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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The aesthetic experience of nature and hermeneutic phenomenology

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### ABSTRACT

One aim of environmental education is to encourage different ways of generating meanings of, valuing, conceiving, and contextualizing “nature.” The field of aesthetics provides an affective basis for interpreting our perceptions of environments and relations with other more-than-human beings. This critical essay examines some of the key concepts about hermeneutics and phenomenology introduced by philosophers such as Kant, Dufrenne, Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Quintás and then indicates some methodological implications. Our Freirean purpose is to advance how understandings of the nature of the aesthetic experience of nature might inform different research framings, critical curriculum inquiry, and eco-pedagogical explorations of being in, becoming and relating with nature.

### KEYWORDS

aesthetic education;  
environmental education  
research; Freire; hermeneutic  
phenomenology; post-critical

### Situating and framing the study

The aesthetic experience, appreciation of, and concern about nature has historically informed the experiential pedagogies and interdisciplinary aspirations of environmental education and its research. Yet, the still undertheorized role of aesthetics, and its “felt” and embodied or “soma” and “eco” animations in environmental education research has typically assumed or presumed their qualities, characteristics, and values. These affective attributes, however, are rarely conceptually developed and/or empirically described due to the “non-representational” problem in the social sciences and humanities of interpreting and explaining the primordial and, often, pre-conscious and pre-rational/linguistic experiences of selves and ecological others (Descola, 2013) found historically in “nature” (Thrift, 2008). Furthermore, the non-representational that problematizes efforts to represent the affective and (eco)somaesthetic experience of nature is further complicated when the “correspondence” problem overlays it (for example, Sparrow, 2014). Simply speaking, the correspondence problem highlights the “gap” between being and thought and, in doing so, rejects the authority and legitimacy of the alleged strong correlation between being and thinking, exacerbated here when the ambiguity of the term nature and our experiences of it are, and must be, included in interpretive inquiry. More recently, “openings” are emerging within environmental education research that “post-critically” highlight a different ethical and political warrant of such research (Hart, 2005). This warrant for an “ecophenomenology” (Brown & Toadvine, 2003) does, indeed, have a history in environmental education and is found in, for example, Jardine’s (1998, 2000) descriptions of the experience of nature, and nature itself as he perceives and “feels” it. Other examples of an “ecopoetics of nature” can be found in McKenzie, Hart, Bai, and Jickling’s (2009) efforts to “re-story” environmental education. Anglo-speaking readers are already very familiar with Abram’s (1996, 2010) “earthly cosmological” extension of the North American “nature writing” genre animated vitally through his “synaesthetic” emphasis on the fusion of the senses, or “sensorium”

(Stoller, 1989). They are also very familiar with Leopold's (1949/1953/1966) prescient interest in "perception" and, for example, cannot fail to be moved ethically and politically by his "trigger-itch" complicity in witnessing the old fierce green fire dying in the old wolf's eyes. Moreover, in historicizing the connections for research of the human experiences of nature, Ingold's (2000) ecological anthropology has conceptually heightened the relevance of incorporating spatially attuned "movement" experiences and interpretations into our ecopedagogical practices and research framings of, for example, the prospects for an ecosomaesthetics in environmental education and for its practices of research.

Notwithstanding these promising reformulations of othered ways of interpreting the otherness of nature(s) and our felt subjectivities in and about it/them, the highlighting of the correspondence and non-representational problems will rightfully persist as an interpretive problem and challenge, notwithstanding the limitations openly acknowledged previously. Rather than dwell on those conceptual and experiential/existential limitations, or their implications for methodological (and pedagogical) speculation and experimentation in environmental education and its research, our primary interest here is to outline some historically influential understandings of aesthetics and their key understandings while broadly responding to related considerations of the deeper ontological-axiological-epistemological and methodological "tensions" underpinning the framing of environmental education research (Robottom & Hart, 1993). Our modest aim is to "affectively" (Clough & Halley, 2007) advance a more ecological approach to the framing, naming, and situating of environmental education practices, pedagogies, curricula, and research within a generalized account of the aesthetic experience of nature.

