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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Performative abstractionism in environmental education: A critical theory of theory

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Environmental Education (JEE) has produced and circulated different forms of knowledge for 50 years, mostly for a North American readership and, most recently, a globally-extended English-speaking audience. A critical theory of theory in environmental education (EE) and its research (EER) is needed in looking 'back', 'now', and 'forward'. This critical theory will reexamine the field's knowledge assumptions, presuppositions, and 'post' forms of intellectual representation and academic exchange so as to reveal the underlying logics, mediations, constructions, characteristics, and commitments within a post-Anthropocene aspiration. The critical theorization of performative abstractionism in EER uses various histories of theory that parallel the *JEE*'s 50 years. The early 1990s is found to be a crucial turning point in the critical/praxical approach of EE. Seventeen characteristics of intellectual work and its exchange in postmodern knowledge productions are identified into which the performative abstractionism of allegedly 'new' theory fit. This historically attuned critical theory concludes reconstructively with the outline of a *framing* of praxis in the generalized form of a stratified and de-centring approach to the 'politics of inquiry'. The eco-ethico-political aim of this 'post foundational' approach to inquiry is to reverse the geographically reduced global accelerations, intensifications, and individualizations of abstractionism in EER. A 'practices theorizing' imperative is to re'turn' EER to the ecological ontologies of rematerialized, everyday practices of (environmentally or/and ecologically) ethical value, political concern, and esthetic sensibility needed to ensure the field's criticality, relevance, credibility, and sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Performative abstractionism; ontological realism; epistemological abstraction; embodied materialism; axiological interest; methodological holism; decentering; theories <gap> practices problem; critical ecological ontology; critical praxis; digitalization/platforming

The problem: Positioning, suspicion, cynicism, criticism, pessimism

The Invitation for Papers (IfP) for this 50th 'commemorative/celebratory' Special Issue (SI) of *The Journal of Environmental Education (JEE)* posed some difficult questions for 'old' established scholars and 'new' emerging researchers in environmental education (EE), and its research (EER). Namely, (1) to (re)consider the scope and focus of (y)our accumulating work, and (2) to respond to how we can work "back to the future that, when combined, address complex issues of what (we believe) is (wrong) in the field and what is (really) going on in it?"

The IfP licensed some 'memory work' from its contributors with the intention we *historicize* our *anticipations* of the future of EE, based on how we interpret the field's, and the *JEE*'s 50 year-long narrative. Normally, I shun expressing personal views in academic 'spaces'. I am critical of the bind, complicity and, perhaps, simplistic conflation, of academic subjectivities or professional identities *and* postmodern mediums and modes of intellectual exchange in EER (Payne, 1997). EER is fast becoming an accelerated digital (Hall, 2016) platform (Srnicsek, 2017) in the global technics of *unsustainable* EE (Payne, 2003/2006) – the field's discourse is being flattened and hollowed out (Nakagawa & Payne, 2018) in the speedy Dromosphere of the intensifying Anthropocene–Capitalocene (Payne, 2018c). EE has strayed a long way from its 'founding' roots in, for example, the Tbilisi Report of 1978 (Palmer, 1998). Memory, as I demonstrate

below in reformulating a fifty year-long *critical theory of theory* is important, as is ‘working’ on not becoming part of the postmodern amnesia in the moment/now.

I argue in this extended essay that critical insights into the mono-global cultural ecology of EE/EER are well overdue. It is imperative we come to critical terms with EE ‘imag(in)ed’ (*sic*) as a ‘new’ (*sic*) mode of knowledge production, performance, circulation, and exchange. This response to the 50th IfP partially achieves that demand but a great deal of preliminary work about the changing intellectual relations of theory and practice and its ‘postmodern condition’ (Lyotard, 1979) require updating and reworking. None of the histories of EE I am aware of raise issues, or express concern, about the problematic role of academic intellectual exchange in privileging dominant theoretical modes of knowledge production efforts despite the long-standing acknowledgement of the chronic practices < gap > theory problem. That **gap** is fast becoming a schism due to the intensification and individualization of performative abstractionism in EER as the now/new dominant mode of theoretically led knowledge productions.

The critical theory of theory developed below reveals that the academic reification of the gap commenced in the late 1980s/early 1990s, primarily as a consequence of the ‘linguistic turn’ of ‘postmodern’ theory and its uncritical uptake in a unique field like EE whose logic and praxis is, and was, driven, by preserving, conserving, or sustaining an ‘other-than-human’ and ‘less anthro/andropocentric’ notion of Nature and, by inference, its derivative ‘environments.’ This period was crucial in laying the foundations for the acceleration, intensification, and individuation of abstractionism in EER. Effectively, what counts as knowledge, or claims on producing it in relation to the field’s ‘roots’ in the 1970s, and before, was deconstructively ‘up for grabs’ in academic settings and their intellectual ‘spaces,’ primarily in the global North/West. EER became little more than a language game of naming, denaming, renaming, and un-naming. Or deconstructing the ‘texts’ of others.

Indeed, the consequences of this vacated academic space, and emptied out ahistorical intellectual exchange within it, are now being belatedly (re)considered. For example, in another 50th celebration Special Issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, over 70 ‘short’ responses to the ‘thought/attitude’ ruse of “what comes after postmodernism?” play with its death, or offer an obituary and, importantly, are authored from various geo-cultural-ecological settings and stages of knowledge production and critique (Peters, Tesar, & Jackson, 2018). Better late than never!

Unlike EE’s commitment to practical action, or *praxis*, presumed or/and promised in the 1970s, *theory* is often promoted, usually non-problematically or uncritically, as *the* authoritative ‘currency’ of academic aspiration and expectation, ‘scholarly’ mastery and achievement, ‘legitimization’ of the field’s textualism of the life/world and, inevitably, ‘performative’ measure of researchers’ promotional impacts on knowledge productions. The agonism about what instrumentally counts as knowledge, and how it is performed and promoted, has intensified within the accelerations of neo-liberal academic capitalism (James & McQueen-Thomson, 2002) and its ‘stealth’ (Brown, 2015) consequences in and for society. Simon Cooper (2002, p. 208) observed the inability of ‘post-intellectual’ academics to resist the rise of neoliberalism and its reshaping of their academic identity formations and professional relations. Cooper’s (2016) later essay “Language cannot encompass being: poststructuralism and postmodernism” signals why a critical theory of theory in EE/EER/ESE is well overdue in responding to the two questions posed in the IfP purposes. Indeed, many of us do misrecognize our own textually-driven complicity, as ‘researchers’ or ‘theorists’ in ‘subjectively’ and ‘reductively’ reconstituting certain material/structural conditions of identity formation and knowledge productions that are, by and large, contradictory to the field’s founding purposes and practices. Similarly, we too often fail to appreciate, or recognize, the historical-structural-material contexts, conditions, formations and relations of the ‘researched.’ They too become a language game reinscribed as abstract texts. A double, double-bind exists, indeed, that I open up here, pessimistically, for inspection, examination and, maybe, preliminary ‘action’ and resistance in critical EE/EER.

Mindful, therefore, of the IfP, what do I think is (mostly) going wrong in EER? Despite my extensive background and love of theory and philosophy of direct and indirect relevance to EE and EER, the problem targeted here is the escalating hegemony, sovereignty, and authority of abstract theory in the construction, governance, disciplining, surveillance, imaginary, and now ‘beyondism’ of the textualized ‘discourse’ of, in particular, EER. To support this assertion, I construct a 50 year-long critique of theory (plural), as theory is often deployed in the texts of the humanities, social sciences, education, and, almost

by osmotic desire, ‘transfers’ to EER, or ‘trickles down’ to EE, often in ignorance, obfuscation, or evasion of the field’s ‘practical’ roots ‘found’ in the Tbilisi Report of 1978.

This formative critical theory of theory in EER parallels the steady rise of *abstractionism* over the same period of *academic* EE in the global North, as is being marked, celebrated, and represented in this 50th SI. The problem with theory (and its knowledge/language/text interests, in general) and its/their underlying ideological assumptions, reproductions, and contestations in education was, it must be memoried, critically engaged in EE in the 1980s (for example, Fien, 1993; Robottom, 1987), and in EER in the early 1990s (for example, Robottom & Hart, 1993). Not much, really or materially, has since been ‘written’ - an expanding *absence* in never ending (neoliberal?) ‘space’ whose political void invokes many of those practical and conceptual confusions and contradictions I highlight in what follows. However, the problem of theory and its tendency to fuel epistemologically-driven abstraction of everyday, lifeworld (material and real) practices in the, often, post-factual/truth of the global North, at least, accelerated in the early 1990s.

