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REVIEW ESSAY

Producing knowledge and (de)constructing identities: a critical commentary on environmental education and its research

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Disrupting privilege, identity, and meaning: a reflective dance of environmental education, by Alison Neilson, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2008, 191 pp., US\$49.00/€45.00 (paperback), US\$99.00/€90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-9-08-790182-0 (paperback), ISBN 978-9-08-790183-7 (hardback)

Critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy, and planetary crisis: the ecopedagogy movement, by Richard Kahn, New York, Peter Lang, 2010, xx + 186 pp., £19.10 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-43-310545-6

Introduction

The past decade of scholarship in environmental education has seen a mushrooming of interest in the intersections of the social and ecological, evidenced in part by both a broadening and further nuancing of largely philosophically-informed versions of socio-ecological critique. Significantly their purposes include not simply inviting but increasingly deconstructing how educators' and educationalists' deliberations and activities might engage and enthuse various ecological and sustainability sensibilities into their work (for example, Bonnett 2004; Foster 2008).

In other words, reflexivity about the framing and goals of work in the intersections of education and environment is growing. Authors increasingly recognize that while examining understandings of our ecological responsibilities, duties and freedoms on this globe, we are also wise to engage and appraise alternatives and their framings from both familiar and less familiar sources. Moreover, invoking reflexivity about knowledge in and of a field invites us to question whether there are conceptual and theoretical blind-spots that have yet to be recognized and articulated in such discourse. On this crucial

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point, a key task is to consider carefully the conditions for and drivers of the construction and production of knowledge claims.

Importantly, our two texts share a common intention: to examine and propose how various understandings of agencies, structures and natures might be appreciated, critiqued and reconstituted through the cultural medium and force/power of education. Indeed, both books attempt to inform and contest the discourses and practices of education in general, not just environmental education *per se*. So in the following, we focus first on how each author positions her or his text and audience; then, on whether the broader narrative enfoldings and unfoldings of the discourses on education and the environment are represented adequately and accurately, given the author's goals for their texts.

Environmental education as a dance of the researcher

Disrupting Privilege, Identity, and Meaning: A Reflective Dance of Environmental Education is Volume 14 of Sense's *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* series. The text renarrates 'the journey' of Neilson's doctoral inquiry undertaken at the University of Toronto, offering an exploration of 'the motivation to study practices of environmental education and the privilege that supports the author's ability to do so', alongside 'the process of dislodging individual privilege in environmental education research and being part of a community of practice' (3).

Her labour's to those ends, framed by a discourse of working toward social change and environmental justice, impel Neilson to invite readers to participate '... in reciprocal learning/teaching about and knowledge construction of environmental education as collaborative reflexive practice' (3). Then, across 150 pages of prose and illustration, she attempts to collaboratively and purposively 'dance' her research stories such that they live (out and with) the 'ambiguity' and 'complexity' she 'discovers'; a textual dance involving six 'patterns' that are 'receptive and responsive to what is evoked' through the 'embeddedness of collaborative efforts, movements, laughter, embraces and flows' (1). She positions herself in the text as a 'white, English-speaking, well-educated Canadian with sufficient income or related social support' (4). She also readily acknowledges this identity trope makes a strong claim on the author: as being endowed – perhaps even uncomfortably so – with social privilege within a global context.

Ostensibly the crux of her thesis is the claim that 'being an environmental educator is about reviving a state of being within our own bodies, being fully within relationships, ecosystems, and systems of spirituality' (10). The opening chapter cites frequently from a cadre of critical and post-critical environmental education commentators and scholars to affirm how she believes a text written with this end in view should be judged; Neilson asks (of) herself:

Does the research process live up to the ethics and principles I set out to follow? Does the form of this book also meet these espoused ethics and principles? What are the implications of the actions taken within this work? ... Have I further privileged myself or have I left room for others? ... Does this text disrupt your commonplace assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs about environmental education and research? Where I have left my own assumptions uninterrogated, do you feel forgiveness toward me? Is there joy in the reading ...? Does it resonate with you ...? (8–9)

There are many ways Neilson's choreography could be treated, while there is much to applaud in the questions pursued. To simplify, we could go along for the ride and enjoy her journey/dance, even be part of it, as Neilson intends. Or we might find the seats in which others and we are positioned awkward, facing the wrong way, even peering into misty windows. Then again, we might have our toes stubbed, or perhaps find ourselves lost along the way, with destinations and durations thereat unsettling if not uncertain.

