

INTRODUCTION TO BAI

In the fourth reading in Unit 1, SFU Professor of Education Heesoon Bai challenges us to rethink the goal of education. Her concern in this essay is the separation we humans have from the Earth. Bai asks: “How shall we recover the sensations and feelings in our numbed psyche so that we see, hear, feel the joy and pain, wonder and despair, in experiencing the earth and all its biotic communities?” How can we stop the ecocide David Orr depicted through statistics in the opening paragraph of his article (Reading 1.2)? Bai’s answer is that we need to radically alter the current education system to one which focuses on “reanimating the universe.” She feels that separation can be sundered by a reanimation of the world through deepening our perceptions of the world through a keen attunement of all our senses. She suggests that we as educators should help our students reach a perceptual consciousness in which “the Earth appears to us in full sentience and presence.” She and other thinkers believe that when we see the world as a sacred space, that is both sentient and present to us, we will stop violating and exploiting it. When we love and appreciate Nature and the biosphere and all the beings that it contains, we will have deep feelings of love, compassion, and respect for them.

Bai also includes an inquiry into how we separated ourselves from the world: how it became de-animated. She examines the considerable influence of Rene Descartes; his philosophy of mind separated it from the world. (You may have heard of phrases such as “the Cartesian split” or “the Cartesian dualism” to indicate this split between the mind and body, between the mind and the world.) One of the possible outcomes of the Cartesian perspective is that we sever any emotional relation we have with the world—indeed, the emotions are

relegated as being inferior instruments of developing knowledge. What Descartes valued was the *cogito*—cognitive mind that thinks, reasons, doubts, imagines. Bai also examines Plato’s championing of the conceptual, abstract, and analytic rational mind or discursive consciousness, and it is interesting to note her concern about the Homeric poets. She notes the difference between what is perceptible and what is considered intelligible, as well as the differences—significant for Plato—between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* worlds. Another concern of Bai’s is the discursive consciousness—the mind that thinks away about things—especially since it is privileged in much of our education.

Bai thinks this love of and appreciation for nature is innate in every child. She says that we may be “hardwired for the capacity in participatory consciousness.” We have what some refer to as the “aboriginal mind.” One of the things that our present-day education system does to us is mess with our aboriginal minds and marginalizes the embodied connection to the natural environment, gradually “destroy[ing] children’s native capacity for participatory consciousness.”

Bai’s argument here is reminiscent of painter and writer Robert Bateman’s (2000) contention in *Thinking Like a Mountain* that children “are naturally enchanted by the world of trees, birds, plants, and rivers” and that most of them remain interested in nature until the age of twelve or thirteen. Only age and education can “correct” their view. But Bai goes further. She recommends walking as a starting point in our journey to participatory consciousness. One of the highlights of her article here is her making a connection between soil, sole, and soul. It is only when we treat our planet (the “soil”) with respect and care that we can have a chance to nourish our soul (our sensitive and empathic qualities). And the best place to start this process of nourishing the soil and the soul is by going on nature walks, using the sole of our feet. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the letters in Dr. Bai’s given name (Heesoon) can be rearranged to “one shoe.”

The section on the benefits of walking in Bai’s article recalls some of the ideas presented by the naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1862) in his essay entitled

“Walking.” Thoreau opens that essay with some meandering passages about the possible etymological roots of the verb “to saunter.” (To *saunter* means to stroll, to amble, to walk slowly, to proceed without hurry.) Thoreau explains that the origin of the word *saunter* may have to do with “idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under the pretence of going to *la Sainte Terre*, to the Holy Land.” “‘There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*’, a Saunterer, ‘a Holy Lander,’” the children would exclaim. Another possible origin may be another French phrase *sans terre* (without land)—a person without land or a home to call his own is, in some sense, equally at home everywhere.

In conclusion, Bai calls for an awakening of the Eros in us that unleashes the urge to adore and protect, love and care; one might summarize her entire thesis as “Eros re-gained.” In offering practical suggestions of how educators might help student reanimate the world, she considers the significance of paying attention to attention—to the re-vitalizing of our senses, to practicing what David Applebaum calls “the stop,” and to the re-establishment of dialogical relations with that from which we have been separated: our bodies, nature, the world. “Begin here, again and again,” is her curricular and pedagogical advice.