

Creating a Transcendent Common without Sanctioning Withdrawal

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In “Distance Education and the Pursuit of the Common at the time of COVID-19: Ontology of Separation,” philosophers of education Naoko Saito and Tomohiro Akiyama remind us of the distance of language but also the closeness of ideas, of our voices speaking out when current issues intersect with timeless philosophy.¹ Today is indeed the perfect reminder. As academic conferences and school classes worldwide go online and there are global social distancing protocols in place, separation is imminent.² Saito and Akiyama’s work illuminates important theory for humans managing the delicate COVID-19 dance of the public and private. Their references to American Transcendentalism are appealing, idealistic in the most romantic way (a true testament to Thoreau and Emerson), and also surprisingly concrete as a way of conceptualizing an ontology of being in the world, particularly an ontology of separation.

But there is much yet to do if we wish to form a complete ontology of separation, and even more necessary for reassigning it as a pedagogical guide for distance learning and a new “digital commons.” In my response to their work herein, I applaud Saito and Akiyama’s goal to create a transcendent common. To further their aim, I hope to draw the attention of other readers interested in some of their primary themes concerning otherness, acknowledging inherent phenomenological distances, thinking about placefulness, poetic spaces, and intimacy. I also wish to emphasize some of the riskier aspects of their notion of withdrawal, risks inherent in any language project that restates our separateness in communication, space, access, and being. Withdrawal can indeed renew our interest in the social world, but it can also permit social injustices, ignorance of the plight of others, and underline differences. The internet does not, as they suggest, “make all physical differences the same.”³ We still have access issues, and we always speak and

write in a limited, physical context.

Knowing the risks of separateness (and especially withdrawal), what is the value of further highlighting it today? We already feel distance acutely during a global pandemic. Why draw more attention to it? Saito and Akiyama have an excellent answer to this. The authors do as they claim, “enable a way of thinking about distance that exceeds any facile binary distinctions and crosses borders.” In a time when we tend to think only of the negatives of separation, American transcendentalism preaches the artfulness of living apart. Transcendentalism is about practicing observation, solitude, seeing sociality in all things, recognizing otherness, and cultivating deep inward dialogue. While person-to-person contact has limits, especially since we inhabit individual human bodies, across continents, transcendentalism reveals that we are in fact as distant always as we are today, and that this is nothing new to fear. Theirs is a practice of re-capturing the meaning of distance, revealing its positive (or at least neutral) nature.

Saito and Akiyama’s essay introduces another idea especially well. While it is natural to emphasize separateness, they do not leave their thesis at that stage. Instead, by acknowledging separateness, we can more easily see its contrast, *togetherness*. The range of disciplines their essay touches cannot be denied: they reference sustainability or environmental education, digital, online and virtual reality learning, library digital commons and public access to research, study abroad programs and distance education. It is exciting to consider the many new directions we might take an ontology of separation. I would like for us to add more voices to this conversation, to spark connections for others to this important piece. For some examples: Fernando Bárcena writes on distance and poetics, or for a more elaborate account, Gaston Bachelard wrote a most excellent book on poetic space.⁴ Edward F. Mooney has a great commentary on intimacy in American transcendentalism and restoring privateness and intimacy in philosophy.⁵ British professor emeritus Andrew Stables is concerned with moral education, proximity and distance.⁶ David Granger writes on Cavell and embodiment, Clarence Joldersma leans into phenomenology with his radical embodiment model, and Michael Bon-

nett discusses the moral implications of embodied otherness, being “lost in space,” and language about distance and senses of place.⁷ Also of interest are pieces by Ruyu Hung connecting Thoreau to senses of place and Guoping Zhao on postmodernists like Levinas and otherness.⁸

When Saito and Akiyama mention imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and the possibilities of the public, Maxine Greene comes immediately to mind:

Again, it may be the recovery of imagination that lessens the social paralysis we see around us and restores the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane. I am reaching toward an idea of imagination that brings an ethical concern to the fore. . . My attention turns back to the importance of wide-awakeness, of awareness of what it is to be in the world. I am moved to recall the existential experience shared by so many and the associated longing to overcome somnolence and apathy in order to choose, to reach beyond.⁹