In terms of the former, there can be no doubt that Neilson's dance adds to the limited literature in environmental education and its research about what it might mean to be 'the researcher'. Stepping back, matters related to researchers' identities and roles (and possibly those of 'the researched') might be more often understood in educational research through those (emerging) genres of (interpretive/reflexive) inquiry such as autoethnography, narrative, memory work, participatory inquiry, phenomenology and poetics. Yet Neilson does not dance with those partners. Important connections are foreclosed in building those particular methodological bases of and for this research community, and for educational and social research more broadly. Instead, the textual journey is primarily a solo dance: one that gathers around her experiences and negotiations of subjectivity, her emergent and (at times) troubled sense of identity, alongside the commitments and purposes she both ascribes to and derives from being this particular kind of researcher in this community of research.

Thus given our latter concerns about journey comfort, toe stubbing, destination and time of stay, we now offer some critical incursions, noting too that in her 'Afterwords' Neilson candidly discusses 'other' maps, routes, gradients, signals and destinations that she has left out of the main body of her text. Our first concerns the longer objective journeys, complicated dances, and complex history and context of the research field that are implicated in her authorial stance; a second concerns how claims to coherence and rigor in inquiry might be complicated and even destabilized in such a research(ed) text.

Neilson's all-too-brief 'history of environmental education research' (18–24) is a deficiency Nielson concedes belatedly in her Afterwords. Selectively framing a very partial history within the core interests of her study, Nielson primarily adopts the distinctions offered by a prominent Australian researcher of environmental education, Ian Robottom; to wit, changes in orientation of research processes in environmental education are summarily characterized in terms of phases of 'norming', 'storming' and 'performing'.

The content and problems of the key categories cannot be elaborated here. Rather, we note that as the key material invoked at this point in her thesis, Neilson has not traced how the categories offered by Robottom in 2002 during a conference presentation to a Canadian environmental education network actually emerged, or how they were then subsequently redeveloped and published as ‘Critical Environmental Education Research: Re-Engaging the Debate’ in the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (vol. 10, 2005). Why might this be important?

Robottom’s themes and title are not without pretext: they clearly allude to and revisit work in an earlier Deakin publication, *Environmental Education Research: Engaging the Debate*, co-authored with a leading Canadian environmental education researcher, Paul Hart (Robottom and Hart 1993). This seminal contribution to the field and its particular burdens – to advance the criticality, sophistication and reflexivity of environmental education inquiries epistemologically, ontologically, methodologically and axiologically – go unnot(ic)ed by Neilson. Indeed, that she then categorizes both the critiques and supportive responses to the publication of earlier research on ‘significant life experience’ (SLE) by Thomas Tanner, Louise Chawla and Joy Palmer (amongst others) within a ‘storming’ category might well seem not just tricky but disingenuous. In short, the debates about SLE research in a special issue and follow-up response collection of *Environmental Education Research* in the late 1990s and early 2000s deserved further explication in relation to the explanatory model Nielson invokes: its adequacy, rigor, iterations and reapplication, as well as ‘the stable’ (theory set, paradigm, tradition, values, institutional and politico-cultural context, etc.) from which the work emerged.

Moreover, even though the criticisms of SLE research noted by Neilson (20–21) did take place, we do wonder whether their essences can then be successfully extracted and merged into a largely uncritical and ahistorical discussion of their links to knowledge and identity construction — one that cites rather than engages the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann through to Barbara Heron, Chet Bowers and David Selby as part of its purview. We suggest that this also requires a more nuanced and cautious reading and critique of the literature if a critical and reflexive history of the field, its interests and tensions, as well as its practice and possibility, are to be adequately conveyed. Not only because identity, knowledge construction, subjectivity, self and stories do not present unequivocally stable or helpful concepts if Neilson then invokes a poststructural performance of research. But also whether social constructionism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, a Bohmian implicate order of being, holomovements and the postmodern self can be held together equally in one breath (or paragraph) without causing one to splutter, particularly when a critical appraisal of such an ambitious conjunction of ideas is on the agenda.