We aim also to push partially into empirical work that we are currently undertaking so as to advance the current state of affairs with/in environmental education research. For example, hermeneutics and carnality (Abram & Jardine, 2000), hermeneutic phenomenology (Sammel, 2003), post-phenomenology (Payne, 2003), phenomenological deconstruction (Payne & Wattchow, 2009) and ecophenomenology (Payne, 2013). Based on an ongoing interpretive and empirical study of participants responses to and relations with aspects of the "Cerrado" (Brazilian savannah) in São Paulo State, Brazil, we also bring an "othered" Brazilian "geo-epistemology" (Canaparo, 2009), or cultural ontology, to these current "border crossing" deliberations found in the discourse of environmental education. This geo-epistemological and phenomenological move takes seriously our bodied positionings as researchers (Hart, 2013) who are significantly shaped by an overlapping range of historical-cultural-geographical "locales" of meaning-making and knowledge generation.

According to the Portuguese author, Adriana Serrão (2005), there are distinct approaches to the study of the aesthetics of nature, as the interpretations of the concepts of nature and aesthetics vary considerably both within and across culture-nature locations and relations. According to Serrão (2005), the focus on the cognitive and affective components of aesthetics varies also, which means these different ways of conceiving the aesthetic experience assign different roles to the subject of aesthetic assessment. To be sure, the field of aesthetics, and particularly the aesthetics of nature, give rise to deep philosophical debates (Serrão, 2005).

## The aesthetic dimension in education

Etymologically the word aesthetic comes from the Greek *aisthesis*, which means feeling or sensitivity, and *aisthanestai*, to feel with the senses. Writing in Brazil, Marin (2006) claims the term aesthetic "refers to the human capacity to transcend the immediate perception of things that make up the world" (p. 279, our translation). For Savile (2000), the meaning of *aesthetic* depends on the context. It can designate a series of artistic interests and stylistic choices that dominate the modes of artistic production of a period or it may refer to the emergence of philosophical concerns in our thoughts on the arts, objects and artifacts that attract our sensibility and taste beyond the arts. According to Serrão (2005), from the adoption of an existential and phenomenological perspective in nineteenth-century thought, the concept of aesthetics of nature gained strength since evidence was emerging about the human contribution to the partial extinction of many species.

Most recently, in the Anglo-speaking North/West, a heightened philosophical interest in "somaesthetics" (Johnson, 2008; Shusterman, 2008; Sullivan, 2001) problematizes the assumed "subject" of an

objective understanding of environmental aesthetics whose historical focus and locus emphasizes external nature. Often indebted to the thought of John Dewey and his central premise of “growth” through the organism-environment interaction, that ontological-epistemological study of somaesthetics shifts that already presumed locus and focus of inquiry on statically objectified and “phenomenalized” (or “noema”) “subjects” to include the (human) sentient body (noesis). For our reflexive purposes they are vitally and vibrantly “in relation.” Somaesthetics is part of the “corporeal turn” in contemporary theory, in which there is a very strong phenomenological orientation in the study of human movement (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009).

Within the “applied” field of “aesthetics education,” a recent meta-analysis by Smith (2005) highlighted a number of questions and issues of relevance to environmental education and its research. One was the need for aesthetics education to move beyond its location as a form of art or arts education only. Here, Smith identified the importance of incorporating environmental and natural aesthetics into deliberations and debates about aesthetics education. More generally in academic research, the Brazilian authors (Marin, 2006; Marin & Kasper, 2009; Marin & Lima, 2009) frame the aesthetic experience of nature in education within a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. They also have broadly considered the underresearched and undertheorized links between aesthetics, ethics, and politics in education. Other Brazilian researchers confirm the relative silence of aesthetic considerations in environmental education practices (Bonotto, 2008; Carvalho, 2006; Iared & Oliveira, 2012; 2013; Marpica, 2008; Valenti, 2010). They recommend further research be undertaken to understand this major gap in the literature as mirroring our current limited understandings of society and education within our interpretations of nature and culture relations in order to enlarge the transformative capability of environmental education.

