Sustainability, Place, and Rhetoric:

A Case Study of a Levinasian Pedagogy of Responsibility[1]

Sarah Hart Micke
University of Denver

**with Anne Amati
and Taylor Blagg**

This essay theorizes a pedagogy of responsibility as an alternative to place-based and critical pedagogies that offers to ground students in deep ethical obligation. Using Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, I suggest that place may function as a trace of the Other that reminds the self of her responsibility. By analyzing a case study of a place-based college writing assignment, I demonstrate how a pedagogy of responsibility cultivates students' responsibility for engaging others in ethical, rhetorical response.

Scholars increasingly urge for integrated approaches to the dual issues of environmental crises and social injustice. For example, David Gruenewald calls for a "critical place pedagogy" that marries the disjunctive fields of place-based and critical Freirean pedagogies to promote both environmental and social well-being. C. A. Bowers emphasizes teaching to cultivate a "cultural commons" in order to disrupt capitalism's destructive force. While possibly quite helpful in addressing sustainability and social justice issues, these arguments remain at

the level of politics and economics and therefore, lack the deep ethical obligation Betsan Martin points to. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's ethics to provide "an imperative of responsibility," Martin pursues an "education for sustainability" that offers "an ethical account of human interdependence with nature" (421). Martin argues that the self is ultimately responsible to and for all matter, in part because the Other requires natural resources—air, food, water—for survival (424)[2]. In this logic, place serves as a means through which the self can fulfill her responsibility to the Other by providing food, water, and shelter.

I suggest that in addition to serving as a means through which the self fulfills her responsibility, place may also serve as a means of better understanding that responsibility itself. Place may attune the self to the Other's singularity, deepening her awareness of her responsibility for the Other. For example, museums, memorials, cultivated gardens and landscapes, even sites of injustice, while not the Other herself, may bear the trace of her singularity and remind visitors of their responsibility for others. This argument is supported by an anecdote about Levinas' own use of place-based pedagogy. As long-time director of a teacher's training program in Paris, Levinas highly valued students' engagement with Parisian culture as part of their educational experience. He gave each student "a personal allowance . . . to enable them to enjoy and enrich themselves through concerts, operas, exhibits and other cultural activities" (Ben-Pazi 2). It seems that for Levinas, students' engagement with local places helped cultivate their responsibility for others. His students would engage with traces of others' singularity—the artists, actors, performers, musicians, directors, etc.—by attending these cultural events and exhibits and also engage with other audience members and visitors directly. These places bear traces of others' singularity and also serve as sites of encounters and dialogue with others, as I will demonstrate below. Such encounters with local places, Greg Clark suggests, deepen citizens' ethical participation in their communities (114). Thus, engaging ethically with places may help attune the self to her responsibility for the Other.

I use ethical and rhetorical lenses to theorize a pedagogy of responsibility that encourages students, teachers, and community members to recognize the deeply ethical value of place. I argue

that such a pedagogy involves radical openness to others in which a teacher's conventional, knowledge-based control and authority come into question. In the following sections, I analyze a case study of my first-year writing class that realized such a pedagogy. This case study shows how place can attune the self to her responsibility for the Other. In this class, students, including Taylor Blagg, adapted an academic report about the convergence of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre with the founding of the University of Denver (DU) to appeal to broader institutional and civic audiences. My class's intra-university collaboration with DU's Museum of Anthropology, with which Anne Amati works, spurred the kinds of dialogues that realize Levinasian responsibility and characterize sustainable communities.

