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Ecofeminisms and education: repositioning gender and environment in education

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This issue of *Gender and Education* explores aspects of the relationship of ecofeminisms and the environment to gender and education in the broadest sense. It provides an opportunity to re-think how ecofeminisms have, or could, inform educational theory and practice. In our call for papers we suggested the following questions as one way of sparking ideas for contributors:

- How is ecofeminist thought currently being taken up in practice in diverse educational sites (e.g. early childhood, elementary, secondary and higher education, informal, community and adult education, activist learning, social learning, public pedagogies)?
- How does ecofeminist-inspired education, training, or activist pedagogies perpetuate and/or disrupt dominant ideologies about gender and the marginalization of diverse voices?
- What affinities and tensions are at play between ecofeminisms and feminist new materialisms, intersectionality, and/or posthumanism, and what might these imply for gender and education?
- How could critical environmentally-oriented education movements and subfields (e.g. climate justice education, common worlds pedagogies, critical animal-focused education, critical food education, environmental justice education, Land education, queer ecopedagogies, etc.) be more informed by ecofeminism, and what directions could that take those fields?
- What could ecofeminisms contribute to queer feminisms and what could queer feminisms contribute to ecofeminisms in the context of educational practice and theory?

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*We have listed ourselves alphabetically to reflect our collective effort in co-editing this Special Issue.

- How are the hyper-accelerating changes in environmental conditions in specific locales around the world affecting women, girls, and those who identify as nonbinary and genderfluid, and what roles might education initiatives play in response?
- What insights might ecofeminisms offer for understanding the complex relationships between gender, environmentalism, colonialism and anti-colonialism, particularly in post-colonial and settler-colonial educational contexts?
- What can be learned from historical and contemporary ecofeminist thought, perhaps especially in light of debates around 'strategic essentialisms'?

While many of these questions are left unanswered in this Special Issue, they nonetheless provided a starting place. They also point to potential questions that future scholars might find generative.

As guest co-editors, we came to this Special Issue from different locations and position (alitie)s. Annette is a settler Australian who has been engaging in environmental education research for 50 years, particularly from formal schooling and teacher education perspectives and with an orientation to marginalized voices. Her book, *Gender and Environmental Education: Feminist and Other(ed) Perspectives*, is forthcoming from Routledge in June 2024. Jade is a community organizer collaborating with working-class Chinese immigrants in Vancouver's Chinatown in Canada fighting against gentrification and racism and learning to enact settler responsibilities for decolonization specific to racialized immigrants. Her research focuses on critical place-based education and feminisms of colour. Teresa is based in the United States and is a community-based researcher and ethnographer who works at the intersections of environmental education, animal-focused education, animal geography and critical food systems education. Connie is a settler Canadian who has been working at the confluence of environmental education, animal-focused education and critical pedagogies (particularly feminist, queer and fat pedagogies) for almost 35 years. Shirley is a South African ecofeminist scholar-activist who has been engaged in the praxis of adult and popular education for over four decades. Hilary lives and works in the north-eastern Australian tropics from where she writes on climate change education, gender, sustainability education, reef education and extinction matters. Making use of our different networks, we shared the call for papers far and wide in an attempt to recruit a wide regional spread of articles. We did not achieve this but are nonetheless pleased to have articles from a few different parts of the world, namely Australia, South Korea and the United States.

Ecofeminism emerged 50 years ago, with the term first being used by Francoise d'Eaubonne (1974). Its roots are in activist social movements, particularly the anti-nuclear and peace movements of the time, and in the growing perception of lack of attention to gender and sexism in environmental and animal advocacy groups (Gaard 2011; Phillips and Rumens 2016). Ecofeminism developed as both an activist and scholarly movement and, as Stephanie Lahar (1991) noted, 'the convergence of ecology and feminism into a new social theory and political movement challenges gender relations, social institutions, economic systems, sciences, and views of our place as humans in the biosphere' (28). Val Plumwood (1986) was particularly interested in the 'conceptual links between the domination of women and that of nature' (120), delving into the interconnected foundations and dynamics of hierarchical dualisms (e.g. culture/nature, human/animal, male/female, mind/body). The scholarly and activist strands of the movement were often tightly

interwoven, leading Anita Anand (1983) to conclude that the 'contribution of feminism to the environmental and development movements is the insistence that all forms of domination must be eradicated and that the living relations of subordination be a central problem for study, reflection and action for change' (187).