Writing from the global South context of EE peculiar to the political turmoil of the post-apartheid era in South Africa, Rob O’Donoghue (2018) also traced many of the current issues and problems confronting EER to the mid 1990s. O’Donoghue focused on how locally situated and socially critical theory and the collaborative/participatory praxis/methodology of action research ‘receded’ or was ‘muted’ by the rise of an idealized liberal humanist notion of ‘critical’ education, research, and EE/EER. O’Donoghue employed the notion of “process-reduced abstraction” (p. 35) in his brief explanatory critique of the muting transformations of EE/EER and ESE.

Here, I am interested in those ‘global processes’ of the performative abstractionism of EE/EER, and its digitalization of the ‘new’ and, therefore, offer a nascent *critical theory of theory* to make some sense of “what is (really) going on”. This offering to *JEEs* 50th grapples intensely and extensively with the researchable question in global North and Souths of how and in what ways, commencing in the mid 1990s, did and does the process (and product/outcome) of increasingly *performative abstraction* come about?

Critical and abstraction introduced

Bluntly. The ‘bodies’ and ‘grounds’ of beings and things in the real and material world have symbolically been eroded over thousands of years of ‘human’ species existence. Human languages, their alphabets, and eventually their positivist/empiricist scientisms/technologizations and capitalizations or/and industrializations, have severed humans from Nature, and humans from other-than-humans. This has occurred despite various efforts to represent us, them, and it, as symbols or signs, and in the postmodern now of simulated/imag(in)ed ‘connectivity’, or retrieving of it primarily through the artifice of texts and technologies. Language, including numbers, and various symbols and their performances have qualitatively, quantitatively, and digitally assured that the historically objective material and the real are undergoing a series of socially constructed transformations and one-way conversions to the subjectivities of, increasingly, the immaterial, non-real, simulacra and non-place (Abram, 1996; Auge, 1995; Soper, 1995; Soule & Lease, 1995). Nature is little more than an invention, a script, a text upon which we inscribe ourselves. Nature is theoretically denatured. For (northern) academics, Nature is historically at its ‘death’ (Merchant, 1980), ‘raped’ (Collard, 1988), ‘dead’ (McKibben, 1990) and is now another deconstructed ‘new’ (Low, 2003) or ‘space’. In short, its corpse is disenchanting, devitalized, enculturated, capitalized, technologized and, at best, mechanistically materialistic, possessively objectifiable and commodifiable, and collectively exploitable and extracted. To be otherwise, is to be romantically nostalgic.

Indeed, or if so, with Nature gone missing, is there now any reason for EE/EER to exist? Is the field of EE now part of the problem of the ecological paradox of an unsustainable politic of (non) sustainability (for example, Bludhorn, 2011)? But, might Nature still survive? Does the sun still rise? Do bodies and things need food and habitat? Are there things we do not know about? Or might ‘old’ Nature still serve as a ‘real’ benchmark, or litmus test, from which we atomistic, amnesic, or somniferous humans can self-consciously practice remnant ‘urban’ environmental education, or authentically ‘experience’ the relatively wild of a Disney-like National Park, or solemnly appreciate the indigenous gum-tree planted

in our backyards, or join with other activists to conserve an endangered species, or help protect a local forest, or help rescue a beached whale? Or strike from school because reactionary politicians and conservative governments deny the sciences of anthropogenic global heating and dromospherical climate destabilization!

What, therefore, is ‘post’ nature – another fashionable theoretical (e)scape from Nature for some/many? Is there another ‘practical and theoretical ‘space’ somewhere in-between, or in the textual margins, or on the page’s edges of ‘post’ theory from where EER might reinvent itself and practically reclaim (some of) its roots in EE and, even, ‘memories’ or legacies of once Nature? Connie Russell (2005) was right to ask ‘who speaks for nature?’ as is ably demonstrated by, for example, Abram (2010) in *Becoming animal*, or earlier by Leopold (1949/1966) in ‘thinking like a mountain’ (see also, Seed, Macy, Fleming, & Naess, 1988). But, that ‘old’ Nature too exists in texts, as a remembrance of a past that might not, or cannot be (re)turned to.

Before that rather than ‘beyond’, we might dare ask, following Ted Toadvine’s (2009) ecophenomenological philosophy of nature, ‘what is the ecopedagogical nature of the experience of Nature?’ Or, if that empirical concern is in the ‘too difficult’ basket of theories and texts, will we instead ‘write’ the field’s ivory tower obituaries, comfortably reassured by the ‘posts’ of Nature, as seems to be happening, at least since Merchant? Or consign EE/EER to the interdisciplinary dustbin of knowledge productions and their skeletal performances in the newly platformed/digital postmodern, global, neoliberal university? There is a massive amount at stake when we examine the uncritical rise of theory and overuse of abstractionism in EER. And, (eco)pedagogically in EE.

At this deliberately provocative point of ‘saving’ EE/EER, it is necessary to insert ‘base’ definitions of the terms ‘critical’ and ‘abstraction’ in the way I seek to establish a critical theory of theory in critiquing the performative abstractionism of EER. The aim is to assist the reader in navigating the remainder of this text.

There is a massive literature about Critical Theory, particularly on the post-Marxist contribution of the Frankfurt School which commenced in Germany in the 1920s (for example, Held, 1980). Most recently, Michael Thompson (2017), the editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, reiterated that the task of a critical theory of society and, by inference, Nature, was to uncover the social conditions, including the role of universities, research and theory, “under which knowledge about itself is articulated.” Thompson asserted, “...the way we comprehend the objective world, that of reality, is related to the way we conceive of ourselves.” That task is designed not only to comprehend, but also to transform. Its purpose is to change not only our knowledge of the objective world but, “simultaneously the *nature* of the subject in a *practical sense*.” Thompson goes on to declare that “strands of thought” such as deconstruction have been “crowded under the banner” of critical theory but in doing so “commit an error” about what critical theory is, as well as what *critique actually is*. It is the *inherent* relation of thought and action that is *immanently* crucial *from within* so as to unravel the contradictions implicit to the reconstitutions of the basic socio-ecological ‘conditions’ in which we historically have existed, interact, and relate. This form of criticism assertively rejects instrumental reason and counter ‘attacks’ *thinking* being imposed on it from without. In this immanent manner, Thompson is critical of the aberrant use of (the term) critical theory that stems from its ‘normalization’ in postmodernism through its “pseudo radical” project of “academics alienated from real politics” aimed at deconstructing others who do make *praxical* claims on judging and understanding power, domination, freedom, and human progress.

In “bringing” critical Theory “back in,” Paul James (2006, p. 318) from the Arena Group in Australia summarized abstraction as “the process of drawing away from the embodied or particular while maintaining a generalizing connection between those particularities and embodied relations.” James stated that abstraction occurs through the use of ideas and concepts *and* through their material practices and relations. Put simply, the processes of the abstraction of the material are normatively *constitutive* of our socio-ecological being and becoming that we now rename as (re)imagining only. Abstraction is, therefore, not just of and in people’s heads, but is also a theoretical trickle from the neck down ‘in relation in only.’ Praxis is held hostage, if not abandoned by the textual performances of various abstractions.

James’s definition of constitutive abstraction, alongside Thompson’s account of critical theory, sets the introductory scene, here, for how theorists, researchers and practitioners of EE must confront the

constitutive role of theory, devoid of immanent praxis, as an abstracting process of what elsewhere I have partially developed in the early 1990s for EE/EER via a practically oriented “critical ecological ontology for inquiry” (Payne, 1995, numerous).

Historicizing the critique of abstractionisms constitution of and in EE

In short, the acceleration of the abstraction of the material, materiality, and materialism I emphasize can be sourced primarily, but not solely, in the underlying epistemological preoccupation (in the global North/West, at least) with the linguistic ‘turn.’ This particular turn to the textualism of postmodern theories and, in particular, poststructural theory and its main methods of deconstructionism and discourse analysis marked a movement of and in thought (and knowledge) against the ‘enlightened’ reason and science of modern ‘progress’ and, in particular, its ‘grand’ narratives. The self-claimed importance and move to ‘language’ was introduced to EE in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Bowers, 1987, 1993).

As important as language is in naming and knowing being, things and their interactions, it is a partially constitutive dimension of human and other-than-human being and their relations, or ecologies. Language games and their deconstructions, reified as abstractions subsequently imploded and twisted in the internal discursive/textual logics of EE and EER (for example, Payne, 1997, 1999, 2005a, 2005b). Main targets included authors/texts and dualisms. This acceleration and intensification of textual abstraction and easy reductionism of deconstructing other texts/authors, often from an office in the university, and invariably in the absence of empirical/field work, or critical ecopedagogical praxis, further compounded the theory-practice gap and masking of its contradictions. When coupled with the steady ‘global’ rise of education for sustainable development in the 1990s, and the rise of philosophically liberal humanist/culturally conservative critiques of EE *for* the environment, many of the ‘olds’ amongst us in immanently praxical and embodied materialist EER witnessed what still persists as an under-researched ‘turning’ point in the critical history of a globalizing narrative of EER. And, hence, a long-held key concern for educational ‘reconstructionists’ (Counts, 1932) and critical theorists of education (for example, Apple, 1982) about Education’s conservative role in curriculum/pedagogical, social, political and cultural ‘reproduction.’ In short, without a ‘contestatory’ critical history of knowledge production and theory, even in EE and EER, such a totalizing and universalizing narrative tends to theoretically avoid, escape, blur, obfuscate or ‘mash’ the historical, cultural, ecological, practical, conceptual, and even linguistic differences/othernesses within and across the North, as well as South, and East discourses (for example, Canaparo, 2009; Connell, 2007).

