

Bridging Divides: Invoking a Deeper Understanding of “Spiritual Vacancy” and the Teacher’s Role in Naoko Saito’s Political Education

Response to Saito

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In “Reclaiming the Feminine Voice in American Transcendentalism,” Naoko Saito characterizes a problem of democracy as lying deep within each of our individual psyches. Our difficulties with divisive political climates stem from what she calls a “spiritual vacancy.” Most, if not all, democratic citizens experience fear of the other, which causes a loss of passion for contributing to the democratic process. When we feel such insecurity, we become overly self-concerned, which then breeds a mistrust of our fellow citizens rather than helping us develop the kind of cohesion necessary for a healthy democratic state. This characterization calls Hobbes to mind where members of the polity recognize and enact a natural right to protect themselves from the encroachment of enemies (which nearly all others happen to be in a disorganized state). The less confident we feel in our democratic connectedness, the more likely we are to revert to the Hobbesian state of nature whereby fear governs our interactions with others. If we are to make democracy work, then we need to find ways to quell those fears so that we can move forward.

Thinking of the problem of democracy in terms of “deep divides in the psyche” is immensely useful in helping us find a path toward education for good citizenship. It gives us resources within the self to help bridge political divides, which can lead to a feeling of empowerment rather than a sense of hopelessness. And while I see this as a major strength of the paper, I think it will be useful to examine some of the nuances of the problem in a more thorough way. In other words, I want to know more about the varying ways

in which we are “divided” in the democratic context, and how this connects to the concept of spiritual vacancy. A deeper understanding of these ideas can help us recognize further the wonderful contribution that Saito’s work can make to citizenship education.

It seems from Saito’s writing that democratic citizens are divided on at least two levels. We are divided within ourselves, which takes the form of this “spiritual vacancy.” We are also divided amongst ourselves in political society, which, from my understanding, derives from this deeply fractured psyche. To understand how these two divisions interact and influence one another, I think it would be useful to first try to better understand the nature of the divisions at each of these levels.

First, what does it actually mean for a person to be suffering from a spiritual vacancy as it pertains specifically to their political orientations and emotions? Division seems to entail some kind of inner tension between two or more parts within us that might either harmoniously interact or reside in conflict with one another. But what exactly is “divided” that should be whole in order to make a healthy, democratic psyche? When we start using the language of the divided psyche it become very difficult to avoid an allusion to Plato. Perhaps the spiritual crisis of the self refers to a kind of Platonic division of the soul. The fear we feel as democratic citizens represents the spirited part of our psyches running amok against our own interests. The failure on our parts as citizens to respond “rationally” to the “other” (not as a threat, but as simply one who is different) leads to an egoistic preoccupation with self-preservation and turns us all against each other.

But the author seems to suggest that it cannot be that (or at least *only* that) because she explicitly rejects a “cognitive” answer to the predicament through the politics of recognition. We cannot solve the problem of our divided self by wrangling the fear into submission through rational thought. Mutual recognition fails us here because of the limits that language and thinking present when trying to cope with deeply entrenched fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

So maybe we can find resources for understanding the politically

divided psyche in William James's work. Here we can think about the divided self as a conflicted soul where the unification of the psyche involves a deeply spiritual transformation. This is more in line with the language that the author is using here and seems to leave room for a less "mind centered" way forward toward a spiritual democracy as conceptualized by Margaret Fuller. But before we make that move, we need to think clearly about the meaning of a spiritual democracy. Even though we publicly and communally worship, the true spiritual transformation is often esoteric and individualized. In other words, it is personal. So how does this idea translate into the notion of a spiritual democracy, which is ultimately social?

If we think of the divided psyche from this perspective, then it seems that the key to transcending political divides rests in knowing oneself on a spiritual level, a process that starts with education for isolation and then moves outward. And this process is also democratic insofar as all individuals have more or less equal access to their own psyches. Regardless of how politically or socially marginalized we happen to be in the mainstream culture, we can all understand the experience of feeling uncertainty and fear. We all have some sense of the "spiritual vacancy" involved with being a democratic citizen. Fuller acknowledges this when she claims that we contain "genderless souls" and that there is a false binary of the sexes. Along this same thinking, I suppose we also contain race-less souls, or class-less souls meaning that we can transcend our divisions on the level of the psyche itself. If we start from this difference-blind, inward place, we can begin to move forward into a less fearful and hate-centered democratic future. This seems to be charging us with learning to feel (rather than think) the call to understand our interconnectedness, or the "oneness" of all humanity, and to act accordingly.

With full recognition that my interpretation of Saito's work might be faulty, I have a couple questions going forward, both of which stem from my interest in education for democratic citizenship. First, as a teacher I am left wondering how I can actually enact a "political education for human transformation" in my classroom.¹ Obviously there are some wonderful clues in the paper for how we might proceed based on the life and works of Margaret Fuller,

especially her “conversations.” But do we need a more robust understanding of Fuller herself in order to give us a roadmap for accomplishing this task? I ask this because Margaret Fuller was a dynamic and charismatic individual. She was known for being particularly adept at communication—an element of her character that Saito mentions in her paper. Part of what made Fuller so effective in the “conversations” was her ability to get her students to listen and open up. She inspired them to communicate “from the inmost to the outmost,” as Saito says.² But do you need to have such a charismatic teacher-figure to help students fill their “spiritual voids” or to help discover their individual voices?

Finally, I would like some clarity regarding the mechanism by which teaching can enact the education for isolation necessary to inspire self-realization, and thus resuscitate the democratic voice. Much of the paper focuses on how women, as democratic citizens, could reclaim their voices through self-realization in the time of Margaret Fuller. Of course, Saito acknowledges that the division between men and women was (and continues to be) arbitrary. Yet what happened to liberate women was, first, the acknowledgement of their own oppression. It seems like part of what was so effective about Fuller’s “conversations” was her ability to address the oppressive conditions for women in order to help them “open up” and start the process of self-actualization. But this does not actually mean starting from the level of the psyche and moving outward. It is not an education for isolation, but an education that explicitly acknowledges the ways in which we are different, and the difficulties that this causes for marginalized people.

This would seem to suggest that there is something about the outward conditions that make the inward transformation possible. So it seems as though our differences matter in helping us fill the spiritual void. Or, more specifically, acknowledging the ways in which we are oppressed and silenced helps us to reclaim our voices. But, where does this leave less disenfranchised, more powerful groups when it comes to healing their divided psyches? How can we go from this outward dismantling of oppressive norms to doing the inward work of healing the spiritual vacancy for people who tend to be beneficiaries from the current political systems? How will this help the 1%

address their own spiritual vacancy and become better democratic citizens?

1 Naoko Saito, “Reclaiming the Feminine Voice in American Transcendentalism: Bridging Divides in Political Education,” *Philosophy and Education 2020*, no. 1 (2020).

2 Saito, “Reclaiming the Feminine Voice.”