EXIGENCES FOR COLLABORATION: INJUSTICE IN AN INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

"Many people, including myself, had never heard of the John Evans report or of John Evans in general. I was alarmed that no one was really sharing the story of this tragedy."
—Taylor Blagg

My first-year college writing class turned a responsible, rhetorical eye to place by considering an injustice in DU's past. DU's founder, John Evans, was territorial governor and Ex Officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs of the Colorado Territory when the Sand Creek Massacre occurred on November 29, 1864. U. S. troops attacked a peaceful camp of 750 Cheyenne and Arapaho, mostly women, children, and the elderly (Clemmer-Smith et al. 3). Showing no mercy for these mostly unarmed families, the troops brutally murdered over two hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho and wounded several hundred more (Clemmer-Smith et al. 8). Although Evans was not present at the attack, his leadership roles at the time implicate him in this atrocity (Clemmer-Smith et al. iii). Just two weeks before the massacre, however, Evans founded our university on land originally inhabited by Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes (Clemmer-Smith et al. v, iv). Given this difficult history, in 2013 the university decided to investigate Evans's role in the massacre, as the 150th anniversary of both events approached.

The committee found Evans culpable for creating circumstances that allowed the massacre to happen because of his failure to fulfill his leadership roles and "his reckless decision-making" (Clemmer-Smith et al. iii). The committee released its report in November 2014, two months before my winter 2015 writing class began. Although the report was accompanied by recommendations for how the university should promote communal healing (DU John Evans Study Committee 2), the report reached limited audiences. As a lengthy document over 100 pages long, full of technical jargon, and posted on a marginal university website, it was unappealing and practically inaccessible to students. These rhetorical limitations prevented it from giving voice to this marginalized history. Recognizing these limitations as an opportunity for my writing students to improve the report's appeal, I used it as the exigence for the penultimate class project, "Rewriting History."

"REWRITING HISTORY:" RESPONSIBILITY IN ACTION

The goal of the project was to "adapt" the report using different types of media . . . while collaborating [in groups] to put on an event to share our projects . . . As a class, we wanted the information to reach a broader audience.
—Taylor Blagg

I designed an assignment that created space for students to generate their own ways of engaging with this history, much as Levinas created space for students' agency by devoting funds for them to explore Paris on their own. Mine was an open-ended, collaborative, multimodal assignment, "Rewriting History: Adapting the John Evans Report," for which students read the report and then worked in groups to adapt the information into more appealing genres, such as videos, Prezis, and posters. Finally, students organized a showcase event to share their work with the university community. In this process, students had to listen to the report's account of marginalized history and attend to its rhetorical and ethical limitations in order to decide what responses were called for, thereby actualizing their responsibility. Composing group presentations and the showcase event also required responsible rhetorical work on many levels— analyzing textual and visual rhetoric of the report and related sources and using rhetorical strategies to compose multimodal texts and the

event itself. Approaching rhetoric and writing from such an ethically-driven viewpoint enhanced students' commitment to the project. Yet its success hinged on our collaboration with Anne and the museum.

While my class was working on this project, I learned that the museum was hosting the "One November Morning" exhibit featuring Cheyenne and Arapaho artists' representations of the Sand Creek Massacre. When I called Anne to make arrangements for a class visit, she also connected my class with related events, such as a panel discussion with two of the artists and other university and community stakeholders. These opportunities made the report come alive for my students by giving faces and voices to its dense, technical jargon. At the exhibit, students analyzed the art's visual rhetoric and took photos, asking if they could use the images in their projects to highlight the psychological and affective dimensions of the massacre obscured by the report's jargon. I talked with artist Brent Learned at the museum's panel discussion, and in follow-up conversations with Anne and me, Brent not only gave my students permission to use photos of the exhibit but also asked to see their group projects—a request that suggests his responsible openness to the students.

In using the artists' work, however, students became even more responsible for ethically representing others' voices in the class's retelling of the massacre. They had to narrate history in a way that would preserve the singularities of diverse audiences. In response to the report's call to resist "celebrat[ing] the founder with the amnesia we have shown in the past," and to "see him—and perhaps ourselves—more accurately situated in the complexity of history" (Clemmer-Smith et al. 95), many students felt compelled to share the report's information with others. Students questioned Evans's namesakes—for example, Evans Avenue that runs through campus and Mount Evans near Denver. Such questioning may both fulfill Paulo Freire's call to reflect on situationality, as well as Levinas' responsibility to others. Students invited the audiences of their presentation to participate in similar critical work. For example, Taylor's group created a map representing Evans's legacy across the nation. Another group created a video narrating the massacre itself using images of the artists' work. Collaborating with Anne and the museum deepened

the rhetorical and ethical stakes of my class project, and, as Taylor affirms, student learning.