The post mid 1990s critical theory/praxis project of EE/EER remains, at best, a sporadic effort in an increasingly moribund pedagogical, curriculum, and methodological endeavor and collective narrative. The agonism I have experienced over the past decades about methodological deliberation and experimentation, in particular, deepens unto this day, notwithstanding the tsunami of re’newed’ effort to ‘theoretically’ (but not practically, nor methodologically as far as I can tell) re’turn’ texts/discourses to ‘old’ materialisms and/or realisms, and further epistemological (and methodological) straightjacketing. O’Donoghue (2018), too, senses, such an elusive, if not escapist, re’turn’ over the past decade within the globalizing contexts of the South (African) he best understands.

In all of this potted history of the theoretically driven rise of abstractionism in EER within a globalizing ‘extension’ of theory, we also witness the corrosively slow consequences, costs and risks to, for example, (i) how researchers and pedagogues (mis)understand the problematics of local, mundane, everyday environmental practices and relations (environmental issues and their social problems); (ii) accessing the embodied materialism and embedded grounds of that everyday environment *and* its historically real and symbolic lifeworld ‘condition’ we (iii) as humans materially inhabit and encounter, including those other-than-human things and entities in various natures. To be sure, abstracted globalized, and textualized theory invariably talks/reads/comments *about* that practice of the everyday environmental, but any critical praxis *for* and *of/in* such theory/texts and *for* the environment often goes missing, is absent, or is non-presented, is invisible, or evaded or ignored. Thus, the need for a broader, historicized, and globalized ‘politics of (non)representation’ – inclusion, exclusion and edges/margins is flagged *for* theory (Rodrigues, 2020) and, subsequently, *for* methodology (Hart, 2019). From the 50th anniversary SI.

Obviously, this initial sketch of a critical theory of theory *for* EER demands further scrutiny and development beyond the limitations I have selectively grappled with. Put bluntly, but backed up in detail below, much of the theory I encounter in ‘reading’ abstracted EER ‘texts’ is ‘methodologically individualistic’ and more likely than not is an ahistorical rehearsal of certain ‘big’ ideas (more later) plucked from prominent (almost celebrity-like) theorists who somehow are recruited from elsewhere in *theory* but whose ideas and jargon lack practical relevance, or applicability to EE and/or EER, including the pressing praxical task of empirical-conceptual research and critique.

Less bluntly, the accelerating problem of abstractionism and its associated textualism can be traced to the increasing authority of various *single level*, flat, monistic, reductive and simplified epistemological (and methodological) constructivisms deployed casually, if not causally, as constitutive of the ‘being’ of the ‘discourse/texts’ of EER over and against the historically stratified and complex ecological-social ontologies of the everyday that those single level epistemologies and methodologies fail to represent. And, paradoxically, the tugs of intellectual war precipitated by ‘post’ theory effectively reconstitute many of the universalist, essentialist, hierarchical, and dualistic ‘ways’ of constructivist knowing, and associated values or normativities that, ironically, the abstractionism of ‘new’ theory seeks to deconstruct, disrupt, overcome, reimagine and, now, go ‘beyond.’

In summary, the remainder of this essay is dedicated to sketching a 50 year-long critical theory of the role of theory in education and social science research, as it mostly informs my critique of the rise of abstractionism in EER. Clearly, this history of theory ‘parallels’ but does not necessarily mirror those academic trends and philosophical/practical concerns continuously expressed within institutional constraints and enablements of knowledge generation, or production, or auditing, and their respective performativities. The new performativity of abstractionism avoids, but is complicit, in the structurations of, for example, researcher and researched agencies, exchanges, relations, and identity formations ‘contained’ and (non)represented in the same 50 year period of *JEE*. On that cautionary note, this theorizing of theory only approximates how knowledge in EE and EER might be viewed as an ‘object’ or ‘thing’ despite the associated abstracted ‘re/materialization’ my history aims to presence.

Another word of introductory caution! This critical theory of theory can only be interpreted as a ‘negative’ critique of (environmental) education theory in the absence of engaging with, for example, my 40 year-long ‘positive’ praxical efforts and professional narrative generated after the 1978 critical ecopedagogy pilot, namely - a) the curriculum/pedagogy practice theorization of ‘a critical ecological ontology’ for educational inquiry, or ‘education for being for the environment’ (Payne, 1995, numerous since, but for *JEE* readers, Payne, 2006 and, b) most recently, the positive empirical-conceptual research *assemblage* of ‘practice theory’ that are inductively driven theory ‘building’ exercises about, for example, “ecopedagogy as/in scapes” – the subject and object of an earlier Special Issue of this journal (Payne, 2018a, 2018b, but also 2016).

To be sure, in the latter part of this reconstructive critique of theory, I turn positively to a ‘meta’ theoretical framework that comprehensively and critically engages the stratified politics, ethics, and esthetics of educational inquiry and critique within presumptions, or hidden assumptions made about the underlying pluralism of ontological ~ epistemological ~ axiological ~ methodological tensions.

Framing: Methodology of the criticism

A major dilemma of scholarly effort is dealing in a theoretically and methodologically *justifiable* manner with what cannot be practically, historically and ecologically represented (in texts, at least). There are many dilemmas in representing nature, and our relations with its many environments, all of which are underpinned by the chronic concern of how the researcher *accesses* the question of nature, the names we give to representing it, and its derivatives and, hence, the problematic of our past, present, and future relations with nature, its scales and scopes. This basic dilemma of theory, and its numerous abstracted forms shapes the practical issues/problems with which the researcher, or educator, or policy-maker is pedagogically interested and/or methodologically concerned, and *before* the related worry of the interpretation/representation of that problem.

The dilemma is simplified by calling on the idea ‘non-representation’ – that which defies human consciousness or cannot be accessed or apprehended. Non-representation is currently another ‘big idea’ in theory and research, as is the ‘old’ problem of ‘correlationism’ – where language is rightly deemed to be a mere approximation and reduction of the richness and depth of ‘experience’, be it human or other-than-human in their intraactions, interactions, diffractions, inactions, relations, and conditions.

The more difficult question to pose pragmatically is the (meta) methodological problem of how the researcher goes about the mutually constitutive problematics of ‘framing’ (and naming) the inquiry and ‘positioning’ oneself in it via certain assumptions and presuppositions made in inquiry while also explaining how that dynamic is revealed, embedded, and embodied within the historical context and material/symbolic structures through which the researcher/academic ‘lives’. Context is, undeniably a vague term that crosses over many scales and scopes, and their histories, as might be confronted in researching a landscape, or urban place, let alone practice, given the underlying complexities!

On this quandary of responding to the who, what, where, when, and why of the researcher-researched, and the particulars of the context, under inquiry and criticism, I am most indebted to Arena’s ‘constitutive abstraction’ thesis. What and who is the scholar researcher is a question that has occupied Arena’s history, across many social and ecological issues? Or, theoretician, as I probe into the problems that really matter in research or ecopedagogy? And, hence, the need for a critical theory of theory questioning our intellectual/academic role in generating or producing abstract knowledge that addresses, for example, the past 50 years of EER and the different problems confronted and issues encountered over the different scales of timepace and through the scoping of bodies, human and other-than human ‘in relation’.

At a basic theoretical ‘level’, the Arena’s constitutive abstraction thesis is conceptually versatile and metamethodologically flexible in that in framing and naming inquiry it can incorporate both individual authors and various ‘movements of thought’ (Kneller, 1984), be it from my favorites like Dewey’s reconstructionism, Ihde’s technics, Salleh’s ecofeminism, Abram’s ecophenomenology, Archer’s critical realism, or Ingold’s ecological anthropology. In other words, the stratified constitutive abstraction methodology (for example, James, 2006) I work with in critiquing theory in EER accommodates ‘many’ theories and methodologies whose ‘fit’ to the research questions making up a problem, or object of empirical insight and qualifies criticism, demands the craft of assembling a multi layered (‘vertical’) and levels (‘horizontal’) approach to inquiry (for example, Payne, 2018a, 2018b). I conclude this essay with an outline of that frame for critical inquiry/praxis.