Ecofeminism blossomed at the same time as the second wave feminist movement, sprouting diverse branches that had different emphases, each 'rooted in a particular intersection of race, class, geography, and conceptual orientation' (Vance, 1993, pp. 125-126). As Caldecott and Leland (1983) commented then, 'in many countries all over the world women are taking an increasingly prominent role in political struggles; in the peace, anti-nuclear, health and ecology movements … The time has come for women to take a leading role to rectify the balance' (5) between technology and the threats to health and life on the planet. There was a recognition and reclaiming of women's relationships with the environment, but there was also more than this: 'ecofeminists have realized that we must question the entire civilization that mankind [*sic*] has contrived – all of its values, its goals, its achievements. It is not merely antifeminine, it is antihuman, antilife' (J.S. Russell 1990, 225).

A conceived relationship between women and environment was enshrined in The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations 1992), one of the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), and in Agenda 21 (United Nations 1993), the global action plan for achieving sustainable development. The actual wording referring to women in the Rio Declaration – 'Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development' (Principle 21; United Nations 1992) – is problematic, and can be read as condescending. More recent international statements shifted the discourse to focus more on gender equality. At a more recent U.N. conference on environment and development, the 2012 Rio + 20 Conference (United Nations 2012), the references to women in its declaration were linked with gender equality and human rights, 'including the right to development and the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food, the rule of law, gender equality, women's empowerment and the overall commitment to just and democratic societies' (2). Over time the focus shifted from being about 'women' and 'the environment,' particularly 'women in the global South, whose real material needs for food security and productive agricultural land, forest resources, clean water and sanitation trumped more structural discussions about gendered environmental discourses,' and which constructed them as individual 'victims of environmental degradation in need of rescue' (Gaard 2015, 21) to a focus on 'gender as a system structuring power relations' (Gaard 2015, 22). This shift has been an important development in terms of feminist responses to human-induced climate change and to the reconceptualizing of environmental feminism.

Ecofeminism suffered from a feminist backlash in the late 1990s. One branch of the movement had insisted that women had an inherent affinity with the natural world (often in relation to bearing and nurturing children), thereby 'homogenizing women and reifying restrictive notions of gender as biologically innate and fixed' (Piersol and Timmerman 2017, 11). As a result, ecofeminism was criticized for being essentialist, elitist and ethnocentrist, and was 'effectively discarded' (Gaard 2011, 26). In the past 10 years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the relationships between feminism

and environmentalism around the world, with scholarship in diverse disciplines and interdisciplines using the label of ecofeminism in their work (see, as just a handful of examples, Adams and Gruen 2014; Agboola, Solanke, and Kekeghe 2023, online; Estévez-Saá and Lorenzo-Modia 2018; Gaard 2015; Husein, Herdiansyah, and Putri 2021; Konik 2018; Liu 2022; MacGregor 2021; Ourkiya 2023; Phillips and Rumens 2016; Rahman 2019; Sempértegui 2021).

While different terms have been used over the years, with ecofeminism sometimes positioned as distinct from other labels such as 'ecological feminism' (Warren 1994; Warren and Cheney 1991), 'feminist environmentalism' (Seager 1993), or 'global feminist environmental justice' (Sturgeon 2009), Greta Gaard (2011) argues that what is needed now to address the climate emergency and the many problems of the Anthropocene is an intersectional approach that 'frames these issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation – and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism' (44). Gaard's position is similar to Carolyn Merchant's (1992; 1995; 2016) 'partnership ethic' that Merchant (2016) argues enables us to 'understand nature as a complex system that includes humanity within it [and] allows for the possibility that both the earth as we know it today and humanity can survive and thrive together in the coming decades' (153). Annette Gough (1997) suggested using this partnership ethic in poststructuralist environmental education research pedagogy because it can take into account the disorderly ways in which meanings are written, read, and rewritten and encourage a more nuanced understanding of the multiple positionings of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nonhuman communities, as well as the posthuman.