In situating and framing this study, our aim is to provide generalized insights into the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of eco/soma/aesthetic experience of nature and then consider how some of the concepts might also be consistent with Brazilian approaches to critical environmental education (Carvalho, 2004; Guimarães, 2004). Finally, we conclude with a very brief indication of emerging methodological approaches relevant to environmental education pedagogy and research that we have found are helpful in both empirical work and researcher reflexivity. Much more theoretical, methodological, and empirical work needs to be done.

### **The aesthetics of nature in a phenomenological hermeneutic perspective**

Here, we “track” some of the most influential contributions to aesthetics in a way that sheds light on how “nature” affect and meanings have been “treated.” Plato, of course, relegated sense experience to the lowest aspect of knowing while idealizing the superiority of the abstracted forms. In so doing, Plato’s legacy is to limit the value of body knowing or somatic understanding while elevating the importance of the mind, this contributing dualistically to a “values hierarchical” approach to “knowledge” that, ironically, persists in much Western thought, despite numerous efforts ranging from John Dewey (1920/1948) to contemporary feminists, to speculative realists, new materialists, post-phenomenologists and post-humanists to “reconstruct” or/and “deconstruct” such epistemologically constructivist philosophical and conceptual dualisms and binaries.

Over time, primarily within a European geo-epistemology, Kant holds a decisive and exceptional place in the history of aesthetic thought (Rosenfeld, 1991). He proposed the assignment of aesthetic taste as a third kind of knowledge that is neither logical-scientific nor that of moral laws. In other words, for Kant (1965), aesthetic taste is a specific domain, autonomous from the moral and the empirical domains. Kant’s ideas were greatly extended by Schiller, another German philosopher, also from the eighteenth century, whom with Dewey, Smith (2005) refers to in his meta-review of trends in aesthetic education. According to Rosenfeld (1991), Schiller clarified many concepts that Kant had explained only sketchily. Kant’s approach had described rigid and autonomous concepts, while Schiller conceived a dialectical and historical significance attached to them. Thus, Schiller (1967) realized that sensitivity and rationality were balanced, mutually acting. Although Schiller was greatly influenced by Kant, there is a fundamental issue of the underlying designs of aesthetics that differentiates them:

Schiller understands the aesthetic as a mode of rationality. This view conceives aesthetic *value* as a form of cognitive education. Thus, unlike Kant, for Schiller the aesthetic dimension is directly linked to the moral dimension, which makes the aesthetic field an “educational and political praxis” (Rosenfeld, 1991).

From a phenomenological perspective, the concept of *being in the world* is fundamental in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and ontology and it differs from the idea of “correspondence” and representation proposed by Kant. When we speak about representation, we are referring to an aesthetic object that is seen by the subject and thus to the subject-object dichotomy and the passivity of the subject to the object. For phenomenologists, by contrast, we are the world, we are flesh of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), in a relationship in which the object of contemplation is open to us and we open ourselves to the object, “because here is the proper world as a real spectacle that is: present and not represented” (Dufrenne, 2002, p. 62, our translation). This means that the aesthetic event goes beyond the description of the world lived through the imagination, i.e., philosophy, aesthetics, and phenomenology serve to understand the world and how things are named.

Dufrenne (2002) dedicated a chapter to the aesthetics of nature. He asserted that “nature never ceases to improvise” (p. 62, our translation). According to Dufrenne, the possibility of close contact with the unpremeditated sensible world awakens in us biophilic feelings, precisely because we have a common origin with the elements of nature. Bachelard (1999) and Dufrenne (2002) believed that nature is contemplated by humans even in moments of mystery, danger and fear. Likewise, Marin and Kasper (2009) argued “what seems frightening and negative is received by the beholder as an aesthetic object, as it involves her/him in a desire to participate” (p. 275, our translation). In summary, we perceive that even so-called “violent” nature (storms, hurricanes, volcanoes) is never only tragic; it is also sublime. For Dufrenne (2002), it is in threatening moments that the aesthetic experience is held up to nature, as it is during the sublime that nature imposes itself. Bachelard (1994) pursued a philosophy of poetry against the dominance of Cartesian rationality.