However, for the precise purposes here of clarifying and explaining the increasingly problematic role of how intellectuals are contextually and structurally embedded in, embodied by, and positioned in (certain) theoretical positions, the most sustained critique of “the university in crisis” I have encountered was published by Arena in the early 2000s. Yes, Apple, Bernstein, Giroux, Carr, Kemmis/Fitzclarence, McLaren, Ellsworth, Kenway and other ‘critical education’ scholars have been reconstructively/praxically (and reconceptually!) influential in different ways. But, in *Scholars and Entrepreneurs: The University in Crisis*, Simon Cooper, Hinkson, and Sharp (2002), a key contributor to the 50 year-long socially theoretical development of Arena’s constitutive abstraction thesis, traced the global restructuring of the university and the marketing of scholars/hip to the deconstructive impulses of the 1980s that emerged in tandem with the ‘hard’ rise of the capitalist knowledge economy. Cooper, and his colleagues, argued on a number of fronts how an expanding capitalist economy collides and recollides with the embrace of abstracting knowledge formation in academia and publishing, the rise of post-intellectuality in the universities’ conversion and collapse into a knowledge industry, and the abstracted identity (de)formation of the academic and his/her/they instrumentalized means, modes, and mediations of intellectual exchange and associated performativities fused with the market.

In the lengthy explanation that follows, I demonstrate via critics of education theory like Schwab, Geertz and numerous others how there is a consistent and persistent ‘line’ of critique of theory as abstractionism that, simply, has been ignored, evaded, marginalized, including silence about it in EER. If so, critical praxis has been suffocated by postmodern theory and deconstructive method.

Scholars and Entrepreneurs is one of numerous far-ranging historical, social, and ecological critiques published by the Arena Group. Arena’s very recent 50th year celebratory special issue was titled “Cold War to Hot Planet” (Hinkson, Cooper, & Caddick, 2016). That title lucidly encapsulates the historical

focus, corpus, and range of social criticism. The *Arena* forum concerns itself with theoretically and ethically concerned discussion about the prospects for co-operation within contemporary life. Its central focus is on interpretive and technical practices, and their relation to the reconstruction of social processes such as class relations, forms of selfhood and community life, including ecological, indigenous and gender politics, technologies, globalization, and socio-ecological movements. For those reading ‘new’ theory, *Arena*’s scope is an excellent ‘materialist’ example of criticism that far exceeds the (limiting) idea of ‘intersection’ currently popular in postmodern/structural/humanism textualisms.

The ‘founding’ and original thesis of *Arena* – “constitutive abstraction” (popularized as ‘extended’ social relations for a broader readership) is largely indebted to Geoff Sharp (for example, 1985, 1992, 2002) and, in particular for the purposes here, his critical theorization of the intellectual, and the changing role of the intellectual.

In its 50th issue, Raewyn Connell (2016) traced three phases of *Arena*’s theorizing of intellectuals and their role in knowledge formation, particularly in the academy. The first phase identified features of the intellectually ‘trained,’ where the rise of ‘technique’ – instrumental logic - figured prominently in the critique of much professional work of the 1960s and 1970s. The second phase examined how the social relations of intellectual technique were, increasingly, ‘extended’ and the ‘objects’ (material, symbolic and historical) of critique were reconstituted in more abstract ways and terms. ‘Transition’ of intellectuals was a key focus. A third phase occurred in the 1990s at a time in EE that coincided indirectly with the critical theory of theory I use to identify a basic transition in EER as it ‘turned’ from the ‘modern’ socially critical theorization as praxis to the ‘postmodern’ epistemologies of poststructuralism exemplified in a singular preoccupation with language.

In particular, according to Connell (2016), the rise of postmodernism was an institutionally and culturally defining moment in the movement of (western) thought, as I argue are its ‘inscriptions’ in aspects of allegedly ‘critical’ EER. The broader significance of postmodernism’s strong ‘move’ to epistemological (de)constructivisms is discussed below in historical regard to Lyotard’s (1979/1984) classical and foundational ‘setting of the terms’ of deconstructive poststructuralism. These terms quickly gathered momentum via, mainly, Northern theorists in the humanities and social sciences. It was not until 2005 that a counter critique of ‘post’ thought was seriously engaged in EER, a point I elaborate below in regard to the ‘grip’ of poststructuralism in its de/constructivist/textualism variant.

In short, Connell (2016, p. 22) interpreted *Arena*’s third phase as a systematic critique of the instrumentalized, mediated, abstracted, extended, dematerialized and disembodied relations of the dominant modes and forms of intellectual exchange and, therefore, knowledge productions as fundamentally constituting “a transformation of the mode of being.” I also (re)turn to Connell’s (2008) ‘southern theory’ critique of ‘northern theory’ shortly. In advancing my critique of performative abstractionism, I selectively update Connell’s (2016) identification of a third phase of the constitutive abstraction thesis through referencing the *digitalization* of its always accelerating, intensifying and individualizing hybridizations of theoretical and knowledge productions/marketing and the associated promotion of the post-intellectual.

Reframing the decentered problem

The persistent abstractionism of the posts’ reconstitutions of a theory-practice schism is driven, it seems, by a preoccupation with the textual singularity of linguistically-driven epistemological interests and, consequently, their limiting derivations in methodological inquiry and/or pedagogical and/or policy development. And, finally, their evaluations. For educators, this hubristic over-valuing and arrogant privileging of a mono epistemology is entirely understandable but, perhaps, not acceptable in any shift away to a more ‘eco’ centric framing. Theories and practices of learning and teaching, the *raison d’être* of education, are, however, trapped in and by this (idealist/theory) logic; a reductive monologic whose anthropocentrism will always struggle practically, conceptually, and theoretically with the ‘other’ of Nature, ecology, and their derivative environments. ‘Ontologically’ and ecologically/existentially/experientially, or ecophenomenologically, many of the actual everyday practices, actions, patterns, routines, and habits of concern to environmental educators and researchers are, effectively absented, excluded,

or rendered invisible/non representational in epistemologically constrained textualisms while the ecological, historical, material, real, structural conditions grounding environmental agency and its/their relations, both antecedent and consequential, are ontologically ~ epistemologically diluted, or denied.

The uncritical abstractionist role of theory in that onto ~ epistemological tensional gap is exacerbated when, for the purposes of ecologically 'reclaiming' the critical role of theory, we can no longer ignore numerous 'pre-new' well established intellectual resources, including the 'old' of historical materialist, critical realist, environmental ethics/Nature philosophy, and ecophenomenological points of access to, and representation of, material-real phenomena. Highlighting this tension is assertively incorporated into my decentered reframing of the problem addressed in this article.

In a nutshell, my preferred 'starting' point of *access* to the ecological and material realities of researchable problems and issues in EER is the ontological question. This entails being relatively clear, epistemologically and methodologically, about the presuppositions we assume or presume, and represent, in the practices of EE and, subsequently, through EER. Unlike the de/constructivist rationality of epistemological (and methodological) textualisms, these presuppositions must be deeply attentive to, where possible, the 'non' consciousness/rationality/self-clarity (and representational) of the 'pre' and 'un' consciousness, and affects of senses and sentience of the moving intercorporeal (human, other-than-human, inanimate), ecological body(ies) in the historical timespaces of various scapes (land, sea, air, urban, parks, gardens, etc). Here, in this uneven tensional unfolding of the de-centered ontological ~ epistemological reframing of inquiry lies a revealing of the practices-theory gaps that demand 'exploration' (for example, Payne, 2002). This often (non) representational point of access to the materially real is a promising example of the de-centered notion/practices of experimental 'reversal thinking' (Payne, 2018a). This less anthropocentric and ecohumanist decentering intra and inter-acts against the orthodox singularity assumed or presupposed in accessing language-only epistemology and/or methodology, and their reconstitutions of discursive/textual abstractions. Much more will be said at the end of this essay about the politics of *access* in inquiry aimed at in minimizing the practice-theory gap in each and all of research, pedagogy, curriculum, and policy.

This decentered reframing of the problem of overprivileging the epistemological role of theory in EER, in particular, is very alert to the resolute avoidance of such 'matters' in most of the conventional discourse of EE and EER, including the very selective importations and singular/mono like interpretations of the allegedly new materialisms and posthumanisms. Even in their *critically reflexive* variants, 'gone missing' or 'invisible' is any textual (or ideological, or idealist) concession to accessing the underlying 'natures' of their historical material (and symbolic) structures, and their ongoing structurings of human experience, actions, interactions and relations *and* the recursive dynamic outlined above about the 'nons' of representational and correspondence problematics. Put simply, decentered subjective *critical reflexivity* and the need for historicized, objective *critical theory* go hand in hand, even if different, and underpin the remainder of this critique, as licensed by the two difficult questions posed by the Editors of this 50th SI.

Settling the historical problem: 50 years of critiquing theory

The warrant for decentering the traditional academic authority of modern and now postmodern theory while destabilizing the anthropocentric assumptions in producing credible knowledge of practical value in EE and empirical use in EER now demands more historical weight' and intellectual 'depth.' Further form and shape to that framing and position is provided below by developing a short history of the problematic role of theory in relation to education praxis over the past 50 years.

