

Connection and Difference

Jessica Hochman
Pratt Institute

In this lucidly argued essay, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer notes that ecosophy is capable of “queering our habitus in productive ways that lead to broadened awareness of connections, relationships of production, and social justice issues.” Ecosophical work turns everyday experiences and objects into subjects of inquiry and asks us to look at the contexts we inhabit to critically examine assemblages of people, objects, machines, ideas, and environments. Following Felix Guattari, she cites mapping as an essential tool for ecosophical work, through which we develop a heightened state of awareness of these assemblages. Her cartographic pedagogy indeed puts ecosophy to work in this way, as she and her students examine both the forest and the trees, in an attempt not to lose sight of either.

Greenhalgh-Spencer argues that in our “glocal” age of the Internet, we are always two places at once: we are online but in our homes and offices, in material places and online spaces. Our lack of attention to the assemblages present in these spaces prevents us from using the technologies that connect and distinguish us to address economic, political and ecological disasters. Greenhalgh-Spencer, following Guattari, seems optimistic that mapping these assemblages could change our actions; for the most part I share their optimism.

One challenge of ecosophical work is how we can exist *with* and not *in mastery of* our tools, our environment, and each other. This is a question that is taken up by feminist readings of ecosophy, such as Val Plumwood’s, that problematizes discourses of mastery used to rationalize the subject/object dualism in which the object is controlled.¹ Her work critiques the human/nature binary that allows us to assert our dominance over the natural world. Instead, she advocates an ecosophical view where ethical considerations stem from the recognition of both connections and difference. This view provides a lens through which our perception of relationality is enhanced; here I will use this lens to discuss our relationships with and through technology to move beyond two discourses — those of mastery and disposability — toward true assemblage that can hold both connection and difference.

A PEDAGOGY OF ECOSOPHY

Education, for Guattari, is one of the many fields through which subjects are formed; to educate ecosophically we must become cartographers of human experience. He notes that there is no neutral science, and likewise, no neutral education. Through this work, ever in process, we give up the ideology of mastery and neutrality and instead remain in a state of “permanent evolution.”² Here, pedagogy becomes a collaborative practice that invites multiple ways of knowing rather than superimposing one modality on all learners. Further, I argue that it problematizes the mastery of our technology; Greenhalgh-Spencer’s own examples bear this out.

As an introductory activity, students show the class artifacts from their lives, providing a glimpse of their circumstances. The group maps these assemblages to

show the ways that power functions locally and globally. The act of mapping makes explicit the power implicit within the contents of a refrigerator and gives the students some objects to think with in their discussions. Moreover, this ecosophical work makes space for students' contexts and in so doing, their ways of knowing. By literally putting every student "on the map," their realities are given voice and power.

However, the class's ecosophical work really takes off when a university software upgrade causes a disruption in some students' access to course materials. Together, the group notes that students with older hardware experience more problems and, through an ecosophical lens, interrogated the assumption that a software upgrade would be an improvement for all the course participants. Instead, the upgrade denied many students basic access to the course materials and limited their participation. This disruption underscores the pitfalls of assumptions that we are the masters of our tools and instead shows us the ways in which we are connected to and through our tools. Similarly, these disruptions also demonstrate the ways in which educational work resists mastery, and points toward a pedagogical approach that begins with the material realities of students' and teachers' lives, building toward new knowledge that is shaped by both.

I also wonder if the relentless drive to update systems is a function of our need to master those systems, or perhaps it speaks to a use of these tools for mastery of knowledge? This upgrade challenges both assumptions: the students in this case were not the masters of their technology, nor were they able to use the tools to master content. Further, it also pinpoints the power in technological systems as being often outside the realm of the user, and as teachers, we are users. There are deep connections between our pedagogical and technological needs, but they are only tangible if we map these terrains, including the material conditions of our lives (access to hardware, power, Wi-Fi), the social, cultural, technical, and pedagogical. If we are truly dedicated to providing students with equal access our practice must match our rhetoric at every level. The same is true in the high tech industry.