In *The poetics of space*, Bachelard (1994), used the term *topophilia* (see also, Tuan, 1974) to designate investigations of happy images of space: they aim to determine the value of spaces possessed by humans, of spaces defended against adverse forces, the beloved spaces. According to Bachelard, we carry with us memories of the places we inhabit and this is reflected in our values and in the creation of new meanings (Trigg, 2012). We believe that understanding the temporal relation between subject and living space allows us to interpret the aesthetic values attributed to nature.

Clearly, a central idea of phenomenology emerges that matches hermeneutics: the pre-reflective or pre-understanding knowledge, which is discussed by Merleau-Ponty and reiterated by Gadamer. If we are in the world and we know we are in the world, we have a perception of this world even if it is thoughtless awareness. Thus, we have a pre-reflective consciousness of the world and of our own lives, a consciousness that is also intentional. This level of individual experience is prior to language, it does not begin and it does not end in language, yet it is sensitive and reflects our involvement with the world. Hence, the contemporary accounts of the correlational or correspondence problem, touched on previously. For Merleau-Ponty (1968), this conception is crucial because a philosophy of reflection, if it is not to be ignorant of itself, is led to wonder about what precedes it, about our contact with being within ourselves and outside ourselves, before all reflection.

So, what is expected in phenomenology is the (problematic) task of an unveiling and disclosing of the “essence” of consciousness; in other words, the meaning of a phenomenon. Capalbo (2008) states that intuition is a pathway to reach the evidence of a phenomenon. Therefore, comprehending meanings does not primarily understand what the words mean, but what experiences mean (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). From this, it follows that our being in the world has a situated existence, i.e., the phenomenon occurs in perspective. Capalbo (2008) makes it clear that this meaning is not the result of subjectivism and does not sink to relativism. According to this author, the “essence” of the phenomenon is understood “from a place and a point of view that can be lived and experienced by any individuals who position themselves in this place and with this view” (Capalbo, 2008, p. 134, our translation).

Taking a similar approach to that of the above thinkers, Gadamer (1997) criticized the rationalist tradition of assigning as true only what comes under the domain of science. For him, there are other

experiences of truth, such as history and art. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1997) brings the contribution of Kant to bear on the concept of aesthetic experience, since art was not conceived as truth. In Kant, aesthetic enjoyment enables *disinterested pleasure*, but it does not provide new knowledge. The author is opposed to Kant's subjectivism of aesthetic contemplation that does not give us understanding. According to Carvalho, Grün, & Avanzi (2009), "the museum itself is viewed with some suspicion by Gadamer, since it separates the artwork from everyday life and, moreover, it is seen as timeless" (p. 103, our translation).

Grün (2005) proposed that we understand the aesthetics of nature from Gadamer's conception of a work of art (Gadamer, 1997) in which a game is analogous to the experience of understanding itself. The experience of art requires a launch into the game, of which we, as spectators, are part, as we are part of the world of our experience. We do not control the game, just as we do not control the world. From this metaphor derives the idea that we are part of the world, there being no dichotomy between subject and object. Like artwork, nature is an invitation to embark on a game within an environment that offers us experiences leading to the construction of possible new understandings of the world (Grün, 2005). Carvalho et al. (2009) applied this idea to the human-environment relation: "we cannot or should not try to control it. The environment is part of the world of our experience" (p. 103, our translation). The "game" to which Gadamer referred (1997) has no interest or purpose; it is just there to be played. We are players and we play and are played; the game takes place and changes without our control. We can give it pace and style, but we cannot dominate the events.

Informed by Schiller and contemporary hermeneutics, Quintás (1993) proposed *games* are reality-integrating spaces where binding processes and the creation of meaning occur. For this philosopher, the task of art is to shape the features of reality, which can be everyday spaces (school, home, landscape) or events (a sunset, a clown, an elder who meditates), i.e., to integrate the spheres of reality: "The aesthetic game, like all authentic games, not only mimics the real; it creates scopes and produces meaning" (p. 19, our translation). For the author, the formation of our values, ethics, respect is the result of a confluence of several realities that dialogue, mingle, and create meaning. Through this creation of meaning, we do not reduce the reality, but we see the full complexity of the world. From this, the author clearly associates ethical and aesthetic values.