Composing the showcase event required students to attend rigorously both to who their audiences would be and also the place of the event itself. To make the report more accessible, students had to decide who needed to know the information and how to help their audiences engage with it. To fulfill these responsibilities, students helped draft the guest list, shaping who their audience would be, and tailored email invitations to appeal to stakeholders across campus, including librarians, museum representatives, and even the Chancellor. They composed the rhetorical space of the event, deciding how best to arrange their projects in the classroom, how to help guests navigate the presentations, and where to place refreshments so their peers wouldn't just take food and leave without listening to the presentations—thereby aiming to enhance their audience's responsibility for attending to the report. Such a process deepens opportunities for students to exercise and cultivate their responsibility for others. This responsibility is central to Levinas' ethics, as I explain below, and his theory clarifies the value of such pedagogical approaches, in which attention to place may engage students', teachers', and community partners' as ethical subjects.

LEVINAS' ETHICS AND A PEDAGOGY OF RESPONSIBILITY

In the context of Levinas' ethics, responsible actions towards others matter, because they fulfill or actualize one's capacity for responsibility for others. This capacity defines subjectivity or personhood on the most fundamental level. The self emerges only in response to an Other, whom she threatens to displace and, therefore, for and to whom she is always already responsible. As Levinas explains in "Ethics as First Philosophy," to say "I" is to already be in relationship with an Other, whom the self threatens to displace, even "murder," by usurping resources necessary for survival and undermining her singularity (82-83). In this respect, responsibility precedes ontology and, therefore, also consciousness, intention, emotion, or action (Levinas, "Substitution" 99, 101). Responsibility, in this sense, is a capacity that precedes and makes possible these experiences, which can actualize this capacity in practice—or violate it. Part of applying Levians's ethics, then, is analyzing what actions might fulfill this

capacity and what might not. For example, actions such as teaching (Katz), dialogue (Ben-Pazi), questioning (Biesta), and listening (Lipari) could all actualize Levinasian responsibility, at least to the extent that they sustain the Other's singularity. Thus, a pedagogy of responsibility would draw on dialogue, listening, and questioning to help students and teachers better actualize their responsibilities for others.

Helping students cultivate and actualize their responsibility for others may be teachers' best hope. As Gert Biesta explains, "If teachers and educators can do anything . . . it is definitely *not* the creation or production of responsible subjects," but rather to preserve "the possibility for a genuine questioning and . . . for students to really respond" (67). My class project sustained such possibilities, enhancing students' responsible dialogue: In class discussions, students talked with each other, not to me, about their rhetorical choices. My role as teacher in such a Levinasian context involved, as Biesta describes, "questioning" students in "a truly dialogical process," not a Socratic one that solicits only "the *right* response" (66). For example, when students drafted videos that recounted the massacre and the colonial violence of settlers displacing native communities, I asked students about their rhetorical choice of terms to describe those communities. This opened a genuine conversation about the risks of labels for underprivileged communities and how those risks shift depending on who is using the label—whether she is part of that community taking ownership over a label or derogatory term, or a privileged outsider. Such pedagogy of responsibility depends in part on the teacher's willingness to be interrupted (Zhao 671), to be "call[ed] into question" (Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy" 83), by students and places. This meant designing a new course shortly before the quarter started and rearranging lesson plans to coordinate the last-minute visit to the exhibit. This kind of open, flexible work is part of what it means to teach "from a place of non-knowledge" (Todd 349). Yet it can expand a teacher's responsibility beyond her students to others who share those places.