It is through the “recovery of imagination” that we connect to those around us. When we become “wide awake” about issues like our inherent separation, we choose to “overcome” that distance, “to reach beyond.” In Maxine Greene’s *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Chapter 1, “Freedom, Education, and Public Spaces,” she further describes the relationship between education and the public spaces in American philosophy in a manner that I found most helpful in reading this current essay.¹⁰ And in her Chapter 3, “Reaching from Private to Public: The Work of Women,” Greene recognizes the feminine contribution to the discussion of private and public—an important but invisible aspect of public spaces and community.¹¹ I lean into this point, as we should remember that some people do not see their self without relationship to another (in contrast to Andrew Feenberg’s theory of the self). Consider, for example, carers like parents whose selfhood is dependent on the lifeblood of their children.

To further diversify American transcendentalism, we might take into account its roots in phenomenological Native American philosophies. Wilshire calls Thoreau and Emerson's ideas the "reclaiming indigenous intimacy and at-one-ness" with the "community of all beings."¹² Wilshire adds that this is "so hard for us to acknowledge, given both the domestication of our own 'Nature writers' [Thoreau and Emerson], and the degree to which we are inured to European objectification, dualism, distancing—our insulation, shielding, and straitened [sic] nurturance taken so completely for granted we are unaware of it."¹³

Saito and Akiyama tackle some difficult concepts in order to propose an ontology of separation. I can see the benefit of Heideggerian ontology and a Cavellian language theory to explain how we might re-establish a term like separation that has so much colloquial baggage. One downside of Heidegger and Cavell is that their comprehensive theories could accommodate ontologies of nearly anything. This is not in itself problematic, because there is still great value in understanding how we use words. But in a short essay, I wish for more information about what this means for COVID-19, distance education, and the transcendent common. We know that public bodies are typically withdrawn or closed. "To what extent are we withdrawn?" might be the stronger question. I prefer to resist withdrawal as part of an ontology of separateness, and focus on distance and distance education, and the spirit and intentionality of a commons. And the opportunity to add other voices never passes. This is the process we enter now, with this response essay, with our active conversations, with our current digital commons, with this asynchronous essay session set at an online conference: we blend our public and private experiences while discussing great philosophy.

1 Naoko Saito and Tomohiro Akiyama, "Distance Education and Pursuit of the Common at the Time of COVID-19: Ontology of Separation," *Philosophy*

of *Education* 77, no. 2 (2021).

2 I have been thinking much the same lately. There are many parallels here to my 2021 PES *GroundWorks* paper “Going Remote”; LeAnn M. Holland, “Going Remote: Ecofeminist Education for the Reluctantly Contained,” *GroundWorks* (2021), <https://www.philosophyofeducation.org/committee-on-professional-affairs>.

3 The concept of “neighbors” works in definition only if in relationship to a physical proximity, notably in the closeness of home-spaces. This complication is why I recommend Gaston Bachelard on poetic spaces.

4 Fernando Bárcena, “Philosophy of Education, the Production of the Presence and the Poetic Distance,” *Bajo palabra, Revista de filosofía*, no. 6 (special issue 2011): 27-28; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

5 Edward F. Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

6 Andrew Stables, “Proximity and Distance: Moral Education and Mass Communication,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 32, no. 3 (November 1998): 399-407.

7 See the following, respectively: David Granger, “Towards an Embodied Poetics of the Self: Personal Renewal in Dewey and Cavell,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20 (2001): 107-124. Clarence W. Joldersma, “Neuroscience, Education, and a Radical Embodiment Model of Mind and Cognition,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2013): 263-272. Michael Bonnett, “Environmental Concern, Moral Education and Our Place in Nature,” *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (September 2012): 285-300. Michael Bonnett, “Lost in

Space? Education and the Concept of Nature,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23 (2004): 117-130.

8 Ruyu Hung, “In Search of Ecopedagogy: Emplacing Nature in the Light of Proust and Thoreau,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 13 (June 2014): 1387-1401. Guoping Zhao, “Levinas and the Philosophy of Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2016): 323-330.

9 Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995), 35.

10 Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

11 Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom*.

12 Bruce Wilshire, *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought*, American and European Philosophy Series (University Park: Penn State U. Press, 2000), 19. (See also pages 15-20.)

13 Wilshire, *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy*.