From what has been presented previously, Dufrenne, Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Quintás converge when thinking about an ontological approach to aesthetics: all of them believe that there is no dichotomy between subject and object and that there is a reflective consciousness in aesthetic experience. This ontological view of the nature of reality of aesthetic experience lies within the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. A number of prominent European philosophers, used by Brazilian researchers (Carvalho et al., 2009; Grün, 2005; Marin & Kasper, 2009; Marin & Lima, 2009) have thought about the study of aesthetics. Those authors have been influencing the hermeneutic phenomenological approach in Brazil. The historical review of aesthetics and education seems useful for reframing the research and practice in a more ecocentric view. Some of those authors have not been considering the materiality of non-humans, hence the current theory of *eco/soma/corporeal turn*—for example, Braidotti (2013), Ingold (2000), Payne (2013), Shusterman (2008)—shed a new philosophical and methodological possibilities to environmental education. In the next section, we will articulate their key concepts and the aesthetic dimension that we advocate as effective and significant for critical environmental education. In this way, we will outline our own thoughts of aesthetics experience in nature that is also based on Brazilian "geo-epistemology" (Canaparo, 2009).

### **Why this perspective of an aesthetic experience in environmental education?**

We reconsider the central concepts of this European philosophical stance and the relevance of aesthetic experience to critical environmental education, as we understand it within the Brazilian context of hermeneutic phenomenology (Capalbo, 2008; Carvalho et al., 2009; Grün, 2005; Marin, 2006). Although influenced by English-speaking authors, we interpret those thoughts within the current realities of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005).



Our initial experience of the world is always sensory, perceptual, and is affectively “emotional” in feeling. All precede language: affect is also and often pre-reflective, a key concern often invisible or absent in environmental educational inquiry (Marin & Lima, 2009; Payne, 2003). This realization leads, inevitably, to how such pre-reflective experience can be interpreted and represented in research of an educational type, thus invoking fundamental questions about the methodological importance and intrigue of “non-representational” (Thrift, 2008) and post-phenomenological speculative inquiry (Sparrow, 2014) within the “affective turn” and aesthetics of environmental education. According to Payne (2013), for research, inclusion of this eco/soma/aesthetic notion of pre-reflective consciousness is fundamental to our experience, perceptions and sensation of environments and natures, because it ontologically cannot be excluded “ecologically” from any epistemological orientation or methodological deliberation. This requires research to deepen the ontological meaning of experience as it is held in tension with epistemologically constructivist layerings of knowledge acquisition and “cognitive” development as it is “banked” (Freire, 2005), “produced” or reproduced pedagogically in education. This tension created by assertively incorporating the affective dimensions of an ontology of being invokes a more earnest investigation into how our bodies that are always interacting relationally via movement in the lifeworld are actively complicit in the generation of meaning, or somatic understanding or embodied knowing, presenced and non-presenced, visibly and invisibly located in space, time, and place and how the meaning of that experience is then socially, ethico-politically and culturally ecologically constructed (Payne, 1999). Here, Toadvine’s (2009) meta-phenomenological questioning of “what is the nature of experience?” and “what is the experience of nature?” and “what is the relation between experience and nature?” is invaluable to the recyclical task of interpreting the dynamic interactions of self and environments. As is Trigg’s (2012) almost parallel questioning of the “memory of place” and “place of memory” and their recursive intersections. Toadvine’s (2009) and Trigg’s (2012) triadic questioning, among others highlighting the significance of any interpretation of experience, is crucial because it underscores the importance of reinterpreting what can only be described as a politics of “ontological ethics” (Grosz, 2004; Law, 2004) that is sorely needed to underpin the conventional approach to “epistemological ethics” (including environmental) so heavily privileged in the Anglo-North/West.

