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***Book Review:  
Place, Being, Resonance:  
A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education***

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**Abstract:**

As a poet, I am always seeking to live poetically, informed and motivated by the rhythms and wisdom of poetry. Michael W. Derby's *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* is a poetic rumination on place and ecological living. With attention to the etymology of *ecopoiesis*, Michael is making a home for dwelling, and he is calling us to engage in this home-making, where we do not take for granted the cultural norms and processes. Michael understands the efficacy of education for transformation. He understands the mystery of the ineffable, but he also understands the urgency to acknowledge how the ineffable is always dancing a wild tango with the effable. The role of education is to keep the mind, heart, spirit, intuition and imagination supple and nimble, always attuned to other possibilities.

**Keywords:** curriculum studies; ecohermeneutics; *ecopoiesis*; place; poetics; creativity; arts; critical pedagogy

## Recension

### Résumé :

Poète, je suis toujours à la quête d'une vie poétique, informée et motivée par les rythmes et la sagesse de la poésie. *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* de Michael W. Derby est une ruminantion poétique portant sur l'esprit des lieux et la vie écologique. En portant attention à l'étymologie de « l'ecopoiesis », Michael crée un espace où il fait bon vivre et nous interpelle tous et toutes à nous engager dans cet acte de création d'un espace-vital où les normes et processus culturels ne sont pas pris pour acquis. Michael comprend la force transformative de l'éducation. Il comprend le mystère de ce qui est ineffable, mais également l'urgence de reconnaître que l'ineffable est dans une danse éternelle avec l'exprimable. L'éducation a la responsabilité de toujours garder la tête, le cœur, l'esprit, l'intuition et l'imagination souples et agiles, toujours aux aguets de nouvelles possibilités.

**Mots clés :** sociologie du curriculum; écoherméneutiques; ecopoiesis; écopoïèse; espace-vie; poétique; créativité; arts; pédagogie critique

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Derby, Michael W. (2015). *Place, being, resonance: A critical ecohermeneutic approach to education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

## Invitation

**I**n the busyness of my typical days, weeks, months and even years, I have been planning to review *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* by Michael W. Derby for some time. I am currently on study leave, and I am enjoying the opportunity to linger with books, to savour books, to read slowly, even ruminatively. Michael's book invites me to attend to his words, themes, arguments, voice, conviction and spirit. *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* is a remarkable book for abundant reasons. My response is more a poetic appreciation than a typical critical review. In responding to Michael's book, I am referring to Michael by his first name instead of his last name as a deliberate nod to invite an ongoing friendly, certainly collegial, conversation. Moreover, since *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* was published in 2015, Michael has changed his name to Michael De Danann Sitka-Sage, a name that resonates with ancient mythology, lasting poetry and memorable stories. Since Michael has retained his first name, I use Michael as a signifier that is both rooted in specific places while it is also always in process, much like the earth that is never still, never the same, never static.

Above all, *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* is a hopeful book. Michael is an educator with a resilient and imaginative heart who indefatigably dreams pedagogical possibilities for creative transformation. At the core of Michael's book is a focus on poets, poetics and poetry. As a poet I respond to the book by playing with language (both Michael's and mine). I respond in a series of ruminative turns, here and there, like echolocation, like a rhizome. Michael understands that knowledge is "an interwoven mass of branching, thread-like networks that course and ramify predominantly beneath our everyday awareness" (p. 19). He thinks "the real problem" with educational and ecological crises is "the demand for univocal certainty in discourse" (p. 34). I do not offer "univocal certainty". Instead, I meander in Michael's meaningful text with a desire to engage with him and his words in more meaning-making. Michael calls for "an approach to learning that draws upon both the critical and lyrical capacities of poetics to listen to the resonant structures of the world" (p. 140). In response, I offer five poetic ruminations.

## Rumination 1

I am delighted with the ongoing conversation that Michael invites with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, philosophers and poets—all jamming together. The following lists of names are offered, not as exhaustive indicators of the comprehensive literature that Michael cites, but as semiotic representations of the scholars, philosophers, and poets with whom Michael is conversing

with. All these writers evoke a panoply of wise voices, a pantheon of visionary activists, a panorama of prophetic perspectives.