RESPONSIBLE RHETORICAL EXPERIENCES WRIT LARGE

Having that kind of engagement makes the work I do at the museum so much more meaningful . . . we want to participate in that dialogue. The

collaboration on the John Evans project inspired us to proactively reach out to the DU faculty to explore new opportunities for collaboration . . . I look forward to future projects.
—Anne Amati

In addition to enhancing students' responsibility, this project spurred ongoing conversations about social justice, situating Anne, Taylor, and me as responsible, rhetorical agents in new ways. For example, all three of us talked about this experience at multiple conferences on and off campus. In addition, Anne coordinated an event to connect DU faculty with upcoming exhibits. Similarly, I have since collaborated with DU librarians to support my students' work with archives of local Jewish history. Taylor likewise has presented her group's project at a student research symposium and at a conference with Anne and me. There she explained enthusiastically, "It's been almost a year since I created this project, and I'm still presenting it to other people!" As Taylor recognizes, these conversations affirmed our personal agency grounded in responsibility for others: like all the students in my class, we became advocates deepening broader conversations about place-based injustices.

DIALOGUE DEFERRED: PLACE AS REMINDER OF THE OTHER

Museums increase understanding of and appreciation for cultural diversity . . . DUMA fulfills its vision when it goes beyond the walls of the gallery . . . into the classroom and out into the community.
—Anne Amati

I extend Levinas' ethics of responsibility by suggesting that places, in addition to other people, can call us to responsibility. For example, Greg Clark argues that public places such as Harlem's National Jazz Museum invite patrons to share rhetorical experiences that mold "the identities of good democratic citizens" and "[sustain] communities" (114). The National Jazz Museum encourages patrons to recognize Harlem not as a "depressed," marginalized African American community, but rather as a "vibrant [contributor]" to American society (Clark 121). From a Levinasian perspective, I would suggest that this museum interrupts outsiders' possible assumptions of a homogenous American culture and affirms insiders' human capacity

for responsibility and agency. Such places can remind visitors of their responsibility for the Other.

Similarly, the "One November Morning" exhibit represented the voices of Cheyenne and Arapaho communities still burdened by past violence and the violence of historical accounts. This art seemed to call my students into question—they were moved by the psychological and emotional presence that seemed absent, almost irresponsibly so, in the academic report. Students' unexpected requests to use images of it in their projects led to interactions with the artists and others beyond the class. Such conversations suggest that places such as the "One November Morning" exhibit and the National Jazz Museum can facilitate ethical dialogue by representing traces, reminders of the Other that can help attune selves to their responsibility. Thus, we may also be responsible to places not just because they provide means for sustaining the Other, as Martin suggests but also because they help sustain the self's attunement to her responsibility for the Other.

A pedagogy of responsibility, then, would create space for students to exercise their responsibility to and for others by exploring the range of practices through which it can be actualized. Such pedagogy would create an opening in the class for responsible dialogue with others in the institution and community, proliferating opportunities for others to actualize their responsibility. It would invite all participants— students, teachers, community members—to accept responsibility for sustaining places that provide resources and cultivate the self's attunement to responsibility. In this sense, a pedagogy of responsibility would offer an integrated approach to addressing both environmental crises and social injustice. Yet it would do so on different grounds from other pedagogues, such as Gruenewald, who turns to Freire's emphasis on the self's "situationality" (Freire 109) as the exigence for "reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits" and "to changing one's relationship to place" (Gruenewald 310). Such an ethic, grounded in a subject whose agency and rights precede the Other, runs counter to Levinas' sense that the Other gives rise to the self's subjectivity, agency, and cognition through responsibility. Likewise, Bowers turn to "cultural commons," grounded in shared communal knowledge (2), also risks emphasizing commonality and connection with others at the expense of sustaining others' alterity. Levinas, on the other hand,

offers an ethics that, by prioritizing the self's responsibility to the Other, promotes values shared by Gruenewald and Bowers without the risk of violating the Other in the process.