After this “first” ontological and pre-reflective experience of nature and relations with it, given the right epistemological and pedagogical conditions we may well build a heightened reflective awareness and re-interpretation of the self-world and being-thought. Here lies one of the greatest contributions that an emphasis on hermeneutic (eco)phenomenology provides deeper educational processes and more meaningful understandings of the lifeworld in which actors actually live. Freire (2007) emphasized the nurturing of curiosity as providing a pedagogical opening for revealing our sentiently conscious body to the world so as to understand it better. Curiosity, according to Freire (2007), is a willingness to challenge ourselves in the face of things, facts and phenomena, prettiness and ugliness, and willing to understand and seek the reasons for the facts. Then, Freire speaks of aesthetic curiosity:

There is another way to immerse ourselves pleasurably in a challenge. It is a matter of aesthetic curiosity. It is what makes me stop and gaze upon the sunset. It is what detains me, lost in my contemplation of the speed and elegance with which the clouds move across the blue sky. (Freire, 2007, pp. 95, 96)

For Freire (2007), aesthetic curiosity is naive, but may become a more “meaningful” form of epistemological curiosity when individuals adopt a critical-reflective interpretive position as a form of praxis. Freire commented that the educator’s role, in this case, is to challenge the naive curiosity of the student, to share criticality with him or her. Likewise, in addition to the educational quest for reconnecting humans and nature via environmental education, one critical task is to unveil and interpret the perceptual complexity of various environmental designs afforded the subject within their geo-epistemological and socially/culturally constructed issues (and problems).

We are arguing here for inclusion in any interpretation of social and ecological relations the fundamental role of eco/soma/aesthetics and aesthetics-ethics and their normative implications for an ecopolitics of educational inquiry. Hence, the “normativity” of “affect” and politics of non-representation emerge as fascinating pedagogical, curriculum, and research questions, including the need for

methodological innovations, in relation to advancing environmental education purposes, processes, and practices.

For Duarte Jr.(1988), the representational and methodological reflection in and of experience is one of the potential pedagogical roles of the aesthetic object, because it helps enhance our interpretations and understandings of the world and enables relationships with others, despite the aforementioned non-representation problematic of “affect.” Thus, the pre-rational/discursive or corporeal aesthetic experience of nature enables and “opens up,” at least, discussion on the interpretive difference and otherness of “meaning-generation” and “making” of (environmental) ethical valuing and values (Payne, 2010). Indeed, against the still dominant positivist-inspired formula of knowledge-attitudes-behavior (KAB) found in much environmental education and its research, this powerful “movement” through bodied sensory, perceptual, affective, and aesthetic feeling in the generation and making of meaning is a potential ecopedagogical pathway to be taken in environmental education that researchers of an interpretive disposition can usefully study. To reiterate, many pedagogical/curriculum activities in natural environments (or that refer to them) such as experiential learning, field trips, site studies, laboratory tasks, seem to normatively reinforce the dichotomy between human beings and nature. Including richer moments, “movements” and episodes of eco/soma/aesthetic enjoyment serve to (re)vitalize and (re)animate the curiously critical “consciousness” (Freire, 2007) of subjects is to question many given assumptions and received truths conventionally constructed into the discourse of environmental education practices and its research.

Another significant point worth highlighting about the task of interpretation is the normative relationality of intersubjectivity and the intercorporeality of bodies, things, and objects. From the preceding review of the aesthetics of nature and role of hermeneutic phenomenology, we have seen a range of ideas that emphasize we are already ineluctably beings-in-the-world in relationship with other beings-in-the-world. Our existence is not isolated, not fixed as Dewey argued and certainly not static—our experience is always flourishing ecologically in relation to objects, other material selves, and things. The meaning that our being generates and receives about phenomenon emerges within an intercorporeal dimension of existence and, since we are in a constant search for new intersubjective meanings (Capalbo, 2008), we believe the eco/soma/aesthetic perception and reanimated “enjoyment” of vital nature is a chance to begin a dialogue about other ontologically rich ways of relating to the environment. The partial correlation or correspondence between subject and object, proposed by (eco)phenomenology, opens to us a pedagogical possibility of (soma)aesthetic experience of and knowing ourselves as “wild/more/other-than-human” (Abram, 2010). and, potentially, an actant in a renewed political ecology of things (Bennett, 2010).

