

In Search of a Space Where Nature and Culture Dissolve Into a Unified Whole and Deep Ecology Comes Alive

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Abstract

This paper presents an argument for the importance of considering lived, direct and dialogical experience in nature as an important component of our conceptualizations of the natural world. I begin by noting how certain kinds of knowledge, mostly the intuitive and the local, tend to be muted or excluded from our nature talk. I then suggest that conversations between people can serve as a fruitful metaphor for exploring dialogues with nature, noting how certain kinds of knowledge — again the intuitive and local — are pushed into the background in conversations as well. The thinking of Henri Lefebvre is then introduced to elaborate this position, indicating how his notion of thirdspace, conceived of as lived, situated, and embodied dialogues with nature, provides a rich and generative domain for conceptualizing our interchanges with the natural world. Some preliminary implications of this line of thought are drawn out.

On Becoming a Fishing Guide

In his book, *Dancing with a Ghost*, Rupert Ross tells an intriguing story of becoming a fishing guide on a large lake in Northern Ontario.¹ Knowing where the pickerel were feeding in this lake was a challenge because these fish move around in schools and only feed for brief periods of time. The problem, which was solved over his eleven-year apprenticeship as a guide, was to decide which of roughly twenty spots on the lake would be profitable. Experienced guides accomplished this well, but when asked how they “knew” where to go they could not answer. Rather they responded with what can only be considered bumbling replies like: “I played a hunch,” “I just had a good feeling about those spots,” and so on.

Ross indicates that with increased experience, he too began to get “feelings” about where to go, and “hunches” about what spots would produce feeding fish. These feelings progressively became more reliable — suggesting development of what he calls a “different form of reasoning.”²

He would begin by trying to get an intuitive sense of the day using observations of the wind, sun etc. before going out onto the lake. Over time these observations became more subtle and included nuances of the quality of light, humidity, sense of impending disturbance and so on. Ross indicates that he could not list these features, suggesting they never came to his conscious attention. All the same they were there, and part of his knowing about where to fish.³

The next step involved taking that general “feel” for the day and, if you will, superimposing it mentally on each of the twenty candidate spots. It was an attempt to imagine what each of them would feel like were I to actually go there. Gradually it became much more than just imagining them; they could almost be experienced well in advance of going there.⁴

It was as though Ross could visit these places without going to the actual location.

As the years went by, my capacity to accurately image remote spots grew to the point where I could get a pretty good feel for them well before leaving the dock; there were fewer and fewer surprises when I actually went to try them.⁵

He indicates that some of the spots seemed to attract him, while others left him cold.⁶ This process began without conscious effort and Ross struggled as he tried to explain it to the reader.

I can make this step intelligible only by thinking of my dock image of a particular spot as a transparency of sorts, with all the variables sketched opaquely on its surface. Then similar images of past days at the same spot are slid under it. What I look for, of course, is correspondence between what I anticipate and what I recall.⁷

The memory images of previous days present themselves in their own order based on “their emotional force and content”⁸ — both positive/attractive and negative/repelling. Ross sees this emotional force as critical — it is a “virtual recreation of the feelings experienced then.”⁹

According to Ross, this process is not conscious, not articulable. He describes it as a “very complex and compacted form of reasoning.”¹⁰ We are tempted to deny its status because it is foreign and because “its conclusions do not admit of reasoned back-tracking or explanation. The reasoner himself is unable to report his reasoning process.”¹¹ It seems as if the conclusions create themselves. This explains why Ross’s guide colleagues couldn’t say anything except that that it

was a hunch. Once an accomplished guide himself, Ross was no better able to explain it than were his experienced colleagues. “What had to be learned could not be expressed easily, if at all, in words; each person had to immerse himself in the enterprise and develop his own skills.”¹²

Knowledge-about-Nature as Extraordinary

My point in telling this story is to introduce the possibility that knowledge-about-nature, the subject of this paper, may have something rather special and extraordinary about it. Indeed, I will argue that our academic proclivities are structured in such a way that the kind of knowledge/wisdom Ross has described, and which most of us have experienced in our own life worlds, tends to be excluded from the conversations we have about the environment. This omission is especially true of academic discourse. I believe this exclusion is a significant flaw in current environmental thought deafening us to highly informed and important voices of nature and the environment.¹³

