

Re-Coupling Place and Time: Bioregionalism's Hope for Situated Education

Dilafroz R. Williams
Portland State University

I applaud Huey-li Li for opening a discussion on the connections between globalism and bioregionalism and their influence on the enterprise of contemporary education, for the issues have received hardly any attention from mainstream educational philosophers. Attempts to sloganize the global/local connections through bumper stickers that urge the public to “think globally, act locally,” have perhaps raised the public’s consciousness to get involved at the local level. However, the moral injunction of the first half of the slogan, that is, “global thinking,” is seldom addressed. Living in a complex and interdependent world, surely we would need to see the connections between local actions and consequences beyond the local, and vice versa. This intricate connection between the local and global, unfortunately, has resulted in a new term — “glocal” — coined to diminish even further, the distinctiveness of the “local” that bioregionalists hope to advance. Philosophers of education, I would urge, need to get involved in this long overdue discussion that Li’s essay invites.

But, even as I applaud Li’s daring ventures, I do have some concerns about her lack of acknowledgment of the dilemmas associated with trying to reconcile and integrate the “global” (the megapolis) and the “local” in education. She rejects the incompatibility between bioregion-based education and the project of globalization even as she tries to promote the substantive and perceptual dimensions of the latter through concepts such as “global village” and “global localization.” Here, I will focus on two major points: (1) While spanning “space,” global education cannot accommodate the concepts of “place” and “time” that bioregional (or place-based) education does; and (2) In contrast to the monocultural project of globalization, bioregional education revitalizes both “cultural diversity” and “bio-diversity;” however, bioregional education, too, must be undertaken with caution for it can be subject to and limited by parochialism. Hence, I have argued elsewhere that a more appropriate moral injunction would be for bioregional educators to promote “ecological thinking.”¹

CONNECTING *PLACE* AND *TIME*

Let us ponder the intricate connections between education that is place-based and grounded locally and that which reaches beyond boundaries and locales to span the globe. It was only eleven years ago that the blue Planet Earth was witnessed on the cover of the Time Magazine’s special “man of the year” issue as a finite “home.” This picture of the globe from outer space drew the imagination of millions for our common humanity, our limited resources, our implicatedness in the planet’s status as patient in need of tending and healing. While the issues around environmental ailments have not vanished, today’s image of the blue planet has penetrated home and office, classroom and boardroom: the spinning globe and the static keyboard are linked as never before. The project of globalization is symbolically captured in the

icon of the internet's twirling globe. The world wide web has indeed cast its net widely. And, with that, concepts of "space" and "time" have shifted dramatically.

To capture this shift that has occurred globally, note the example of children growing up in the urban world where the predominant form of, say, "metamorphosis" they encounter or experience is hitting a computer key. With the magical power of the computer, they are able to change a chrysalis into a butterfly within seconds. Further, a butterfly can be re-changed into a chrysalis. Add to this the scenario that they can convert flowers to the colors and sizes they desire in the moment, simply with the tap of a key. It is conceivable that a million children globally encounter the same kind of change with similar taps of the key.

On a computer, seeds become flowers without the medium of soil, air, water, or sunshine; they can also be "transported" as non-living objects via the internet, spanning global space. No longer is the "growth" of a seed place-bound. No longer is the "growth" of a chrysalis dependent on its biological make-up. These examples are followed by a myriad of others. What becomes clear is that these new concepts of "space" and "time" are transforming children's sensibilities about natural phenomena. No "global education" can counteract this trend; rather globalization, in the form of technology, has increased the pace of life, penetrating homes, locales, and privacy. As more and more homes get wired, fewer and fewer children are spending time outdoors with nature in order to understand her clock, her time. Bioregional education is meant to counteract this trend by rejecting distanced global relations. Whereas the project of globalization is framed in flight, bioregionalism calls for groundedness and rootedness in place. In reclaiming "home," bioregional education teaches care of the earth through personal and direct involvement. In the hopes of situating learning within the intricate web of nature and culture, bioregional education re-embeds community within a particular place. Such embeddedness is essential for children to learn patience, to observe, to touch, to feel, and to realize what it takes for a seed to grow into a flower or for a chrysalis to become a butterfly. They learn to submit to an understanding of natural phenomena. Bioregionalism tries to de-value the keyboard and space by valuing place and time. Unlike globalization or global thinking, bioregional educators call for an epistemological possibility that recognizes the difference between David Orr's "dweller" and a "resident."² They also reject the notion of a "global village" which is not a village for the real villagers of the globe.