Ten of the many scholars (five with the same first name) whom Michael cites include:

*David Abram*

*David Greenwood*

*David Jardine*

*David Orr*

*David G. Smith*

*Sean Blenkinsop*

*Heesoon Bai*

*Chet Bowers*

*Kieran Egan*

*Mark Fettes*

Ten of the Indigenous scholars whom Michael cites include:

*Taiaiake Alfred*

*Four Arrows*

*Marie Battiste*

*Dwayne Donald*

*Dan Roronhiakewen Longboat*

*Andrejs Kulnieks*

*Vicki Kelly*

*E. Richard Atleo*

*Gerald Vizenor*

Ten of the philosophers whom Michael cites include:

*Hannah Arendt*

*Michel Foucault*

*Hans-Georg Gadamer*

*Jürgen Habermas*

*Martin Heidegger*

*Bruno Latour*

*Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

*Paul Ricoeur*

*Simone Weil*

*Ludwig Wittgenstein*

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Ten of the poets whom Michael cites include:

*Robert Bringhurst*  
*Stan Dragland*  
*Jane Hirshfield*  
*Dennis Lee*  
*Tim Lilburn*  
*Lee Maracle*  
*Don McKay*  
*Sue Sinclair*  
*Gary Snyder*  
*Jan Zwicky*

## **Rumination 2**

*Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* is filled with eloquent, complex, modulated, reverberant sentences where the syntax slides in serpentine ways with superlative authority, but some sentences, especially some brief sentences, impressed me as so definitively and evocatively poetic that I made a list for savouring further, for ruminating with deliberate delight. And as poets are wont to do, I have played with line breaks and shapes on the page in order to invite even more slowing down and attending to syntactical turns and connections in the semantic process of interpreting and understanding living experiences hermeneutically.

### **Thirteen Ways of Listening to the Earth**

*Ecohermeneutic attention*  
*is humbly drawn towards the earth*  
(p. 2)

*There must be a certain application*  
*of the full attention, a mycelial moment*  
*of connection, a gesture of love*  
(p. 2)

*When I ring the bell,*  
*I invite everyone to listen*  
(p. 7)

*When you think intensely and beautifully,*  
*something happens. That something*  
*is called poetry*  
(p. 22)

*If students hear you,  
it gets in their hearts  
(p. 22)*

*The question is only:  
are you going to take part,  
and if so, how?  
(p. 22)*

*Thinking on the level of metaphor is thus  
one of the fundamental skills required  
of educators in a time of ecological emergency  
(p. 25)*

*How . . . might we intentionally draw  
students towards the “resonances of earth”  
in an age of such mass distraction?  
(p. 27)*

*What might we learn  
if we listened to  
the thrum beneath us?  
(p. 32)*

*We require resonant pedagogies  
characterized by their attentiveness,  
precision and tenderness towards existence  
(p. 32)*

*Ambiguity is the world’s condition  
(p. 36)*

*Attentiveness is an active, conscious  
and intentional discipline  
(p. 38)*

*How are vastly different cultural ways  
of knowing and being  
to occupy the same space?  
(p. 123)*

### Rumination 3

As an expression of a third ruminative engagement, I compiled an abecedarian of some of my favourite words from Michael’s book (and I learned again that the letters x and z still need more opportunities for naming the ungraspable creation):



ancestry	gesture	poetry
attention	hermeneutic	polyphony
awareness	humility	question
beauty	Indigeneity	resonance
being	intertwining	songs
braiding	junction	stories
certainty	kinship	tenderness
chatter	knowledge	thrum
conversations	laughter	univocal
crisis	meaning	voice
dreams	metaphor	way
earth	moment	wisdom
ecohermeneutics	networks	wonder
ecology	oceans	existence
education	optimism	experience
encounter	pedagogy	yet
generativity	place	you
fragmentation	poetics	horizon

#### Rumination 4

Next, I offer five of my favourite quotations about education from *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* with a few riffs and ruminations on each quotation.

*In education . . . we seem to lack the very words, not to mention the cultural precedent, for reflecting seriously upon both genuinely ineffable experiences and those that elicit us from beyond the wanting and doing of our present cultural-historical horizon (p. 7).*

I have been in school for sixty years. In the last stage of my life, I look back on six decades in schools, learning and teaching, being and becoming, and I continue to be struck by a profound sense of the waste that schools generate. Whose stories and voices are honoured in schools? Did I experience wonder in school? I certainly experienced wonder out of school. I was daily fascinated by weather, seasons, cycles of creation. Growing up in Newfoundland I loved snow—the seemingly ceaseless months of snow that blew, fell, swept and slashed with persistent obduracy. Sadly, my experiences out of school were never invited into school. Wendell Berry (1990) understands that “to be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully

alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew" (p. 8). Michael reminds us to attend to the "ineffable experiences" that call us to creative dwelling in the earth.