A number of different but converging histories drawn from disparate fields such as educational philosophy, social theory, ethnography, environmental ethics, political science, and the digital humanities are outlined so as to objectively theorize the problematic role of performatively abstracted theory. Quite deliberately, the histories selected parallel the five decades of JEEs 50 year role in producing the (academic/Northern) knowledge of the field. My broad aim is to provide a historical snapshot of the ascendant role of theory in the humanities and social sciences and how it collides with what we 'take' or 'give' as theory in EER.

The decentered, ‘objective/subjective’ reconstruction of a ‘critical theory of theory’ and its ‘role/place’ in EER, in particular, pushes for a heightened reflexivity about the critical aspirations of the praxical theory/ies of environmental and education theory. In so doing, my specific purpose is to *de-marginalize*, *disentangle* and *incorporate* ‘other’ critiques of the excessive and, perhaps, hubristic, role of theory in narrowly anthropocentric and humanistic educations, the authoritative humanities, and uncritical rehearsals in EE/EER. My aim is to ‘settle,’ following Dewey’s pragmatic reconstructive logic (1938) and philosophy (1920/1948), a path for a flexible frame from which the remainder of this critique of abstractionism proceeds, both reflexively *and* critically.

Despite a promising start to EE in the 1980s in providing a potentially ‘radical’ alternative to mainstream views and orthodox practices of education, *and* the vice-like grip of positivism in education (which persists), critical theory building as praxis remains an elusive ‘end-in-view.’ It seems to me that, for the most part, the promised alternative of EE has been quickly absorbed into the mainstream of education. Its potential *for* deviance has been disrupted and, subsequently, normalized *within* and externally by its (post)-intellectual/academic performings in the postmodern corporate/entrepreneurial university.

A brief explanation of the logic of the following critical theorizing of theory and its role is warranted. The methodological logic is dialectical and reconstructive in historically ‘building’ the ‘theory’ of a decentered and stratified ‘politics of inquiry’ this essay concludes with. Despite its 50 years, Arena’s unique ‘constitutive abstraction’ thesis concerning intellectual exchange is largely unavailable to a global readership for reasons of its politics of distribution. Instead, I refer to a number of far more accessible but ‘not well known’ *outside* authors, albeit from the North, who also represent 50 years of critiquing theory ‘use’ and its authority in education (Schwab, Lasch, Smyth, Kitching, Connell), and the relationship of theory and methodology in the social sciences (Geertz). These contributions are arranged chronologically here to inform a narrative designed to respond critically *and* reflexively to not only the past 50 years but also as a means of critiquing the recent proliferation of allegedly new theory ‘turns’ in the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. To contextualize this critical history, dialectically, a number of practical interludes and ‘better known’ theoretical digressions from *inside* the discourse of EE and EER are injected into this critical history and theorization of theory. Putting *outside* and *inside* dialectically together (re)starts the onerous work of enabling the potential for re-centring the praxis of theory and practice in EER and EE in ways that practically matter.

Schwab (1970) and the practical: Flights of theory and curriculum incompetences

Unknown now, Joseph Schwab, a prominent professor of education and the natural sciences in the 1970s, is best known for his comprehensive account of the moribund status of curriculum theory in the USA. His legacy is captured in a series of essays that elaborate the art (and craft) of *The Practical* (collected in Westbury & Wilkof, 1978). In an essay first published in 1970 called, “The practical: A language for curriculum,” Schwab (1970/1978) diagnosed the crises of “principle” in curriculum could be traced to three interrelated “incompetences of theory”, namely “failure of scope”, “the vice of abstraction”, and its “radical plurality”.

In a ‘history of the present’ like manner *for* EE, Schwab’s 1970s critique helps explain the explosion of competing theories, approaches, perspectives, and methods of curriculum theory in EE and EER over time. For example, Lucy Sauve (2005) identified 15 uneven ‘currents’ of EE that, presumably, have since expanded due to the combination of changing senses of local and global environmental problems and/or the incorporation of new theory to interpret and/or explain the changed socio-political and/or environmental-ecological circumstances. No doubt, the Anthropocene–Capitalocene and climate ‘change’ (sic) will occupy much ‘new’ attention while numerous other ‘old’ environmental problems will, unfortunately, be crowded out. Sauve’s survey of currents, however, does not consider the constitutive role of abstraction. Nearly a decade later, Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Fien, and Kethloilwe (2013) identified five ‘research traditions’ in EE curriculum research into which six thematic areas and theoretical influences are fitted. They too do not examine how the abstractionism of theory works within those themes and their methodologies or methods. It is implied. Lotz-Sisitka et al., do, however, link the themes with plural practices.

Schwab's diagnosis of the three facets of curriculum incompetence provides additional potency for critiquing the 'now' of EER via his fleshing/flushing out the *human* context of the stasis of curriculum. Importantly, poststructural critics of Schwab, like Cherryholmes (1988) failed to appreciate the materialism underpinning Schwab's position and (mis)represented it as a disembodied text ripe for deconstruction. Schwab's account of six (human) 'flights' from the contexts and conditions of the *subject* of the field are, therefore valuable (1978, p. 300–302).

The most important flight according to Schwab, but least conspicuous, is the "flight of the field *itself*, a *translocation* of its problems and the solving of them from the nominal practitioners of the field to other men (sic)." Schwab's second flight is "upward, from discourse about the subject of the field to discourse about the discourse of the field, from *use* of principles and methods to *talk about* them, from grounded conclusions to the construction of models, from theory to metatheory, and from meta theory to meta-metatheory." Schwab's third flight is "downward", where practitioners attempt "to return to the subject matter in a state of innocence, shorn, not only of current principles, but of all principles, in an effort to take a *new* pristine, and unmediated look at the subject matter." A fourth flight is to the "sidelines", where some, maybe many, curriculum theorists are prone to assume the role of the observer, commentator, historian, and critic of the contributions of others to the field. Schwab's fifth flight is found in the marked repetition of old and familiar knowledge (re)presented in "new languages which add little or nothing to the old meanings embodied in the older and more familiar language, or repetition of old and familiar formulations by way of criticism or minor additions and modifications." His sixth flight is marked by "...contentious, and *ad hominem* debate", including the assertion of errors and omissions alleged of others within a particular discourse.

Schwab (1970/78, p. 302) was quick to point out that the flight driven signs of crises and curriculum incompetence were not equally reprehensible. Indeed, he argued that some flights could be used in responsible ways to reveal, open up, disclose, and modify certain views and assumptions.

Geertz (1973): The 'big idea' and implications for the 'field' of interpretive research

Second, of "thick description" fame in interpretive methodology, Clifford Geertz's (in Emerson, 1983) critique of how 'new' ideas are absorbed into the general stock of theoretical concepts employed in the social sciences offers keen insights that are highly relevant to the current rush to uncritically embrace 'new' theory in EER. Geertz alerted us to how abstraction is nurtured when some (only) theories become more powerful than others, or are popularized in discourse without justification, or are lacking in empirical support or qualification. Moreover, Geertz (1973) is best known for his pioneering articulation of 'thick description' in the mainly symbolic contexts *internal* to the meaning making study of culture. Like Schwab, Geertz reminds us of the necessity of retaining the embodied materialisms of the subjects/objects we 'text' abstractly.

Geertz was deeply suspicious of sweeping generalizations and representations of detached theory that typified and regulated much cultural anthropology at that time. Geertz's insights into the role of theory in ethnography, and by implication methodological inquiry, are, therefore, intriguing in further developing how this critical theory of the role of theory can be used in EER to probe how some theory is 'in' and serves to *center* a discourse/practice while 'other' theory is 'out' on the margins and edges of interpretive methodology and method preferencing, or selection in research framing and activity.

Geertz (in Emerson, 1983, p. 37) was curious about how a *grande idee* (big idea) would suddenly burst upon "the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force." He expressed caution about how, and why, the big/new idea promised to deal with and, even, resolve problems and "clarify issues" whose historical/cultural sources, presences, and consequences were, at best, "obscure." Geertz was skeptical about how "everyone snaps them up as the open sesame of some *new* positive science" (*emphasis mine*). He expressed strong reservations about how the "vogue" of the big idea suddenly provided a "conceptual center point" from which comprehensive systems of analysis were established. One effect of this 'new normal', or reification, of the systemized idea was its "crowding out" of almost everything else. Another effect was/is the "excessive popularity" uncritically generated about the big idea and the new theory then regenerated

by its boosters. Another deeper problem he concluded was that “less driven thinkers settle down” to attend to the problems the idea has “...*really* generated.” Irrespective of those problems, Geertz observed of the grandiose, all-promising scope of theory, its infinite versatility of apparent *application* of the once “seminal idea” becomes “a permanent and enduring part of our intellectual armory.” Geertz proceeded to a critique of the “conceptual morass” created at the intersection of the methodological dogma of the social sciences and what the theories’ “apologists” say about it. Geertz concluded that the researcher “... should look at what the practitioners of it do.”