Our second incursion focuses on the second chapter and how it recounts the principles informing the study. Here, Neilson’s style of argumentation, as

noted above, is to list rather than 'interrogate' the material she cites, an assemblage of rhetorical strategies and tactics found throughout much of her text. It can conjure up images of a 'string of beads' approach to demonstrating familiarity and engagement of literature and learnedness. In this particular case, choice quotations and secondary sources predominate, rather than the demonstration of close reading or originality in argumentation. Thus, the reader might find themselves noting such features as 'wholehearted agreement' with assertions (e.g. 35), the author's sharing of – rather than possibility of critical distance from – authoritative viewpoints (44), and the sandbagging of complex as well as ill-formed ideas or deferral of their engagement (45), such as on the relation between the poststructural and postmodern. For a book so heavily based on a doctoral thesis, one might have reasonably expected explication, analysis, and additional legwork in both knowledge construction and production in engaging 'sources' but also to cogitate and adduce finer arguments and insights into these complex matters.

Given such apparent lacks and gaps, Neilson's 'Derridean inspired' Afterwords (143–151) reads to us more like an afterthought that might well have been prompted by the publisher's manuscript reviewers. 'Afterwords' belatedly introduce elements of the research literature and wider theory that a reader with more than a passing familiarity of (and perhaps less cynicism than Neilson's about) the 'mainstream' discourse of environmental education might have anticipated in joining the journey and dance. Neilson is somewhat non-apologetic about leaving some 'mistakes' of omission unchanged while she concedes the 'relative thinness' of her history of environmental education. After revisiting and 'struggling' with the literature (and deliberately citing secondary sources even when she had read the original), Neilson acknowledges that her work has not 'done justice' to a group of Canadian (only!) environmental educators whose practices are shaped by a range of critical dispositions. Yet even in adopting a largely ahistorical and mono-national approach, Neilson also claims (148), 'the significance of this work is not in what I say, but in how I say it and in what I do', finishing the account with thanks to the reader for accompanying her and a looking forward to future dances.

To be sure, Neilson's project is primarily one that attempts a de(con)struction of her field of inquiry. Her own reflexive and reconstructive identity dance on privilege and power is an interesting one for her, and maybe even to some others she chose not to tango with. But as the dance gets longer, the windows into the social and ecological world that we might have anticipated in Neilson's journey get mistier and the destination recedes. She partially succeeds in revealing her subjectively celebrated otherness and difference as a researcher and how her experiences contribute to research in environmental education. Much more, however, could have been achieved in terms of that particular destination and, in this instance, the possible building of methodological insight and strategy for others. Yet, and significantly, 'the researched'

(as ‘co-participant’ researchers) receive far less treatment, representation and expression than what we were promised at the outset. Instead, of the eight chapters in the book, we are offered one of ‘findings’ about them. The chapter thematically covers some of the conversations amongst the nine researchers but this is little more than cursory given the explicit intentions of the project, even when additional information about them and analysis of their conversations is available (albeit relegated to the Appendices).

All that one can fundamentally ask of an author is that she or he has both mastered and marshalled the ideas and evidence on which their case is based, and then, as necessary, that she or he demonstrates an awareness of the extraordinary complexity of the argument being mounted: not just negatively given the risks faced in misrepresenting it, but also more positively given what is understood or believed in the wider communities of readers and writers for whom an author writes. Unfortunately, according to such ‘tests’, Neilson’s work falls short. What is significant for us here in critically reviewing her text is that interpretations and explanations of ideas and events, about the researcher and the researched, are not necessarily treated as of equal value. Nor should there be the assumption that one’s subjective journey as a researcher is sufficient to either advancing understanding of the phenomena under study, or the field in which the study is located: particularly if one chooses to exclude or avoid important connections, be they methodological, historical, or substantive. Also, given this journal’s readership, our concern is that Neilson’s portrait of environmental education research partially misunderstands itself and misrepresents the field as engaged by both earlier and current generations of scholars: particularly those who live with different senses of agency, and the field’s historical framings and structurations, alongside those of its communities, priorities, and key considerations in the production of knowledge.

