are only considering the existence of two genders and their relationships to the world. In order to understand other genders, one has to take a step back to see that man and woman are only two

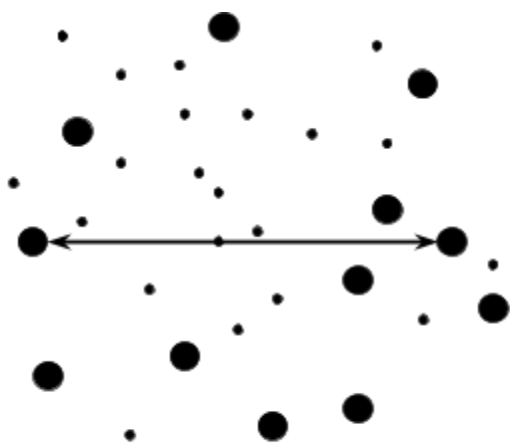


Fig. 3 Two endpoints and a line (i.e. binary ideas) cannot account for the multitude of possibilities that are only visible when looking beyond from the predefined connections.

points among an entire cloud of points that represent the infinite possible gender identities and expressions. Acknowledging these other points creates the space to respect the validity and autonomy of various genders, as well as to make sense of how others experience the world and to recompose the relationships between different genders, expressions, and physicalities.

Sara Ahmed (2006) similarly uses a geometric, spatial model to make sense of gender, space, and identity, and to illustrate the ways we can “queer” the confining linear structure of binaries.

I propose we take this same action of stepping back in the context of the natural. Just as with gender, nature exists in a common sense way as the opposite of culture, or more broadly, that which is *unnatural*. We are very good at categorizing things with only a brief glance into one of these categories. A tree, a car, an apartment building, or a flower. But what about when things get knottier? A laboratory synthesized strain of bacteria? A fungus bred in between your

toes? A garden in the middle of New York City? A hole in the ozone layer? Genetically modified corn? One could be quick to judge these examples, but upon more careful consideration, it is not so easy to delineate whether these are in fact natural or unnatural, by existing definitions. In fact, even the more straightforward examples are far more complex than at first glance, given the entwined in networks of labor, resources, power, and biotic and abiotic forces.

Blending binaries is not radical. The best outcome one can get is some hybrid of a binary. What if we reject the notion that there is a binary to begin with? What if we reject the idea that all things in the flux must fall into or between two categories? The more deeply I think about this, the more *nonsensical* it seems to attempt to categorize seven billion people (and counting), millions of species and innumerable forces into such reduced categories. In the same way that we don't need to stop talking about men and women in order to validate other genders, we do not need to excise "nature" from our vocabulary. Still, far more specificity is needed.

"These binaries create boundaries and differences that are presumed to inhere in reality, in part 'by nature', in part by design," and further, "these oppositional [antonyms] often appear to be *hierarchical*, with one side coded positively and the other not... One of the paradoxes of binary thinking is that in order for any one antonym to make sense it must necessarily imply the meaning of the very thing it is supposed to be the opposite of...each antonym casts its 'conceptual shadow' over its putative 'other', so functioning as an absent presence." (Castree 2014)

There are a multiplicity of relationships between things categorized as natural and unnatural, human and non-human, social and ecological, and it is not conducive to creative thinking to be limited to a single, linear axis. As alluded to in considering holes in the ozone

layer, or global climate patterns that are changing in unprecedented ways, how can we understand and approach problems that are functioning among networks that we are blind to? How can we understand the ways that these problems—which, I may add, have very tangible effects and demand serious attention—not only blend what is understood to be natural and unnatural, but actually transgress these categories and exist as a totally different “point” among this cloud of possibilities? Drawing a line between two endpoints does not create something radical. It creates a line. One can only bounce back and forth. Acknowledging the multitude of natures, or genders, means considering what it would mean to draw many lines between many points, forming a complicated, intertwined, network within the nebulous expanse of possible points. Certainly, this is more complicated to navigate, but so are the realities of power, oppression, privilege, and relationships among humans and nonhumans. Troubling the the binary of naturalness is just one of many places to start.

I have asked, *How is nature "naturalized" in forms of pedagogy that center place as a way to blend critical and environmental educational traditions?* And while we have many answers, I have far more questions. If we take the Anthropocene as a given, accepting that our planet has been fundamentally and irreversibly altered by the human presence, what must nature mean and how are we to educate about it? Hayles’ conception of “constrained constructivism” offers a helpful framework: “A constructivist position need not lead to a laissez-faire attitude toward the environment,” rather, it “points out that human interactions with the flux comprise only an infinitesimal fraction of possible modes of being in the world. It extends our awareness of anthropomorphism into a perspective that values other species’ encounters with the flux precisely because they are different than ours. Understanding that we are positioned, we also

understand that we are limited and finite creatures.” (Hayles 1995, 60) When we question what outcomes could arise when we disrupt the laser focus on binary categorizations of naturalness to work toward a notion of "multinaturalism" in how we teach and learn, we begin on a path toward visionary futuring.

Endnote

I just have so many questions!

If given another year to work on this, my primary goal would be to integrate queer theory into this argument and to seek the ways that the rich and growing literature on “queering” ways of being and knowing could support this goal to de-naturalize nature in pedagogy, and conversely, consider how a denaturalized nature could support the objectives of radical queer theorists writing across disciplines. The scope of this project changed broadly with only a few weeks to spare, and I feel certain that my genuine interest and personal stakes in the matter will compel me to continue reading, rewriting, questioning, and practicing what it means to de/recompose nature— and the many parallel threads I could follow to weave this throughout many areas of study, social projects, and professions. High up on my reading list is *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed, and a re-reading of *The Ecological Other* by Sarah Jaquette Ray. I want to, in future iterations of this work—even if it is not in essay form—refer more to female and genderqueer people of color and actively seek those perspectives that may not be available or accessible in the same ways as traditional scholarship values. I am eager to enter the profession of teaching with this mindset and I hope to find those challenging, motivating, and hopefully liberating models of pedagogy, and I also hope to find space for myself to practice this as a teacher, learner, co-creator of knowledge.

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