Ross gives us a hint of how this plays out in the conclusion of his treatise on becoming a fishing guide:

With our quantifying science we have learned to see things, to understand things, as distinct from their constant change, from their *life*. We say “the barometric pressure is X,” when in fact we have frozen the life out of it for the purpose of measurement. It sits then as a concept in our minds, separated from dynamism, from its constant change. And we thus separate ourselves from feeling that life and from being able to know things through life.¹⁴

By adopting knowledges that “freeze the life” out of nature, we lose sight of the kinds of lived, complex and rich forms of knowing-about-nature that lie at its heart. (See Evernden, 1993;¹⁵ Rogers & Holton,¹⁶ for elaboration.)

My goal here is to open up an avenue of thought that will, if fully realized, begin to recover a place for the kind of knowledge Ross is talking about — the kind of knowledge that tends to be excluded in many of our discourses about nature, and the kind of knowledge that is a critical component of knowing-about-nature. My approach involves drawing on a mix of psychology, geography, environmental thought and epistemology. This is definitely, and I underscore definitely, a work in progress. I hope to open up a discussion that will help us to converge on a sharper understanding of this rather fuzzy notion that seems to fall between the cracks of our Cartesian world view.

The standard Oxfordian view of knowledge partitions it into two distinct kinds. Following Gilbert Ryle (1949),¹⁷ there is “knowing that” which is the kind

of scientific, objective, propositional knowledge that forms the foundation of much academic discourse, like Ross's barometric comment just presented. This is contrasted to "knowing how" which relates to the knowledge that comes of skill-based learning such as how to use a hammer or a Secchi disk or a computer. Ross's knowledge about where to fish for pickerel does not readily fit into this binary classification of knowledge. Yes, it has elements of "knowing that" as well as elements of "knowing how" — but it is more. Indeed, trying to force it into Ryle's binary classification of knowledge obscures its essential character, its emotional and intuitive nature. There appears to be a need for a third category of knowledge here.

Interchanges with Nature as Conversations

I would like to draw on a metaphor to elaborate this third kind of knowing. Let us for a moment (and in reflexive awareness of the limitations of metaphor), consider that a person's interactions with the environment can be likened to a conversation between two people. We interact with nature in a spatially and temporally defined way much like we do when we talk with another person. Nature may offer an opening comment such as a birdsong. We then react by drawing on our previous experience to recognize it as, say, a varied thrush. In response to the thrush's single-note call, we stop and begin to search the upper limbs of nearby trees for signs of the robin-like bird. But our stopping brings caution to the thrush and soon she is flitting through the tops of the lodgepole pines. A sequential dance between observer and creature then begins that has all of the earmarks of a conversation between two people, only this time it is between a person and nature.

In an interesting sense, then, our interchanges with nature can be conceptualized as a dialogical drama in which the embodied human and the world of nature play off of each other. The essential feature of this dialogue is the bustle and richness of joint engagement between the human and natural worlds. In this "conversational" space, the two parties involved in the interchange dissolve into the singularity of embodied, reciprocal dialogue.

The main value of this metaphor is that it opens up the possibility that some of the ongoing work of analyzing conversations, especially the domain of discourse analysis, may have especial relevance for understanding nature and how we interact with it. Of particular interest in this discursive work is the suggestion of a *third kind of knowing* that provides the beginnings for understanding the kinds of knowledge excluded by Ryle's binary and described by Ross. I will elaborate this by drawing on the work of John Shotter who is a social constructionist working within the domain of discourse analysis.