How then, in these regards, does Kahn’s text fair?

Radical ecopedagogy as a passionate hope

Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement is another reworked doctoral thesis, published through Peter Lang’s *Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education* series. It also adopts an engaged, personal position, but – in contrast to Neilson – Kahn’s key message is to urge educators teaching ‘in the world, about the world, but also for the world’ to become not just conscious of, but to respond to, ecological destruction and corruption ‘orchestrated by the inhumane greed and economic brutality of the wealthy’, a rapacious, predatory and repressive neoliberal capitalism, and the ‘the political systems and social structures that propel us towards unsustainability and extinction’ through the practice of a critical ecopedagogy. Kahn avers, ‘... we are all implicated in this destruction by the very manner in which we define ourselves, each other, and all the living things

with whom we reside on the earth' (x). Moreover, for Kahn, much that passes as environmental education uncritically mirrors those mainstream social relations and material conditions that may serve to only 'greenwash' our pedagogical intentions and activities at their very best. When viewed through an eco-critical lens, these can be judged as primarily supporting an anti-ecological and uncritical view of life upon which it is predicated, rather than, as Kahn would have it, offering hopeful alternatives that champion 'ambiguity, dissonance, difference and heterogeneity'.

The book begins with an eight-page Preface from Antonia Darder, then a lengthy introduction to the notion of 'ecopedagogy' as a 'movement' that has much to learn from the critical theories of Freire, Illich and Marcuse if a collective 'cognitive praxis' (25) is to be fostered throughout various education settings in the global North. For Kahn, an ecopedagogy broadly relevant to the formal and informal education sectors will help reconstruct technoliteracy, promote collaborative ecopedagogy, and revalue traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as integral to reconstructing science. These themes are developed in the next five chapters around three organizing principles: 'cosmological transformation', developed via a critique of the classical Athenian notion of *paideia* and Hellenistic *humanitas*; 'technological transformation', where a case is made for reconstructing today's uncritical dominant technoliteracy through a technopolitics inspired by Freire and Illich; and 'organizational transformation', where TEK is proposed to both frame and populate the practices of alternative, revolutionary and radical forms of science. Marcuse, who might well have been included in Kahn's earlier political discussion of technology given his celebrated notion of 'one dimensional man' [*sic*], is then offered up as a genuinely radical ecopedagogue and founder of the ecological movement, noting Kahn's concession that it was only in the later works of Freire and Illich that environmental concerns gained any traction. A short epilogue named a 'concluding parable' uses activist Judi Bari as further inspiration, at which point it is also worth noting Kahn's earlier categorizing of Illich (93) as an example of the 'epimethean' rather than 'promethean' pedagogue: that is, one who values 'hope above expectations'. Kahn's text finishes abruptly, like Neilson's, lacking in synthesis but with a four-page celebratory Afterword from his PhD supervisor as well as long-standing friend and collaborator, Douglas Kellner. Kellner declares the book 'groundbreaking', commends this and Kahn's wider projects, and notes that 'existing eco-education all too often lacks solid philosophical and ethical vision' (152).

In essence, Kahn's book is an impassioned survey of a range of ideas drawn from various modern critical theorists aiming to express a still abstract post-human notion of a nascent ecopedagogy. For some, this will be an exciting proposition, even idealistically utopic, as yet others appreciate of some traditions of emancipatory social theory, that it is fraught with risk, as Fay, Beck, and Bauman amongst others have argued. Kahn's text draws eclectically from

Latin/South and Frankfurt School-inspired critical theory, critical pedagogy, environmentalism, media studies, and education theory to skewer the logics, limitations and consequences of a broad array of 'isms'. His targets include: capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, anthropocentric humanism, ethnocentrism, militarism, species-ism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism, hedonism, patriotism, and other forms of 'oppression' and 'inequality' laid claim to within the 'global technocapitalist infrastructure' and its 'matrix of domination' of nature, alongside the inevitable apocalypse predicted.