The ecopolitical processes of generating meaning, valuing, and, inevitably, formation of values, the fruit of lived experience, is another prominent theme in our perspective. In the same sense, Freire (2007) stated that the intentionality of consciousness does not end in rationality, i.e., like a totality—reason, feelings, emotions, desires—that my body, aware of the world and me, captures the world that it intends to capture. In arguing that the (un)intentionality of consciousness is not reducible to rational experience, we are proposing that the aesthetic experience with, in, and of nature has a deep relation with the values inevitably assigned to it, inevitably through epistemological and pedagogical means. However, equally so, we are concerned about the imposition by teachers and the curriculum of certain “values” on the experiences of learners. This “critical pedagogy” imperative (Fien, 1993) justifies the concern with educational activities that provide eco/soma/aesthetic experiences, so we can understand the (non-human) “otherness” in the world of things and objects, partially understand it and respect it.

In summary, the eco/soma/aesthetics notion of the somatic understanding or embodied mind in experiencing nature in environmental education is (un)timely in environmental education research at both conceptual and methodological levels and multilayerings of experience (Payne, 2013). This “othered” perspective departs from the representative approach (Kantian inspired) and the mind only correspondence and correlational view of self and nature (widespread in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*). According to Payne, many studies in education (environmental, outdoor, physical, health) have focused on a limited notion of experience, but not the bodied-temporal-spatial and “affective” nature of the lived experience and its complementarities with the deeper experiences in



different modalities and circumstances of “movement” in nature’s affordances. This kind of investigation demands that ecopedagogues and researchers ask different questions that seek out the dynamic roots of our still remnant vital, animate, and “animal” experience if, indeed, the lived nature of bodied human experience is to have much relevance to the aspiration of environmental education. Payne (2009) stresses the need for “commensurability” of the research in environmental education: if we have deep research questions like Toadvine’s (2009), what is the experience of nature and Trigg’s (2012) what is the memory of place, as checked by each statement reversed and then intersected, we need to develop additional theoretical notions and methodological strategies to grapple with this question in “applied” fields such as environmental education and its research. Then, there persists the beguiling question of the (non)-representational problem of environmental education research. Within the field, McKenzie et al.’s (2009) volume includes a number of examples of how “positioned” researchers are interpreting and representing the subject/object of their respective inquiries. Payne’s (2013) four sequence “narratives” of his ongoing “emplaced” encounters over time and space with kangaroos pays earnest attention to such ontologically “representational” themes as intercorporeality and the sensorium, in particular episodic time-space, movement-presence-absence. But he also critically “contextualizes” these narratives historically and contemporarily in the meta-layered Anthropocene and consequences of anthropogenic global warming and climate destabilization. Hence, a critical ecophenomenology, or critical ecological ontology for inquiry that is responsive to the ontology-epistemology tension *before* but commensurable with methodological deliberation. What we are now arguing is the additional interpretive need to reframe hermeneutic phenomenology in a more ecological and geo-epistemological theorization within the field of environmental education research.

From this political ecology of the affective and vital self deeply in tune with nature’s “signals,” new theories remain important to any interpretive perspective in investigation that acknowledge the otherwise normative vibrancy of a wider range of conceptions of human and non-human nature and their enacted and entangled agencies. They might then be interpreted “differently” in educational research (for example, Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Thus, from a “post-critical” view of environmental education research and “seeing ourselves within it” (Hart, 2005, 2013) consistent with the quest for an eco/soma/ethics-environmental ethics-ecopolitics grounded in the ontology-epistemology-methodology triad of inquiry, we encourage framings and strategies of research that might helpfully pose and probe “other” research questions and their coherences with theoretical conceptions, the context of research and the approaches to “data collection” that establish a degree of representational legitimization. For this to occur, intellectual (re)sources outside the discourse of environmental education are, increasingly, crucial if we are to partially move in a “post-critical” environmental education research direction—albeit in a non-anthropocentric/eco-centric, affective, new/critical materialism, speculative/imaginative realism, non-representational “manner.”