Shotter starts by observing that fulsome understanding of an unfolding con-

versation between two people escapes Ryle's¹⁸ binary classification of "knowing that" and "knowing how." He argues that conversational dialogues involve more than these two traditional knowledge forms. What appears to be missing is what Shotter has labeled "knowing of the third kind" or "knowing from."¹⁹ Here Shotter is referring to the unique, interaction-specific knowledge that a person both obtains from, and needs to function in, a specific conversational situation. This third kind of knowledge forms a "lower plane, in a set of unacknowledged and unintended, disorderly, conversational forms of interaction that involve struggles between ourselves and others."²⁰ This level of knowledge, by virtue of its open-endedness and embodiment in the hurly-burly of everyday conversation, provides the opportunity for give-and-take in talk that allows for negotiation of agreed meanings or contesting assertions of conversational partners. So too does this third kind of knowing specify the possibilities or affordances for possible actions that could be taken in response to previous events. It is the kind of knowledge that one has from within a social situation, a group, or an institution which:

. . . thus takes into account (and is accountable within) the social situation in which it is known. . . . So, although I may not be able to reflectively contemplate the nature of that knowledge as an inner, mental representation. . . . I can nonetheless call upon it as a practical resource in framing appropriate answers.²¹

I would like to advance the claim that understandings gained from interaction in the landscape, like Ross's wisdom about where to fish, have more in common with Shotter's third kind of knowing than they have with either "knowing that" or "knowing how." To be sure, dialogues with nature have elements of these two traditional forms of knowing, but more importantly, they are embedded in "knowing from." Ross's understandings of his lake in Northern Ontario are almost primal, transcending theoretical or skill-based categorization. It is here that we see that dialogues with nature are similar to conversations between people. These interactions with the land have all of the hurly-burly, uniqueness and openness of Shotter's third kind of knowing and result in understandings that can only be achieved "from within" the particular interaction or conversation with the land. They have a special quality, born of the interchange per se, that escapes traditional views of knowing. According to Shotter, we simply do not have the words and concepts to capture these ephemeral, contextual and situated knowledges.

Given our current 'basic' ways of talking, however, we cannot easily grasp the nature of such knowledge. Indeed, to the extent that we cannot 'command a clear view'²² of its overall nature, we cannot rationally imagine it. Further, because it cannot be represented (or formed) as an object of knowledge within a normative or disciplined

form of talk — that is, within a discourse — it's nature for us is *extraordinary*.²³

Of particular note here is the similarity between Ross's indication of the difficulty, say impossibility, of articulating his knowings and Shotter's' observation that these conversational knowings cannot be represented within an available discourse. It would seem plausible that these two knowings, Ross's and Shotter's, are joined at the hip by being part-and-parcel of a third way of knowing about the world, a way that escapes our more traditional understandings of the nature of knowing. And I would like to borrow Shotter's particularly appropriate descriptor of these knowings as being *extraordinary*. For indeed, they are because they stand so firmly outside of the boundaries of our traditional ways of thinking about knowledge.

A Stroll with Henri Lefebvre

As I was struggling with trying to put words on this almost un-wordable kind of knowing, I came across the work of Henri Lefebvre, a French scholar, whose thought begins to provide another avenue for articulating this third kind of knowing or "knowing from." Lefebvre's thinking provides a convergent avenue of thought that begins to put some interesting flesh on the epistemic skeleton sketched out by Shotter. It opens the door to some rather intriguing possibilities.

In a series of books in the 1970s and 1980s, Lefebvre emerged as the patron saint of some geographers' attempts to understand space. His seminal volume, *La production de l'espace*²⁴ (*The Production of Space*), encouraged what can only be called a different take on the meaning and significance of space and its impact on human life. It is a wide-ranging thesis that provides a new way of thinking about place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory and geography. It has, I believe, considerable relevance to understanding knowing-in-nature. (See Soja,²⁵ for an introduction to Lefebvre.)

At the heart of Lefebvre's position is the continual search for ways of challenging many of the binary classifications that undergird our conceptual worlds. Indeed, the touchstone of almost all of his work is captured by his epithet "*Il y a toujours l'autre*" — there is always the other. When confronted with a problematic binary, such as the troublesome dichotomy between "knowing that" and "knowing how," Lefebvre would search for an "*autre*" that would crack open the two-fold classification and provide emancipatory understandings. According to Lefebvre, finding the "*autre*" allows movement beyond the restrictions inherent in the dichotomy and takes us into a third, rich and generative world. So for starters, it would seem that Lefebvre's search for a "thirdspace" is congenial to Shotter's third way of knowing.