Geertz’s views about the politics of theory, ideas, and interpretive methodology in ethnographic research can easily be read into Schwab’s ‘flights’ of theory in curriculum and the closely associated problem of abstractionism embraced in the new discourse and languages of the/any field. Geertz, however, moved somewhat beyond the diagnosis of a chronic problem within the big ideas, vague concepts, popularization of certain theories, dogmatic methodology, and stylized jargons. He drew on Gilbert Ryles’ views about “thin” and “thick” description to suggest the need for a “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” in interpretive methodology whose aim was to richly describe the particular contexts of various “cultural categories.”

In bringing theory much closer to the grounds of interpretation, Geertz was adamant about the importance of “gaining *access*” (in Emerson, 1983, p. 55) to the conceptual worlds and lived experiences of the subjects so that the researcher can “converse with them.” In so doing, the relations of the researched and researcher are given a heightened sense of the Levinas-like mutually constituted, face-to-face, and reciprocal agencies in the forming of cultural-ecological social relations, actions, and interactions. Tim Ingold (2000, p. 160), a prominent, contemporary environmentally perceptive social anthropologist, acknowledged Geertz’s important breakthroughs in cultural anthropology. The breakthrough was shifting ethnography from an undue focus on culture as that which resided in the individuated “interiority of the mind” to the view that cultures are a constant sharing and living of symbolic exchange in a historical, material ‘world.’

With Schwab’s curriculum critique and Geertz’s methodological critique ‘opening’ this critique of theory, it is timely to offer a ‘practical’ diversion, reiterating the subjectivity licensed in the invite by the *JEE* Editors this 50th Issue. The lack of availability of publications central to Digression 1 means that the diversion is cursory while the method of narration uses the first-person singular (Lingis, 2007). The digression is also partially autoethnographic and exemplar of an embodied materialist ‘memory-work’ methodology rarely practiced in EER (for an example, see Kaufman et al., 2001; Payne, 2013) about seemingly in/significant formative life experiences (Payne, 1999; Tanner, 1980).

Digression 1 (1978): Practice

Circa 1978: My “Slow ecopedagogy and critical curriculum action” was written nearly 40 years after it happened (Payne, 2015). It restoried a pilot study of an ‘experimental’ EE curriculum ‘theory’ I was invited to ‘enact’ in a primary/elementary school as a novice teacher. The *practice theory* was formulated by teacher education researchers at nearby Deakin University. Its enacted, slow praxis resulted in a class of 8-9 year old children taking responsible action of an ecopolitical type *only* after five months of their student centered ‘interdisciplinary and experiential learning’ inquiries into a local drainpipe whose allegedly ‘bad’ water emptied into a bay. This geographically local, temporally everyday, real beach/coastal environment where they played, explored, and swam was where most of the children had observed dead fish. They devised eight experiments to ‘test’ the assumption of a cause and effect relationship between the drainpipe, its water, beach shallows, and dead fish. In so doing over many weeks of experiments, the children individually and collectively practiced and learned the ‘scientific method,’ and monitoring/recording of it, while vastly improving and ‘interskilling’ literacy, numeracy, and other ‘subjects,’ including citizenship/democracy education and health/physical educations via an experience-driven pedagogy that (temporally/spatially/bodied) combined repeat excursions to the site and classroom ‘follow up’ to those ‘data collection’ activities. The celebrated Deakin pilot study resulted in a visit to the (rural/coastal) school by the then Minister of Conservation of the State government.

Forty years later, we witness, globally, the #climatestrike kids taking action against global heating and climate destabilization. In so doing, these kids have been publicly admonished by the Australian Prime Minister, another conservative who once brought a lump of coal into Parliament, for not studying hard enough, missing school, and acting like parliamentarians.

Why the 40 year wait to publish that significant life experience of ecopedagogy (Tanner, 1980)? I wrote it out of sheer frustration when the allegedly new of 'new materialism' theory first appeared in EER 'discourse'. The pilot study was a brilliant example of the 'experiential' or '*embodied materialism*' and ecophenomenologically and ecopedagogically lived 'ecosomaesthetics ~ environmental ethics ~ ecopolitics' of the 'founding' principles of EE formulated during the 1970s at three UN conferences. These conferences concluded in the Tbilisi declaration where the basic principles, aims and processes of EE were established 'globally' (Palmer, 1998). But have since been forgotten in the dromospheric fast of the postmodern 'moment' and amnesia of the past. Finally, a well overdue re'turn' to the allegedly 'old' materialisms of everyday EE in the 1980s and early 90s.

The frustration driving the 2015 memory-work effort was borne of the long observation of the 'dilution' of the "socially-critical EE" and its 'historical materialist' inspiration of curriculum theory and studies, critical pedagogical praxis, and preferred methodology of (participatory) 'action research' in, about, and *for* the environment (See also, Robottom, 1984; Henry, 1984 in the first issue of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, the second journal after *JEE* in 1969). Three seemingly unrelated Geertzian *grand ideas* were gaining traction in the 1990s, namely the conservative, if not reactionary, critique of environmental education 'for' the environment (Jickling, 1992); the post-Brundtland Report global policy shift to the UN's Education for Sustainable Development (for example, Palmer, 1998) and; the initial "post-liberal" but culturally conservative critique of education's linguistic "myths" and metaphors in constituting the "ecological crisis" (Bowers, 1987, 1993). The latter mirrored the broader moves in education theory at that time (in the North) to 'poststructural investigations' (Cherryholmes, 1988) and "deconstructed text" (Pinar & Reynolds, 1992). Each 'coincided' in 'turning away' from progressive 'political' versions of critical curriculum theory of/for education (for example, Young, 1990) and environmental education (Robottom, 1987).

Intuited in my doctoral thesis of 1993 (for example, Payne, 1995), a new politic of EE was, clearly, becoming apparent in the early 1990s, following the 1980s struggles and battles within the field to claim territory and identity, be it the purposes of the field typified by the clash of the 'old' of education 'in' and 'about' the environment and the 'new' addition of 'for, following Tbilisi (Palmer, 1998) and/or the positivist/quantitative and interpretivist/qualitative methods/methodologies debates in research (see, Hart & Nolan, 1999).

The new politic was the 'politics' *internal* to the claims and rhetoric made under the banner of 'critical.' My doctoral study formulation of a curriculum theory called 'a critical ecological ontology for inquiry' contrasted Robottom's 'red' version of EE and Bowers' 'green' EE. This contrast used Dewey's logic of inquiry. It procedurally undertook a number of interrelated conceptual and theoretical mediations. First, the dualism of pedagogical and phenomenological interests. Second, Bowers' culturally conservative agenda and Robottom's politically progressive interests. I concluded that Bowers' linguistically lofty 'flights' from the field's origins in the late 1970s, unlike Robottom's grounded praxis, mirrored Schwab's 'flight of the field' to a hybrid of conservative philosophical and linguistically reduced idealism acting as a type of de and retraditionalization of critical EE. With the publication of Gough's (1994) poststructural 'ecopolitic,' my suspicions were confirmed about the turn in EER to a singularized textual/constructivist and linguistically dematerialized 'new' cultural conservatism in EE 'discourse'.

In a nutshell, contra the 'new' 1990s conservative but, ostensibly, 'liberal' critique of EE *for* the environment initiated by Jickling (1992) and 'new' ecopolitical (sic) textual conservatism of Gough (1994), the Deakin pilot demonstrated how a highly democratic, participatory, inclusive (socially-critical), but slow and cross curriculum, interdisciplinary, experiential curriculum enabled children to *voluntarily* learn about, and freely 'choose' a range of educational, social, moral, ethical, and politically 'responsible actions' that, materially, were ecopolitical in enacted practice, and consequential in ethics and politics as evidenced in the visit to the school by the Minister to congratulate the children for their 'rigorous' studies (Payne, 2015).

Commencing in the early 1990s, the ten year-long conservative critique of education ‘for’ the environment for, allegedly, being coercive, in ‘theory’ at least, was a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of both the democracy and the ecopolitics of not only the antecedents of ‘for’ the environment enacted ‘materially’ in the localized ‘pilot’ curriculum study. To reiterate, that pilot occurred in 1978, well before John Fien’s (1993) exhaustive explanation of the ‘socially-critically’ version of critical theory and its pedagogical approach, and before the *ad hominem* attacks on him, mindful of Schwab’s sixth flight by those occupying the territory of the fourth flight. It is also important to note that Fien’s 1993 theorizing preemptively anticipated the (de{con}structive) objections to ‘for’ that might be made (textually) against the critical/progressive and praxical reconstruction of EE. Only recently, are we witnessing some theorists advocating for a ‘re’turn to EE ‘for’ the environment.