That is not to dismiss approaches like Gruenewald's and Bowers's; on the contrary, I'm quite optimistic that the practices they urge could be shown to be social, political, cultural logics and actions that could actualize Levinasian responsibility, although I won't detail those arguments here. After all, as Guoping Zhao observes, "Levinas's subject still thematizes and comes to be; it is still a consciousness that reflects, contemplates, knows, signifies, and articulates. But this subject is already far less secure and stable than" Western rational thought allows (671). Indeed, my class involved many such actions that aim for commonality, which, as Todd affirms, undermine the Other's alterity (346). Yet Levinas himself recognized value in these actions and emotions (Todd 346); it's just that they are not a sufficient ground of ethics, and the self must vigilantly guard against their risks. I would suggest that such connections are the residue of responsibility, on which sustainable communities depend.

NOTES

1   I would like to thank the *Reflections* editors for their especially constructive feedback as well as my colleagues in my University of Denver writing group, all of whom helped me develop and articulate my ideas more clearly and eloquently here. Special thanks to Taylor and Anne for presenting with me at the Community Writing conference and helping make the class and this article possible.

2   See pages 421-422 for an overview of other arguments extending responsibility beyond the human.

WORKS CITED

Ben-Pazi, Hanoch. "Ethics, Responsibility, Dialogue: The Meaning of Dialogue in Lévinas's Philosophy." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (2015): 1-20. Web. 17 June 2016.

Biesta, Gert. "Learning from Levinas: A Response." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22.1 (2003): 61-68. *Springer Nature.* Web. 24 June 2016.

Bowers, C. A. "Rethinking Social Justice Issues within an Eco-Justice Conceptual and Moral Framework." *Journal of Educational Controversy* 4.1 (2009): n. pag. Web. 7 June 2016.

Clark, Gregory. "Rhetorical Experience and the National Jazz Museum in Harlem." *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials.* Ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2010. 113–35. Print.

Clemmer-Smith, Richard, et al. *Report of the John Evans Study Committee University of Denver. DU Portfolio.* University of Denver, Nov. 2014. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

DU John Evans Study Committee. *John Evans Study Committee Recommendations. DU Portfolio.* University of Denver, Nov. 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000. Print.

Gruenewald, David A. "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place." *Environmental Education Research* 14.3 (2008): 308-24. Web. 14 May 2016.

Katz, Claire Elise. "'The Presence of the Other is a Presence that Teachers': Levinas, Pragmatism, and Pedagogy." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14.1-2 (2006): 91-108. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 24 June 2016.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader.* Ed. Seán Hand. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1989. 75-87. Print.

---."Substitution." *The Levinas Reader.* Ed. Seán Hand. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1989. 88-125. Print.

Lipari, Lisbeth. "Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45.3 (2012): 227-45. *JSTOR.* Web. 19 June 2016.

Martin, Betsan. "Taking Responsibility into All Matter: Engaging Levinas for the Climate of the 21st Century." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48.4 (2016): 418-35. Web. 19 June 2016.

Todd, Sharon. "Teaching with Ignorance: Questions of Social Justice, Empathy, and Responsible Community." *Interchange* 35.3 (2004): 337-52. *Springer Nature.* Web. 24 June 2016.

Zhao, Guoping. "Levinas and the Mission of Education." *Educational Theory* 62.6 (2012): 659-75. *Wiley Online Library.* Web. 24 June 2016.

Sarah Hart Micke is a Teaching Assistant Professor and Assistant Director of the Writing Center at the University of Denver. Her research and teaching focus on the intersections of rhetoric, ethics, and poetry, especially in situations of loss. She teaches several community-engaged writing courses and co-advises a community service student group. Currently, she is working on an article about the rhetorics and ethics of contingent labor in higher education. Her work has appeared in *Rhetoric Review* and in an edited collection on literature, rhetoric, and values.

Anne Amati is the Registrar/NAGPRA Coordinator at the University of Denver Museum of Anthropology. She is responsible for the legal aspects of the museum including loans, acquisitions, and Native American Graves Protections and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) compliance activities. She works closely with students on collection management and exhibit projects.

Taylor Blagg is a student at the University of Denver focusing on studies related to accounting and finance. She is passionate about investing, sustainability, and writing. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and outdoor adventures.