Most North American scholars who have adopted Lefebvre have been concerned with the urban context. Here we find postmodernists like Edward Soja²⁶ using Lefebvre to examine locales like Los Angeles and Herod²⁷ exploring labour and geography. In our case, the goal would be to mine Lefebvre for ideas and concepts that permit the elaboration of “*un autre*” form of knowledge — that elusive “knowing from” which stems from our interchanges with the natural world. In a figurative sense, what I would like to do is go for a stroll with Lefebvre in, say, a wilderness area, chatting with him about how his ideas would help to understand some of the complexities and issues surrounding the area in which we are strolling.

Lefebvre’s Triad

One of the first things Henri would mention is what he calls his triad. This involves three different kinds of spaces, each with its own different structures and processes. First space, what he describes as “*espace perçu*” or perceived space, involves the kinds of social practices that humans have imposed on the world. He might point to the path upon which we are walking as an example of this, noting how it reveals the social practices of multiple occupants of this region such as deer, long forgotten Aboriginal tenants, hikers and so on. (See Lefebvre,²⁸ Ingold,²⁹ and Macnaghten & Urry,³⁰ for detailed argument.) I would like to suggest that Ryle’s “knowing how” is integral to this particular space by virtue of its implying understandings of *knowing how* to navigate and function within the spaces so defined by social practices.

Second space, by Lefebvre, is full of representations. It is the domain he calls “*espace conçu*” or conceived space. Here we find knowledge, signs, codes that are tied to the relations of production and to the kinds of order these impose. On our wilderness walk, he’d demonstrate his “*espace conçu*” in multiple ways: discussing how we talk about the path upon which we are walking as revealing constructed representations; noting the scientific understandings of the ecology of the pathway and its margins; exploring the various ways in which the surrounding area is constructed as a resource — and many more representations, abstractions, and ideas we bring with us into this space and apply to it. He’d remind us that this is the dominant space of any society, tending toward verbal representation.³¹ Here we have Ryle’s “knowing that” with second space being rife with the conceptual content provided to us by science, various other disciplined, propositional knowledges, as well as the myriads of the other dominant forms of knowledge that are so much part of our cultural ethos.

The last element of Lefebvre’s triad, thirdspace, is defined as the “space as directly *lived*. . . the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users.’”³² This is Lefebvre’s “*espace vécu*” or lived space — his “*autre*.” On our stroll through the woods Henri might point to the manner in which we are engaged in the constraints

and affordances of our pathway as we actively walk along it. For example, he might note how we resist the physical materiality of the trees by following the path. In a dialogical way, we avoid the troublesome high shrubs and exposed roots, perhaps the presence of annoying blue burrs, by engaging the embodied activities prompted by the presence of the pathway and our joint interactions on it. Our stroll, then, is a lived, embodied dialogue with nature, situated and understandable only within the here-and-now of reciprocal interchange in the specific location in which we are strolling. As Lefebvre begins to draw these points out, it would become clear that our activity on the pathway has an element of mystery and openness, it seems to be at once knowable and unknowable.

I believe this thirdspace is the domain in which we can fruitfully locate the kind of elusive, non-representational (i.e., non-conceived or non-perceived) knowledges described earlier by Ross and Shotter. Like Shotter's "knowing from" the knowledge of thirdspace is extraordinary difficult, if not impossible, to articulate, never finished or closed, and deeply situated. It is the lived space, as experienced by its inhabitants — a domain in which the conceptualizations of second space or the perceptualizations of first space dissolve into the hurly-burly of living and lived experience in the particular space being considered.

The Primacy of Thirdspace

As we move through the wilderness area, Lefebvre would argue that the utility of thirdspace is revealed in his idea that the production of space is a very complex act of creation. As a place to begin, he argues that third — or lived — space can be seen as the first to emerge. Only then is it perceived or conceived. I can hear him quoting from *The Production of Space*:

. . . spatial practice is lived directly *before* it is conceptualized; but the speculative primacy of the conceived over the lived *causes practice to disappear along with life*, and so does very little justice to the 'unconscious' level of lived experience *per se*.³³ (emphasis added)

Here is the key to Lefebvre's position as applied to understanding interchanges with nature and elaborating our third kind of knowing. By this view, the process of creating space involves first and foremost direct and lived experience in the world. In Ross's case, this would be the daily experience of taking clients out onto his pickerel lake. In Shotter's case, this would be the engaged dialogue and its implied space of joint action between conversational partners. Here, in this thirdspace, is the wellspring of our ideas about, and representations of, the world.