*Education as home-coming, as home making (literally ecopoiesis), as finding ourselves already home in a world thrumming with resonant meaning. Then, the question is only: are you going to take part, and if so, how? (p. 9)*

We live in a world that is "thrumming with resonant meaning"—I am just not sure that most of us are able to attend to the thrumming and meaning. We are distracted, lost, alienated, full of desires that can never be fulfilled, temporarily sated with stuff we don't need, stuff that fails to sustain, hardly conscious of desires that can be filled if only we had the sensual attunement and linguistic imagination to know the creation as a manifestation of ancient and ineffable glory. So, are we taking part in the glory? I think reverence is needed. The philosopher Paul Woodruff (2001) writes that "most modern philosophers have forgotten about reverence. But poets are aware of it, as they have always been" (p. 12). What does it mean to live reverently?

*What if, instead of inculcating the virtues of energy-saving lightbulbs and composting (not that there is anything wrong with that, some of my best friends compost), we approached ecological education as a practice of learning to fix our attention on the resonant structures of meaning—the voice—of the world? Might we begin to recognize with more frequency the immeasurable, yet strangely familiar, polyphony of things? (p. 9)*

I happily recycle, but I recycle a lot because I consume a lot! I am caught up in the cultural experience of ubiquitous advertising, revolving styles and avaricious consumption. I fail daily to fix my attention on "the resonant structures of meaning—the voice—of the world." I need to learn to hear the "polyphony of things." Wendell Berry (1990) calls us to "pay attention" as coming "into the presence of a subject" (p. 83). He claims wisely that we must attend to ourselves and others. In effect, we need to acknowledge how we are all ecologically connected and interconnected. We need to come into the presence of one another and of the earth. So many of us live such distracted lives that we hardly seem to notice others, and at the same time we are likely forgetting even who we are. Surely, education must start with questioning what it means to be human in the creation, what it means to live in relationship with all of creation, what it means to resonate with voice and voices. Ecological education is located in imagination, spirituality, creativity and love.

*Ecopoiesis is not aesthetic experience about the world per se, but poetic encounter with the world, from within the flux, and intended to draw one into awareness of the ethics of an interspecies entangled world (p. 37).*

As a poet, I am always seeking to live poetically, informed and motivated by the rhythms and wisdom of poetry. Michael's scholarship is ecopoietic. With attention to the etymology of ecopoiesis, Michael is making a home for dwelling, and he is calling others to engage in this home-making, where we do not take for granted the cultural norms and processes. Michael understands the efficacy of education for transformation. He understands the mystery of the ineffable, but he also understands the urgency to acknowledge how the ineffable is always dancing a wild tango with the

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effable. The role of education is to keep the mind, heart, spirit, intuition and imagination supple and nimble, always attuned to other possibilities.

*The substratum of education remains constituted by competition, abstraction, compliance, fatalism and dominion (pp. 97-98).*

If Michael's book comprised just this one sentence, it would be an exemplary and necessary book for all educators. The book is, of course, a treasure trove of riches, but this one sentence is the precious gem I will turn over and over as I continue to ruminate on Michael's wisdom. After a long lifetime in education, I am sad and frustrated by the persistent experience of competition that has governed my life. Even now, in old age, I am still driven by the insatiable desire to be first, to claim a big portion of the apple pie, to stand out in the crowd, to be recognized and acknowledged. Why? That is the question that I have not asked, at least not with sufficient vigor. I have been driven "by competition, abstraction, compliance, fatalism and dominion". I am now a grandfather to four granddaughters. Three of them are in school, and the fourth is not far behind. I am experiencing school again through the experiences of young children. What might replace "competition, abstraction, compliance, fatalism and dominion"? I want everybody involved in schools to focus on well-being, experience, questioning, hope and love. Michael's book reminds me that education can be constituted in other ways.

### **Rumination 5**

What I especially love about *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* is the way that Michael invests his book with passion, conviction, emotion, optimism and intelligence. Just consider the following powerful phrases from Michael's writing—a small selection of evocative and provocative wisdom, as a photographer might focus on when attending to a meadow of wildflowers, singling out a few colours in order to acknowledge how the meadow can be known and never known.

#### **Nine Memos for the Journey**

*teachable moments*

(p. 4)

*beyond our comfortable constructs*

(p. 6)

*ecological emergency*

(p. 10)

*everyday certainties*

(p. 21)

*common-sense inevitabilities*

(p. 21)

*a crisis of relation*

(p. 24)

*fundamentally prosaic*

(p. 25).

*metaphoric thinking*

(p. 57)

*ecohermeneutic intertwining*

(p. 124).

### In/conclusion

I am grateful for Michael W. Derby's *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education*. Michael calls for "a reorientation to knowing, a new kind of ontological engagement" (p. 55). He invites us to "think intensely and beautifully" (p. 55). His book is a prophetic call to wake up, and attend and listen and linger, in order to learn how to live well in a world that urgently needs wisdom, heart and courage.

### References

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