In the 1990s, around the time Donna Haraway (1991) was first playing with the idea of cyborgs, there was divergence in the conceptualization of feminist environmentalism, particularly around how material/socialist feminism and ecofeminism was being articulated at that time. Stacy Alaimo (1994) described the difference this way:

> Whereas ecofeminism seeks to strengthen the bonds between women and nature by critiquing their parallel oppressions and encouraging an ethic of caring and a politics of solidarity, Haraway seeks to destabilize nature/culture dualism that grounds the oppression of both women and nature. (133)

Drawing on both Haraway (1988; 1989; 1991) and Merchant (1980), Alaimo (1994) argued for an environmental feminism that stressed political alliance between women and nature, but one that would not slide into essentialism. She argued that:

> focusing on the agency of women and nature can help keep environmentalism in the political arena and can oppose the appropriation of nature as resource by stressing nature as an actor and by breaking down the nature/culture divide, thus undermining the systems of domination. (150)

Interest in material feminism and new materialisms has taken off in recent times, although the influence of ecofeminism has not always been sufficiently acknowledged (MacGregor 2021).

In education, the type and level of attention paid to ecofeminism and the theoretical influences in play have mirrored these broader trends. In 1996, Constance Russell and Anne Bell, taken with the idea of a 'politicised ethic of care', discussed ecofeminist ideas in relation to outdoor environmental pedagogy. Soon after, there was a spurt of

writing on ecofeminism and education that lasted for about a decade (Fawcett 2000; Fawcett, Bell, and Russell 2002; Fry 2000; Gardner and Riley 2007; Gough 1997; 1999; 2004; Hallen 2000; Houde and Bullis 1999; Li 2007; Schwartz 1999). This was followed by a mostly fallow period with a couple of exceptions (Harvester and Blenkinsop 2011; Spencer and Nichols 2010). In the past 10 years, there has been another burst of activity in educational circles (Bakhmetyeva 2021; Berger 2020; Bhutia and Liarakou 2018; Chattopadhyay 2019; Echegoyen-Sanz and Martín-Ezpeleta 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Fahs 2015; Fawcett 2013; Gough 2013; Gough and Whitehouse 2018; 2020; 2021; González-Weil et al. 2022; Gruber 2023; Hatten-Flisher and Martusewicz 2018; Holmes 2021; Isik 2021; Lloro 2020; 2021; Lloro-Bidart 2017; 2018; Lloro-Bidart and Semenko 2017; Maina-Okori, Koushik, and Wilson 2018; Martusewicz 2013; Piersol and Timmerman 2017; Pilgrim and Davis 2015; Rizzo 2018; Russell 2019; Russell and Semenko 2016; Ryman 2021; von Kotze and Walters 2023; Walters 2022; 2023; Walters and Burt 2022; Walters and von Kotze 2021; Wiyatmi et al. 2023), reflecting ecofeminism's resurgence, repositioning and reasserted potential.

This resurgence mirrors renewed interest in gender more generally in the environmental education field, which was in part spurred on by two special issues of *The Journal of Environmental Education* (see Gough, Russell, and Whitehouse 2017; Russell, Gough, and Whitehouse 2018) that drew on a range of feminist theories and helped place gender back on the agenda (Gough & Whitehouse, 2019). Perhaps one of the reasons ecofeminism is now being rethought and repositioned in education is also related to the growing interest in theoretical approaches that have significant overlaps, such as intersectionality, feminist new materialisms, and posthumanisms (see Gough and Whitehouse 2020; Lloro-Bidart 2018; Lloro-Bidart and Finewood 2018).

At play, too, is the sense of urgency many feel in response to the climate emergency and other problems associated with the Anthropocene that may have sparked, as Gaard (2011) suggests, reawakened interest in an approach that 'frames these issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation – and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism' (44). For example, Skosana and Cock (2023), in their study of Black working-class women's responses to the climate crisis and Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in mining-affected communities in South Africa, suggest that these women are engaged in ecofeminist practice even if not all label it as such, highlighting their 'respect for nature which goes beyond the expansionist logic of capitalism which reduces nature to a store of resources for profit' (87) and the solidaristic and communal nature of their actions.