It remains unclear, however, not just conceptually but also given the abstraction from everyday lifeworlds, how so many -isms and long-standing injustices pointed to by Kahn can be strategically, tactically and structurally rectified (pedagogically or otherwise) in his own construction of a radical ecoliteracy. In the place of these myriad -isms, he argues for the 'construction of a critical ecopedagogy that is founded in economic redistribution, cultural and linguistic democracy, indigenous sovereignty, universal human rights, and a fundamental respect for life' (xii), bringing us 'all back to a formidable relationship with the earth, one that is unquestionably rooted in the integral order of knowledge, imbued with physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wisdom' (xii). While Neilson amongst others would probably applaud this, there remain few empirical informants, indicators or models appraised in the text to support his contentions, despite the availability of a veritable wealth of literature on the achievements and shortcomings of environmental justice movements, ecopolitics and even green schools. Nonetheless, accompanied by a nod to some practical contradictions, Kahn does include a brief outline of the Shundahai Network's Peace Camp in Nevada (115) as a potent example of a resistance movement that, given numerous other forms of possible activism, could draw on and exemplify the ecopedagogical possibilities available via a 'TEK'-based approach.

Kahn's version of critical ecopedagogy covers much ground in a relatively short book. However, we found ourselves never really clear about the levels of education his ecopedagogy 'works', or is intended to. As one might expect in the formal sector of schooling-related education, these difficulties can create both a tension and a problem for the historical narrative of environmental education, in particular, that which has laid claim to being critical for well over three decades, be that in 'modern' or 'postmodern' terms, notwithstanding the geo-cultural/regional transitions that have occurred over the last decade particularly outside USA where Kahn's textual positioning of an ecocritical pedagogy occurs. On the one hand, Kahn's passionate and 'en-hope-d' text might well serve as a rhetorical wake-up call for those academics interested in an educational response to the declared 'great moral challenges' of climate change betrayed (yet again) by political leaders at the recent Copenhagen and Cancún COP meetings. It might even be a timely one for the formal field of environmental education in the United States and elsewhere, given that its critical dispositions seem to be in a wane period.

Yet on the other, Kahn's account of the 'ecocrisis and environmental education' (4) and Kellner's Afterword pay scant attention to the almost 40-year-long formalized (and contested) histories of environmental education and its research around the globe. Kahn's promotion of a critical ecopedagogy is, mirroring Neilson, largely ahistorical when viewed from both within and beyond his particular frame of reference. The text fails to demonstrate a sufficient understanding and appreciation of the field's national, international and transnational terrains, tensions, shifts, critical dimensions and achievements, as sporadic and uneven as they might be given the relatively small critical masses of 'activist' environmental educators, researchers and scholars in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Southern Africa and, even, the USA. Rather, Kahn's inspired-from-the-South text offers a potted account of environmental education in USA that somewhat erroneously ascribes a principal role to the North American Association for Environmental Education ('the world's flagship', 5).

While we still appear to be at pains to argue that other stories could and should be told, and that critical ecopedagogy, curriculum and research in environmental education are not without some history – or for that matter, contestation – the point remains that numerous examples can easily be found in any constructive effort to build, contest, or imagine post national 'knowledge' bases and their varying conceptualizations, contextualizations, representations, legitimations and praxical consequences, as in the recent emergence of debates about the plaudits and limitations of current versions of 'critical pedagogies of place' in USA and elsewhere. Nor is it obviously sensible for environmental education to be ecopedagogically conflated with outdoor education as Kahn seems to do (7), or be non-problematically interchanged with notions of ecological education, place education, peace education and other such 'adjectival educations' even when pursuing a broad, eclectic and transformative notion of ecoliteracy, as Kahn wants to do (11).