For Li, bioregion-based education cannot cultivate a meaningful bioregional sensibility without addressing political and economic globalization. She favors the cultivation of open-mindedness and multicultural awareness to regenerate biodiversity. I agree that we need to have the sensibility that goes beyond the local. To do so, we need to "think ecologically." This is to recognize, as Orr, *a la* Wendell Berry suggests that "[a]ll actions have effects on one locality or another; knowledge, responsibility, and care are easily diluted by distance, both spatial and psychological; and limits of scale and complexity affect all human actions."³

And finally, is global education a "socially responsible educational reform," as Li claims? Bioregionalists Wendell Berry, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Prakash,

Wes Jackson, Wolfgang Sachs, and others have shown that in the guise of developing multicultural awareness, global education can actually validate globalization undertaken by the West which has, instead, led to the systematic crushing of cultural diversity.⁴ A monoculture driven by the market economy permeates the globe as the imbalance of power between the North and the South is being acknowledged. As Berry explains, in an extractive economy, “the conquerer is always from some place else; seeker of gold or of markets that believe in getting bigger.”⁵

But, accusing global actions as being necessarily parochial, bent on spreading the Western cultural, economic, and consumeristic values, some bioregionalists consider local thinking and the associated local actions as radically pluralistic embedded in the myriads of traditions, customs, and cultures at danger of being crushed by the Western globalization movements. They call for the abandonment of the idea of global action *vis á vis* global thinking and urge a modification of our mindset for local thinking and local actions. But, like Li, I challenge this view. There is an equal danger that the project of localization will become parochial, resulting in balkanization of society, as argued by C.A. Bowers.⁶ Our consciousness needs to transcend our locality; it is dangerous not to recognize that local thinking must surpass its local context in order to gauge the consequences of local actions. Specific communities affect and are influenced by other communities. This requires that locales and their communities necessarily engage in communication, inquiry, and debate with others.

To be Martha Nussbaum’s “citizens of the world” we would need both narrative imagination and also critical self-examination with bioregionalists and globalists equally attending to the latter.⁷ The domination of localized activities through disembodied mechanisms such as money transactions and expert systems has resulted in the disembeddedness of human beings, argues Anthony Giddens.⁸ And, Pico Iyer, in his recent book, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, laments the growing homogeneity of the human landscape and the fact that globalization has made this place and that place the same place.⁹ Instead, by recoupling place and time, biodiversity and cultural diversity can be revitalized. Berry urges that we consult the bioregion using nature and particular places as reference points. For him, biodiversity is about preservation of ecological diversity and integrity. Berry writes, it is also about the “renewal of local economies and community based on sound cultural and ecological principles of local economies and local communities. Membership of community must include local nature — the land, the water, the air, the native creatures.”¹⁰

Bioregionalists hope for a journey toward home. But home-coming is not about nostalgia — it is about hard work and good thinking. And, it is about developing ecological sensibilities.¹¹

1. Dilafruz R. Williams, “Think Ecologically, Act Locally,” *Holistic Education Review* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 52-4.

2. David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992).

3. David Orr, "Thinking Locally and Acting Locally: A Response," *Holistic Education Review* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 48.
4. Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972); Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism* (London: Zed Books, 1998); Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); and Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
5. Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987).
6. C.A. Bowers, *Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).
7. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
8. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
9. Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (New York: Random House, 2000).
10. Wendell Berry, "Conserving Communities," *Orion* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 52
11. Gregory Smith and Dilafuz Williams, eds., *Ecological Education in Action: On Weaving Education, Culture, and the Environment* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999).