For example, Ingold (2000, 2011) in his ecological and experiential anthropology, emphasizes *movement* in the perception of nature: “we do not perceive it; we perceive in it” (Ingold, 2011, p. 138). Thrift (2008), following the somaesthetics interest, picks up on movement as ontologically it applies or is always lived in presence and the present, as Payne’s kangaroo narratives attempt to represent “literally,” notwithstanding the severe limitations of language and text he openly acknowledges in the representational/legitimation demand for academic work. This conception of movement as ontologically prior to epistemological representations has enabled, for example, the development of new approaches to theoretically informed methodological development about “mobility.” Ingold and Vergunst (2008) focus on *walking* to better understand the variety of embodied meanings. Another movement/mobility strategy is what Pink (2009) labels *sensory ethnography*. She discusses numerous examples of corporeal practices concerned with mainly smell, taste, touch, hearing, and vision, reiterating the sensorium and Abram’s (1996) view of “synaesthetics” where the senses are ecologically interconnected and interrelated, not disaggregated as we are led to believe in the Western scientific mindset to which phenomenological, hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, and ecophenomenologies are poetically “other.”

## Closing thoughts

One of the crucial issues raised in environmental education is how to deal with the construction of a new way of thinking about nature. Interpretation/hermeneutics is, therefore, bared and opened wide as an “other” worth pursuing. We have outlined a post-phenomenological notion of eco/soma/aesthetics we feel adds richly and deeply to the possibilities of (eco)pedagogy, curriculum, policy, and research. We have built our preliminary case on a historical overview of the main influential European contributions to the study of aesthetics and hermeneutic phenomenology to argue they are still insufficient for environmental education research and practice. We have contextualized our development of eco/soma/aesthetics in various geo-epistemological ways given our current situation and positioning in environmental education. We have linked our positioning to the notion of aesthetics education, it also being insufficient. (Re)interpreting and (re)thinking our vital, animated relations and agencies with the othernesses of our “own” human being and other animal living and animated non-living beings and things creates a different sense of, and approach to, the questions of aesthetics, of ethics, and of politics. We consider that one of the strategic ways to be critical is to favor the oppressed (Freire, 2005) and the always marginalized other according to this philosophical movement that includes nonhuman beings. Thus, to be normatively critical is to not only incorporate an aesthetic/affective component of our being and ecobecoming, but to emphasize its potential compartments within the ethical and political dimension of environmental education. We need to know clearly for whom we are positioning ourselves. By drawing attention to contemporary studies of the “turns” in ontological/corporeal and eco-centric perspective of lived experience, we might advance traditional theories used in environmental education and overcome some of their associated methodological limitations.

Addressing the aesthetic experience from an ecological starting point in a normatively reflexive manner, in this instance, lends itself to a hermeneutic ecophenomenological perspective. We believe this approach to (re)framing “education” and the narrative of environmental education inquiry as research will make a valuable ontologically aware contribution to the epistemological constructions of a new, bodied, vital, and material environmental education. Here lies the creative role of the interpretive educator to guide this process further. We, environmental educators, are guides of this process, tasked with transforming and transpositioning the aesthetic curiosity found in epistemological curiosity into forms of praxis and their associated demand on reflexivity (Freire, 2007). We, therefore, remain alert to the metaphor Gadamer (1997) uses for interpretive purposes, as already outlined: if aesthetic experience is a game that we cannot control, then we ought to, at least, provoke these possibilities in our environmental practices. Our provocation is the eco/soma/aesthetic experience of nature as it might ontologically-epistemologically be revealed methodologically and non-representationally in modified ecophenomenological hermeneutics. We recommend the development of further empirical and theoretical investigations to open up the comprehension of the nature of soma/ecoaesthetic experience.

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