But our major concern, however, is that Kahn's contribution to the historical and internationally 'collective' narrative of a critical environmental education and pedagogy, like Neilson's, misses various opportunities to build, shape or even recast the 'field' (notwithstanding the numerous issues surrounding the globalization of education), whilst also demonstrating a partial understanding, limited representation and unwitting distortion of its steadily accumulating knowledge bases, debates and issues (theoretical, evidential and speculative, each defined broadly).

Concluding remarks

Our anxieties about these two texts run to the very heart of the question often asked about how and in what ways a field (of knowledge, practice, discipline, evidence) constitutes and reconstitutes itself over time and space. The significance of this question is exacerbated when small, relatively marginal fields of

inquiry and practice like environmental education are constantly grappling with their ‘identities’ and ‘place’ more broadly in the discourse on education and schooling, historical and imaginary, but also locally, nationally, regionally and globally. And in this case, perhaps even socially and ecologically – given the convergence as well as tensions in interests of those pursuing and advocating an environmental education, who, like Kahn and Neilson, may regard it as offering a critique not just of approaches to education, research, policy, curriculum and pedagogy, but also society and the social more broadly.

Both texts finish in abrupt and, for us, somewhat awkward and inconclusive ways: with Neilson’s Afterwords as afterthoughts, and Kahn’s Epilogue and Afterword as parable and celebration. Much could also be said about the overall quality of the knowledge production effort where numerous spelling and referencing errors or oversights could be found. But it is the ahistorical nature of the knowledge construction effort that is, frankly, disconcerting to us, on a number of fronts. Yes, each book covers a range of topics invoking multiple perspectives (poststructural, critical and other ‘disciplines’) even as they pursue similar agendas, advocating for radical, reflexive or transformative change. Yet to the extent that their conclusions reflect each author’s sense that the work is one in progress, or is incomplete in synthesis, evidence, theoretical discussion or critical debate, would be supported by the focal questions informing this review, namely: those of the authority the author brings to satisfying her or his purposes, how the thrust of the text is positioned within and represents the narrative history of environmental education and its research, and the extent to which the field is qualified, enhanced or advanced by the text as a form of knowledge construction and production.

Put generously, each book could help inform important questions and debates about researcher subjectivity and the role of ecopedagogy in fostering a socio-ecological movement (localized, networked, globalized). However, our underlying concern from the ‘inside’ converges on the largely ahistorical and at times largely nationally delimited nature and conception of their respective texts. In particular, the fields of environmental education and its research are not well represented locally or globally if, indeed, we do need to take the position that, in these times, a field needs to historically imagine its global future, value and potential usefulness as authoritatively produced knowledge given current demands and contexts for its construction.

For this journal’s readership, we have signalled in a rather unapologetically critical manner how the environmental education field’s narrative, identity and recent knowledge construction and production efforts could be pushed forward by and beyond the texts reviewed. Those signals were offered not only with a sense of the field’s history, tensions and challenges, but also what can reasonably be extended in the future against the hypnotic effects of neo-liberalism’s ‘post-intellectual’ knowledge economy. Different ‘disciplines’ outside our own narrative can be configured as part of a future imaginary. There are, of course, an increasing number of positive signs ‘outside’ the

discourse of environmental education that are incorporating an ecocentric reframing of their discourse's disciplining in, for example, human and cultural geography, 'post-ecological' political sociology of environmental movements, ecopsychology, environmental criticism in the humanities, ecophenomenology, and the philosophizing of nature, as well as reflecting various 'turns' in thematic theorization including the (inter)'corporeal', the 'spatial' and 'animality'. Moves like these further broaden and challenge the discourses on education and environment but also the still largely and persistently anthropocentric social theory of the sociology of education, and its accompanying research and methodological derivations and practices. Socio-ecological theorizations and praxes of education are still demanded to creatively and critically contest the ecologically problematic human and social condition that paradoxically 'education' might well be complicit in reproducing and reconstituting.

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