Lefebvre might go on to indicate that this lived experience is gradually transformed into either the “perceived” or “conceived,” first or second, spaces. The dominance of second or “conceived” spaces has the effect of causing “practice to disappear along with life,” thereby diverting us away from a full appreciation of the direct and lived experience of interacting with nature. Once conceived, the interchanges themselves recede into the background to form the mysterious, near unarticulable knowings of the third kind. This is what we lose if we fail to find an “*autre*” to Ryle’s binary between “knowing that” and “knowing how.” As well, this argument is congenial to Shotter’s recognition that his “third kind of knowing” is unknowable and resists “inner, mental representation.” It also echoes Ross’s struggles to articulate his knowings about his lake. In this sense, once conceived, the lived aspect of experiences in nature become elusive and extraordinary because they are no longer conceivable within the dominant second space of our cultural world. It is as though our conceptual and perceptual proclivities capture our minds and seduce us away from consideration of the direct and lived aspects of experience, consigning this direct, lived world to the shadows of the unconceived and the unperceived. The extraordinary knowledge that reveals lived experience in nature simply “falls between the cracks” of our conceived and perceived worlds and thereby becomes mute and extraordinary.

Lefebvre, in our stroll through nature, would be certain to remind us that classical “knowing that” propositions, the currency of second space, are deeply problematic in the manner in which they do violence to understanding lived experience. They impose sets of abstractions which leave us “buried in a mass of metalanguage, empty words and chit-chat about discourse.”³⁴ In the application of these denizens of second space, abstractions and semiological systems, “the forbidden fruit of lived experience flees or disappears under the assaults of reductionism and silence reigns around the fortress of knowledge.”³⁵ Here he is warning us about some of the pernicious effects of abstractions from second space described by him as “harbingers of death”³⁶ and articulates the manner in which they make it harder and harder to appreciate and articulate thirdspace. As applied to knowing-in-nature, Lefebvre would argue that our conceptual and perceptual proclivities do considerable violence to our capacity to articulate, let alone understand, the direct, lived, extraordinary world of engaged dialogues with nature.

The Importance of the Artist

Another thing Lefebvre would remind us of in our walk/chat through the woods would be that the artist, more likely than the scientist, will understand and operate within thirdspace. Indeed, well-written prose about nature, of the kind offered to us by, say, western Canadian nature writers like Sharon Butala (e.g., 1994),³⁷ Don Gayton (e.g., 1996),³⁸ or Kevin Van Tighem (e.g., 1997)³⁹ puts substance on third space as we begin to live the world of nature through the

eyes of such gifted writers. (See Banting, 1998⁴⁰ for an anthology.) In their detailed and rich texts we find embodied understandings of dialogues with the natural world. As we read these wonderful works, it becomes possible to sense the presence of thirdspace and experience the slow melting away of our second space conceptualizations and abstractions.

An Opening Move

As we return to our car, Lefebvre would sound a call for studying interchanges with nature at the level of direct, lived experience — in his thirdspace. He would counsel us against giving in to our initial tendencies to want to filter these through our binary, Cartesian lenses. So rather than framing our conceptualizations of nature within dichotomies like culture and nature, we should search for our “*autre*” in the embodied dialogical interchanges we have with our world. It is here, in Lefebvre’s thirdspace, that these troublesome dualities dissolve into the rich and full fabric of lived experience. It is here we begin to see Shotter’s “knowing from.” And it is here we begin to understand the nature and significance of Ross’s intuitive, near unarticulable knowings about his lake.

Enacting this call to thirdspace could involve, among other things, detailed micro-analysis of interchanges with nature. It could be possible, for example, to explore the manner in which a logger or a recreational angler interacts with the natural world. Foregrounding certain aspects of these interchanges would enhance the possibility of engaging thirdspace. Included here are:

1. Carefully embedding our exploration in the particular situation, resisting attempts to abstract or generalize to other contexts;
2. Clearly embodying the interchange by not letting the corporeal body drift into the background as is the case in much academic work today (see for example: Bordo, 1993;⁴¹ Butler, 1993;⁴² Davis, 1997;⁴³ Frank, 1990;⁴⁴ Haraway, 1991;⁴⁵ Radley, 1991;⁴⁶ Shilling, 1993;⁴⁷ and Stam, 1998⁴⁸).
3. Paying sensitive attention to the inherent temporal and sequential character of the interchanges;
4. Foregrounding the interchange per se, constructing it as joint action between the person and the world.