Digression 2: Theory

A little after that 1978 Deakin pilot study, in 1979, I subscribed to the interdisciplinary journal *Environmental Ethics*. This ‘new’ journal was dedicated to the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. Its intellectual effect on me was ‘significant’ (Tanner, 1980) enough to travel overseas in the early 1990s and undertake my doctoral studies at The University of Georgia, USA, where *Environmental Ethics* was then housed. My studies included two research dissertations; a minor thesis that elaborated a reconstructive historical materialist-embodied critique of ecofeminism in rock climbing (Payne, 1994), and a major dissertation on a ‘critical ecological ontology for educational inquiry’ (Payne, 1995, 1997, 1999, numerous).

In the introduction to the first Volume of *Environmental Ethics*, the founding Editor Eugene Hargrove (1979, p. 1) admitted his Geertzian ‘big idea’ for the Journal was conceived around two purposes. First, as a forum for diverse interests and, second, as a means *for* (*emphasis mine*) establishing an environmental ethics Institute. Hargrove confessed he was “...both a philosopher and an environmentalist.” In other words Geertz would approve of, a responsible activist, a conative declaration of a praxis *for* the environment that bears remarkable similarities to the initial principles, aims and processes of the then ‘new’ EE declared at Tbilisi in, not coincidentally, 1978.

Fifteen years later, Hargrove (1993), again, editorialized, about the future of environmental ethics, in much the same way the IFP for this 50th invited us to anticipate the future of EER. Hargrove lamented the lack of impact of the journal, in particular, and the field, more generally. He concluded, “Environmental ethics...continues to be too “practical” for mainstream philosophers and too “theoretical” for environmentalists, policy makers, and the general public.”

In sum, *Environmental Ethics* introduced me forty years ago to much of what is now being labeled as ‘new’ theory in the grafting of ‘posthuman’ and ‘materialism’ onto the exhaustion of poststructural theory and deconstructive method. Numerous big ideas, theories, and philosophies debated extensively in the 1980s such as non-anthropocentrism and non-human are, now, being ‘introduced’ to EER as ‘new’. Those ‘old’ prescient ideas circulated over the first 15 years of *Environmental Ethics* from 1980 are too exhaustive to list here. David Keller’s (2010) “big questions” of environmental ethics, amongst others, provides a comprehensive and ‘updated’ account of much of what was introduced, engaged, and debated in the first decades of *Environmental Ethics*.

To emphasize, very few environmental educators or researchers have used, or engaged, the concepts and thematics of *Environmental Ethics*. It is a ‘flight’ that rarely was boarded in EER. There is nothing new about, for example, ecocentrism, biocentrism, non-anthropocentrism. Their absence in framing research (Payne, 1995, 2009, 2010b) is indicative of how ignored ‘theory’ of ‘direct’ environmental/ecological relevance to EER underpins and reconstitutes the ahistorical (and atheoretical) basis of the general problem of practice-theory gaps, and praxis issues within EE/EER discourse/texts/language.

Indeed, in founding Editor Clay Schoenfeld’s (1969) introduction of *JEE*, he posed, ironically, the historicizing question, “What’s new about environmental education? He asked, is it just “word merchandising” or a creation of “new dimensions in ecological communication.” The “today” of then 1969 (in USA) entailed a shift/turn in EE flagged by Schoenfeld towards comprehensive, broader, global, urban,

indigenous concern, ecological, man centered, universal, social studies, quest for quality, public involvement, open-ended involvements, adult, all media, research, and sense of urgency. Some seemingly 'new' shifts flagged by Schoenfeld fifty years ago remain very relevant, some more important than others. Some relate closely to the Tbilisi declaration of 1978. But, we should ask also of the 1960s and 70s, why did practices like 'conservation' and big ideas like 'consumerism' become terminal when 'conservation education' was renamed 'environmental education' in the 1970s, and then 'die' when EE was renamed 'education for sustainable development' in the 1990s? Indeed, what do posthuman and new materialism authors/theorists say 'materially' and 'historically' about conservation(ism) and consumer(ism) agential relations and intractions?

Lasch: Academic pseudo-radicalism and its elitism

Published in 1995, a key 'parallel' moment in EERs 'turning' from a critical social theory of educational praxis to a linguistic theory of abstracted textualism, Christopher Lasch's (1995) account of the "revolt of the elites" sheds retrospective light on the theorists (and agential relations) whose 'theory' is the subject of this critique. Lasch's provocations about the "charade of subversion" of "academic pseudo-radicalism" shift Schwab's 'flights,' and Geertz's 'big ideas,' to the prevailing political-cultural contexts of universities in USA and their traditional role in producing knowledge. Lasch concluded that already abstracted theory sourced in the social sciences was further abstracted in the humanities and expressed as a form of cultural cynicism, from both elitist left and right scholars. This literary/culturally predisposed 'enclave' of the academic humanities was, Lasch argued, complicit in the betrayal and abandonment of the liberal democracy he sought to 'protect.'

Lasch (1995, p. 176-196), structurally and historically, was highly critical of the rising economic stratification of 'liberal' education that, he believed, had increasingly become the prerogative of the rich. His critique of the agencies and relations of the pseudo radicals in the humanities focused more on the strategies those tenured academics promoted and protected through their professional privileges and theoretically 'radical' interests. Protections alleged by Lasch included the elite's failure to communicate with broader audiences, either as teachers or writers, and the use of incomprehensible jargon and "overcharged verbiage" to subvert plain language. Lasch concluded that no thought was exempt from criticism by the elite, and was achieved by the shifting of everyday critical concerns of the empirical social sciences into the 'literatures' of the humanities. Here, Lasch linked the rise of academic careerism with the ascendancy of the self-referentiality of theoretical deconstructionism largely associated with the "postmodern," "posthumanist," and the "poststructural" accounts of the circularity and indeterminacy of language. He argued that those internalized accounts of the human and humanistic liberal democracy had little contact with the world outside the academy for which, Lasch bluntly concluded, there is "contempt for the general public" (1995, p. 184).

Lasch's assessment of the creeping elitist abstractionism of the academic humanities was particularly scathing of the increasingly narrow and fashionable method of deconstructing claims on knowledge and truth. He conceded the impossibility of certainty by not precluding the pragmatic reconstructive possibility of "reasoned discourse" and democratic importance in it of "provisional assent" (p. 189). Lasch's critique of theory 'developments' in the academy is salutary, particularly when located in the 50 year-long history of the critique of theory being marshaled here. He shifted the respective but related critiques by Schwab and Geertz into the frame of how the scholarly 'agencies' of 'relational' academic work were 'post' (structurally) promoted, protected, and exchanged. Moreover, although not using the term 'neoliberal,' Lasch argued, tellingly, that one of the consequences of the corporate and bureaucratic control of the then academy was "to drive critical thinkers out of the social sciences into the humanities, where they can indulge a taste for" theory" without the rigorous discipline of empirical social observation" (p. 193).

In so doing, Lasch argued that heavily abstracted theory was no substitute for social criticism which no longer had any "academic cachet" in disrupting the status quo, be it from the left or the right. Instead, abstracted theory was a new form of cynically self-perpetuating intellectual activity and (re)circulation to a limited audience. Social criticism, he asserted, was unlikely to get any encouragement in the entrepreneurial, corporate university. Thirty years later, mindful of the 'passing' of socially critical and praxical

EE, neoliberal inspired poststructural abstractionism now dominates in certain parts of the university (Cooper, Hinkson, & Sharp, 2002). Its traction in EE has only recently been noted (for example, Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015; Kahn, 2010; Springer, de Souza, & White, 2016).

Back to the future. Not surprisingly, in *The death of truth*, Michiko Kakutani (2018) echoes many of Lasch's criticisms of the 1990s humanities in the university; the continued fall of reason; the arrival of a 'new' version of the culture wars prosecuted through the conservative right's cooption of language; the academic legitimization of deconstructionism; the rise of subjectivity (mindful of Lasch's (1979) earlier critique of the culture of narcissism); and the vanishing of reality and objectivity. Kakutani's main target is Trumpism, and the political and social/cultural 'conditions' of this reactionary political time that enables and advances that deconstructive politic of 'false' facts/truths, and like Lasch, the academic elite's systematic contempt for reason, commonsense, expertise, knowledge, certainty and democracy in the USA, and elsewhere. Like Lasch, Kakutani is not a conservative. They share major concerns about the demise of democracy due, in part, to the accelerated rise of postmodern deconstructive theory fermented by the intellectually trained/pseudo radical elite in the academy, particularly in the Humanities.

But before we focus microscopically on one of the very few critiques of equivalencies to abstractionism in EER, the critical history of theory being formulated here remains very alert to Geertz's observation of how 'less driven' thinkers in interpretive research have the task of 'settling down' the problems not anticipated by those elites (re)working the *grande idee* of the moment. In short, in their critiques of the role of theory twenty years apart, Lasch and Kakutani establish a number of powerful political insights that go to the heart and mind of a central problem this extended essay seeks to highlight about the rise of performative abstractionism and its mediations and dilutions of practice and praxis.