As this brief review illuminates, the popularity of ecofeminist ideas has ebbed and flowed in academic and activist circles and have been taken up in a variety of ways over the years. The five articles included in this Special Issue are grounded in different disciplines and theoretical traditions to discuss some of the ways gender and environment are, or could be, interconnected in educational thought and practice. While the articles do not touch on all the questions we posed in our call for papers, they do span a range of different interactions with ecofeminisms.

In the first article, Hyena Kim, weaving ecofeminist insights with waste studies, feminist posthumanism and new materialisms, queer ecologies, and critical animal studies, seeks to unfetter education. An ecofeminist lens illuminates which bodies are more likely to be

devalued and subordinated, relegated to becoming 'waste-bodies'. Education is implicated in this process of reproducing and legitimizing inequitable relations, yet education could also encourage grappling with how we all are more-than-human waste-bodies at this moment in time as well as offer space to play with alternative ways of being in transspecies relationship. Kim suggests that the leakiness and ferality of waste-bodies offer possibilities for unsettling boundaries and divisions. Offering an ecofeminist interpretation of ecotones, the transitional spaces between ecosystems, Kim seeks learning and unlearning that attends to gendered disposability, embodiment, sensual kinship, and more-than-human entanglements.

In the second article, Lisa Siegel argues that ecofeminist theory and practice has potential to cross a threshold into an era of an expanded intersectionality that moves beyond the hegemonies of neoliberal patriarchal and colonial capitalist structures that have limited ecofeminist theorizing and material practice thus far. She starts with Gaard's (2017) contention that, over the last decade, ecofeminist thought has moved into a fourth stage, critical ecofeminism, that acknowledges that humans are unavoidably part of a multifaceted and interconnected global ecosystem that critiques attempt to reinforce human separateness and superiority as violent and damaging, and that calls for intersectional approaches. Siegel advocates for further entanglements of scholarship and embodied experience in a move towards a fifth stage of ecofeminism, which she envisions as an amalgamation of engaged theory, activism and education.

In the third article, Noel Gough offers a rationale for deploying ecofeminist science fiction (SF) stories as object-oriented thought experiments in science and environmental education, highlighting the importance of fostering imaginaries. Referencing developments in genetics and evolutionary biology, and their implications for human and more-than-human reproduction and kinship, he discusses the societal and educational implications of gene-centric discourses. Noting the marginalization of feminist and ecofeminist SF writing, he discusses two novels published in 1962 and 1975 by a neglected 'proto-ecofeminist' writer, the late Naomi Mitchison. Exploring how her novels reimagine what it means to be human, dramatize 'otherwordly conversations' and challenge relationships between literature and science, which are all matters of concern to ecofeminists, Gough argues that Mitchison's stories open up imaginary possibilities for ecofeminist education.

In the fourth article, Lorraine Larri and Hilary Whitehouse analyse some of the ways Australia's Knitting Nannas Against Gas and Greed (The Nannas) embody an ecofeminist approach to informal, social movement learning. They excavated earlier survey and interview data to focus on the Nannas' experiences with learning around environmental and social justice activism, and in the face of ageist sexism. Such a focus is especially important, they note, because educational research pays little attention to older women's learning experiences. Using an ecofeminist materialist lens, they reveal how the Nannas creatively, and often humorously, draw attention to matters of age, gender and environment, and in doing so, together build knowledge and skills helpful to their efforts formenting social change. Larri and Whitehouse conclude with a call for more attention to such emergent learning spaces, which they dub 'ecofeminist gerogogy'.

In the fifth and final article, Liz Wilkinson collaborated with four of her students, Katelyn Regenscheid, Megan McCready, Shannon Hill, and Stacy Hannagan, to write an autoethnographic account of how they journeyed together into unknown waters. Wilkinson, a

feminist literature professor tasked with teaching ecofeminism at the graduate level, felt significant impostor syndrome at the outset as someone working on the fringes of ecofeminism. Inspired by Gaard's (2017) book, *Critical Ecofeminism* and determined to ensure the course had a solid foundation in feminist theory and Indigenous texts alongside experiential activities and opportunities to engage with local experts and the more-than-human world, she felt both deeply excited and deeply underprepared. Wilkinson decided to use her 'academic artlessness' as the impetus to engage her students in disrupting pedagogical hierarchies and collectively creating knowledge. The perspectives of the student authors woven throughout this article reveal they too felt trepidation initially but came to appreciate the joy and challenges of engaging in 'radical vulnerability', 'decomposing', and 'living transcorporeally'. Embedded in the narratives are useful takeaways for educators and students alike.