With a subtle smile, I expect Lefebvre would suggest that this could provide one way, but only a beginning, to discover the extraordinary third kind of knowing that is so critical to our understandings of interchanges with nature.

These suggestions are not made to sketch out some kind of grand research project, but rather to indicate, as an opening move, one of many possible ap-

proaches we could use to engage the elusive thirdspace. It provides a tentative guide to one potential way of bringing the second space abstractions of this paper (i.e., embodied dialogics), into the realm of lived experience — that is, into thirdspace.

The major goal of this paper has been to open up an avenue of thought that could possibly lead to renewed understandings of our complex interchanges with nature. Seeing the convergence of the writings of Ross, Shotter, Lefebvre and many nature writers is useful in helping to give substance to this possibility. There is the nub of a potentially important view of knowledge in this convergence — a set of ideas that could frame revitalized approaches to ecosophy.

In one of his most expansive moments, Lefebvre might go so far as to suggest that abstractions and reductions (the stuff of second space) could be evaluated in terms of the effectiveness with which they are grounded in detailed analyses of thirdspace. He might also point out how the fabric of thirdspace could be used to build a coherent vision of the genesis of phenomenological experience. And he certainly would point out that thirdspace dialogues with nature are not necessarily harmonious, conciliatory, or productive. Rather, he'd note that thirdspace explicitly reveals the workings of power and thereby becomes the site of its actualization, opening up the possibility of both harmonious and disruptive dialogues. But these concerns are for a later date — to be reserved, perhaps, for another stroll through the woods. For now, if we did listen to Shotter and Lefebvre we would begin to give voice to the kinds of near-unarticulable knowings like Ross's expert knowledge — a voice that has been sadly excluded from our discourses of nature.

These kinds of embodied, dialogical, situational, and joint-action-based understandings, while limited in their generalizability, could provide the foundation for a generative approach to understanding nature — an approach that would free us from the restrictions imposed by the lingering impacts of Descartes' division of the world as consisting of either extended material matter or cognitive "stuff." Rather, if seen in a temporal, embodied, dialogical thirdspace, interchanges with nature would reveal the rich and detailed substance upon which our abstractions are based, dissolving the binaries in the process. They would provide the ground zero for beginning to break down the troublesome dichotomies that cripple our efforts to come to grips with current environmental crises. For it is in Henri's thirdspace that we can see it all together, embedded in an embodied, rich and fascinating dialogical dance — nature, humans, and their immensely complex interchanges all whirling together in this wonderfully detailed and thick thirdspace.

One particularly important implication of engaging thirdspace involves the manner in which it offers a generative view of deep ecology. In Henri's "*espace vécu*" all of the elements of a dialogue co-occur in reciprocal relationship with each other. In our dialogues with nature, the physical world, its living occupants and the human are all seen as operating within a complex set of reciprocal in-

terchanges as each plays off of the other in the unfolding, embedded drama of thirdspace. As such, the whole complex of lived experience, human and natural, is constructed as a network of reciprocal connections. This view is certainly congenial to a deep ecological perspective in offering a space in which multiple relations are not only seen as important, but in which they are explicitly foregrounded. The kind of relationality that underlies thirdspace can help resist the (second space) tendencies we have for concentrating on the end points of relationships and recruiting over-simplifying binaries — tendencies that can, and do, inhibit a fulsome understanding of deep ecology. So too is the openness of thirdspace congenial to the emerging view of the mysteriousness, perhaps unknowability, of the networks of relations that create our ecological world. It is in thirdspace that deep ecology, with its myriad of relations between and among the world and its occupants comes to life — in all its delectable mystery. The challenge now becomes trying to put Lefebvre's wisdom into effective practice as we attempt to deal with the massive issues confronting ecosophy in the new millennium.

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