DISPOSABLE CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY

Ecosophy calls us to notice that when one element of our ecosystem is disposable, so too are others. As Greenhalgh-Spencer points out, our society views technology as increasingly disposable. In the two examples below, I explore the ways in which the disposability of our tools speaks to the disposability of human subjects and of democratic spaces.

In Greenhalgh-Spencer's software upgrade example, the disposability of hardware is highlighted, and she rightly points out the amount of labor (and, I would add, water) that goes into making a computer chip. While digital waste may be an afterthought here in the Global North, in the Global South, where those chips are made, this waste is the thing that is contaminating that same water. The lives of chipmakers become as disposable as the chips themselves.

In April 2014, Microsoft ended support for Window XP.³ An estimated 96 percent of our nation's public schools are running Windows XP because their computers can't run any other operating system (OS).⁴ Windows XP is not just a product, but also an environment, a system, a lifeline, and a tool for people who have little capital and

less power; an ecosophical view strikes me as a crucial intervention here. Though marketing rhetoric and the discourse of “high tech” may suggest that our technologies should enhance and improve our lives and connect us to others, by denying support to a system that helps to educate most of our nation’s P–12 students, the tech industry is literally pulling the plug, (or pulling their pins, to keep with the mapping metaphor). What might the map of XP users look like? What might it show us about the flow of capital through our school system?⁵

Beyond the material disposability inherent in digital life, there is a social-emotional disposability building as well through forms of online violence. One such violent practice is trolling, or writing hateful comments on a web site or blog. These practices suggest that the feelings and dignity of others are disposable as well. An example: in September 2013, *Popular Science*, the century old magazine on science and technology, took down its comment boards. “Comments can be bad for science,” remarked Suzanne LaBarre, director of online content for the publication, citing a recent University of Wisconsin study that found that personal attacks in online comments caused readers to focus more strongly on the downside of a given article than they would have without those ad hominem attacks.⁶ The site no longer supports public dialogue on scientific topics; if this becomes a trend, what does this portend for the Internet as a dialogic space, and how might it impact online learning?

Ecosophy, which proposes that we consider people, devices, real places, and digital spaces as connected, pushes back against this disturbing trend. As a “collective dialogue capable of producing innovative practices,”⁷ ecosophy requires dialogical spaces. A course such as Greenhalgh-Spencer’s is an important space for ecosophical work, but how can we scaffold this work outside a classroom, virtual or material? When only those with the power of advanced degrees and the sanction of the hard sciences can voice their opinions in online spaces, where can such dialogue take place? Online instruction strikes me as an opportunity to model productive discourse in digital spaces as part of mapping practices.

At its core, ecosophical cartography helps us address power. Greenhalgh-Spencer ends with the suggestion that an ecosophic lens may help us reenvision the practice of education, not just online but in all spaces. Building on her work, I have attempted to map some of the contours, connections, and disconnects in spaces of online learning. With any luck, maybe some of these skills may transfer from our thinking to our practices in digital spaces.

1. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

2. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 2000), 34.

3. While IT experts recommend running a full audit of applications before this date, this is not possible for most large school districts. As many machines running XP are over 12 years old, and computers are often moved from classroom to classroom or building to building, machines in question may be difficult to locate.

4. Anders Minor, “Why Do People Still Use Windows XP?” *dorkTech* (blog), February 10, 2014, <http://dorktech.com/why-do-people-still-use-windows-xp/>.

5. It is worth noting that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the charitable foundation of Microsoft's founder and his wife, has made significant investments in both educational technologies and in the proliferation of charter schools in the US.

6. Steve Mullis, "'Popular Science' Shuts Comments, Citing Internet 'Trolls,'" *All Tech Considered: Tech, Culture and Connection* (blog), *National Public Radio*, September 24, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/09/24/225793577/popular-science-mag-online-comments-are-bad-for-science>.

7. Felix Guattari, "Red and Green Micropolitical Practices," in *The Felix Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 264.