We look forward to your responses to these articles. While ecofeminism has been discussed sporadically in environmental education for close to 30 years now, we note that these conversations have only occasionally reached beyond those particular circles in education. One of the goals of this Special Issue of *Gender and Education*, then, was to broaden the conversation. This journal publishes articles that consider how gender shapes and is shaped by social, cultural, discursive, affective and material dimensions of difference and seeks to generate multi-disciplinary and critical discussions of the complex interplay of gender and education across all educational sites and forms within a lifelong learning approach. It has long had 'social justice' as an overarching goal, and we argue that ecofeminisms have the potential to illuminate how climate justice, environmental and ecological justice, planetary justice, animal justice, Indigenous land sovereignty and other such frames can expand ideas about the 'social' beyond the human, in ways that are generative for readers of this journal. We hope to see future scholarship in this journal on ecofeminisms and education that is grounded in diverse geographical and learning contexts as well as theoretical traditions. Many of the questions we posed in our original call for papers for this Special Issue remain unanswered and the authors of the articles suggest additional avenues to pursue. We anticipate you as readers will generate even more ideas that deserve attention.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Annette Gough OAM is Professor Emerita of Science and Environmental Education in the School of Education, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. She has been an adjunct/visiting professor at universities in Canada, South Africa and Hong Kong, and is a Life Fellow of the Australian Association for Environmental Education (since 1992). She is author of *Gender and environmental education: Feminist and other(ed) perspectives* (Routledge 2024) and *Education and the environment: Policy, trends and the problems of marginalisation* (ACER 1997), and co-editor of *Green schools globally: Stories of impact on education for sustainable development* (Springer 2020) among many other publications. Her research interests span environmental, sustainability and science education, research methodologies, posthuman and gender studies.

Yi Chien Jade Ho is a Post-doctoral Fellow with the School of Public Health and Social Policy at University of Victoria, BC. She works to support Indigenous frontline workers' effort in building autonomy and community-centered responses to the overdose and housing crisis, as well as building cross-racial tenant organizing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Chinatown in combatting housing exploitation, racism, and colonial policing and neglect. Jade's doctoral work, *Radical Pedagogy of Place: A Decolonial Feminist Narrative Exploration of Returning, Organizing and Resisting*, centres on developing a decolonial place-based pedagogy through focusing on the connection between place, land, and identity in marginalized communities in Taiwan and in Vancouver.

Teresa Lloro is an Associate Professor in the Liberal Studies Department and Director of the Master's in Regenerative Studies Program at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. She teaches courses in the environmental studies and sciences, with a focus on environmental and science education, human-animal studies, just food systems, and regenerative social practices. She is the author of *Animal Edutainment in a Neoliberal Era* (Peter Lang), lead co-editor of *Animals in Environmental Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Curriculum and Pedagogy*, and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*.

Constance Russell is a Professor and Lakehead University Research Chair in Environmental Education in the Faculty of Education of Lakehead University in Canada where she teaches courses on environmental education, social justice education, animal-focused education, and food education. She is an award-winning author, the co-editor of *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression Through Critical Education* (Peter Lang), and the former editor of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*.

Shirley Walters is deeply influenced by the oceans and mountains where she lives in Cape Town, South Africa. She is committed to the personal and political work of unlearning separation and relearning relationality in the interests of justice. She is an ecofeminist activist-scholar and professor emerita of adult and continuing education at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). She was founding director of UWC's Centre for Adult and Continuing Education and Division for Lifelong Learning. She has been active within justice oriented civil society organisations for over 40 years both locally and globally. She is currently president of Pascal International Members Association (PIMA), an international network of adult educators and lifelong learning practitioners and scholar-activists.

Hilary Whitehouse is an adjunct Associate Professor with The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, and a life member of the Australian Association for Environmental Education. Before retirement she worked as a teacher educator and in a position supporting post-graduate research. She is known for her scholarship on gender, climate change education, anti-extinction education, and sustainability education. She is an editor with *The Journal of Environmental Education* and the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. She currently volunteers her time with a small, conservation, not-for profit, The Bats and Trees Society of Cairns.

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