In short, there is a compelling and overdue need not only in EER but also in education research to frame and conceptualize, then contextualize, how academics 'form' their scholarly agencies and identities and 'relationally' exchange knowledge productions as an auditable performance within the prevailing but changing conditions of their individual, collegiate, and global 'work' or 'labor.' To partially achieve this 'emergent' demand, three authors devoted to critical *education theory* in the late 1990s and early 2000s are now sampled in an effort to highlight the problem of abstractionism within the postmodern conditions and relations of neo-liberalized intellectual exchange and knowledge production. They are John Smyth's (1995) edited *Academic Work*, Raewyn Connell's (2007) *Southern Theory*, and Gavin Kitching's (2008) unique empirically qualified study of the educational costs of postmodernism. Again, none of this sampling are environmental education researchers or educators and, again, point to serious lacks in theory in EER about how and why, and where we actually work as knowledge producers, performers, and exchangers in, about, and for those environments derived or extracted from Nature we purport to serve, conserve, sustain, or preserve.

Critical education theory, academic Labor, and local intellectual exchange

John Smyth's (1995) edited volume of twelve chapters examined the changing Labor processes in (global north) higher education settings as they had been reconstructed, transformed, and reorganized due the global restructuring of capitalism. In a typical sociological manner, Smyth's book focuses on the structural, economic, and institutional trends in which new social forms and academic relationships were forged in the workplace during the 1990s. Institutionally and organizationally arranged, agencies of various actors and disparate groups within the academy were subjected to a range of emergent paradoxes, dilemmas, and contradictions within the new market-driven ideology of production, efficiency, and effectiveness in and of education practices. Amongst a number of trends and conclusions Smyth extracted from the volume's authorship were, (i) the growing separation of those who conceptualize work and those who execute it (ii) the increased managerial control of the institution (iii) the reduction of worker autonomy (iv) the isolation, fragmentation, and codification of worker skill (v) a new emphasis on ideological and technical control of academics themselves by certain policy-making and institutional elites. In other words, Smyth's volume highlighted the changed organizational 'environment' and its managerial intensifications of the capitalist abstraction, delabouring, and disembodiments of academic and professional work.

For EER, there is one notable omission, however, in Smyth's (1995) and Cooper et al. (2002) accounts of the problem of abstracted intellectual knowledge production and divided/divisive academic management. There is insufficient differentiation of how the various faculties and disciplines of knowledge actually (re)form the discipline in which they work, including the interdisciplinarity and praxis historically aspired to in EE and EER. Criticisms engaged dialectically above, so far, have focused mainly on the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. There are glimpses or inferences only of how the changed Labor processes that privilege abstractionism within the neo-liberal university and its market-impacting performativities of academic capitalism vary among the sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences. Even within the Faculties/Schools/Departments of Education and Teacher Education that often house EE researchers and pedagogues, there exists a strong hierarchy, privileging, and reward/promotion system of certain 'disciplines' such as science, mathematics, literacy, and technology educations. Environmental science education in teacher education is treated, promoted, and rewarded far more favorably than, for example, interdisciplinary environmental studies or environmental ethics educations or, even, experiential education (costly field work) as a preferred pedagogy for (ecological) sustainability.

In EER, we had to wait, yet again, until 2015 before a dedicated critique of the neoliberalism of EE was published (Hursh et al., 2015). The 14 articles included in that volume provide useful and, at times, important introductory insights, and evidence, about how EE was, and continues to be, educationally deconstructed and reconstituted in the university by the global forces of neoliberalism. Again, however, missing from those critiques is any critical insight into how the various agencies (or not) of the academics themselves, collectively and individually, were complicit in, or naïve about, practically reproducing and abstractly reconstituting what that otherwise 'critical' volume actually critiqued. More recently, Paul Hart (2013) in an *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education* asked of EE researchers, "can we see ourselves within our own terrain?"

A digression to the discourse-practice of EER is, therefore, warranted.

Digression 3: The abstractionism of theory in EER

The first concentrated critique in EE/EER as a new, emergent form of performatively driven abstractionism had to wait many years (Hart, 2005). There had been fleeting discussions about how EE was 'caught' in the transition from 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' (for example, Payne, 1997/1999, Huckle, 1999, Sauve, 1999). "The language of sustainability" (S. Gough, 2001) touched lightly on some of the concerns identified above, such as the languaged "re-engineering" of the discourse of EE (Stables, 2001). Nonetheless, the abstractionism of EER in the mediated form of increasingly globalized intellectual exchange, and its effect on changing academic and social relations within and across the field, was not examined in any critical detail. Nor was its 'next' incremental step in 'globally' reconstituting the endemic 'local' problem of theory-practice, rhetoric-reality gaps despite the historical legacy of the praxis interest and associated ideological critique.

The belated 'intervention' about a post-critical EER (Hart, 2005) was devoted to a critique of Marcia McKenzie's lead article published in a Special Issue of the journal *Environmental Education Research*. Hers was a poststructural inspired "post post" version of the field's evolving knowledge commitments and emerging priorities. Mainly, this SI was scripted as a conceptual struggle between poststructural theory and critical realism theory. For such an important issue, strangely or sadly, only three responses to McKenzie's text from Payne, Russell, and O'Donoghue & Lotz-Sisitka were published, plus a rejoinder from McKenzie (2005). Now, nearly fifteen years later, we can only speculate, with a heavy dose of irony and despair, about the reasons why the 2005 'debate' received scant attention from academics working in EE/EER following its publication. Critical, practical, materialist, realist methodologies were well and truly available shortly before the 2005 publication (for example, Archer, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Law, 2004; Sayer, 2000) notwithstanding their anthropocentrically inclined non-inclusion of environmental and socio-ecological matters.

In some ways, mindful of Geertz's observations, the three response papers to McKenzie's lead article were 'efforts' to (re)settle the problem generated by the 'big' idea of 'posts' inscribing of EER. A common

denominator was there variations of critique from *within* a critical realist/materialist perspective of theory in EER and practice in EE. Subsequently, McKenzie's (2005) 'second thoughts' rejoinder was telling. She acknowledged how the material bases represented in/by (her) poststructural position warranted additional (textual) clarification and that such materiality/ism of humans, and other than humans, was elusive to any consequential methodological deliberation. Nonetheless, McKenzie adhered to the orthodox 'post' authority of, curiously, the rational self-clarity and centeredness in abstraction about the singularly deterministic or totalizing/universalizing role of language, discourse and texts in deconstructing various cultural realities. Her single level, flat position about the authority of language served to epistemologically sustain the anthropocentric, idealist, constructivist and subjectivist constitutions of EER via the linguistic turn's abstracted claim to deconstructively *access*, and *correspond* with the (non)representational 'realities' and material conditions and relations, including Nature, of historical interest to EER/EE.

Within the IfP for this 50th SI, and the critical theory of theory formulated for it, that prescient 'special issue' of 2005 can retrospectively be viewed as a 'critical' anticipation of the allegedly 'new' theoretical re'turn' to, for example, new materialisms and posthuman theory (amongst others). But, already, there are textual indications, at least, that the new of the 'new' amounts to little more than an epistemological continuation of the abstracted poststructural and (de)constructive project. Put bluntly, there is little evidence, even textual, that 'new' theory is not just a continuation of poststructural theoretical obfuscation, jargons of authenticity, and methodological opacity. As far as I can tell, this theory mashing of new/posts rarely 'returns' to practices, following Schwab's warnings, while its methods, let alone methodologies of accessing the real and material remain elusive, or just recycle the old methods of deconstructing texts and refusing dualisms. If so, whatever 're'assemblage of constructivist epistemologies occurs within the allegedly new of theory raises very difficult and challenging questions about 'new' methodology in EER, given the rhetorically/discursively claimed 'turn' to ontology that underpins many of these new/post theories. And what then can, or might be said about a 'new new' onto-ethics? (Grosz, 2017), most of all in EER? Yet again, the concluding recommendations in this essay are an effort to pave a way.

Not coincidentally, Paul Hart titled the 2005 SI intervention and engagement as 'post-critical' in an attempt to 'weave' aspects of critical historical-materialist theory and poststructural theory in the always evolving framings of EER. My own contribution to that 'tension' between critical and poststructural perspectives sought, alternatively, to 'reassemble' the researcher and researched rather than the respective objects of each perspective; that being the purpose of this 'intervention' into the role and value of theory in the postmodern. It concluded with the outline of a decentered approach to methodological inquiry, critique, and 'ways of doing' 'grounded/practical' empirical work (see also, Payne, 2005b).

Kitching's empirical trouble with theory

Lasch vehemently criticized the avoidance of empirical studies by the pseudo-radical elites. Following Digression 3, we have to look elsewhere in the (Northern) academy for empirically qualified insights into the (political) silence in educational research about the problematic of performative abstractionism and, indeed, any relations with, for example, EER in pedagogy, curriculum, policy, and research, including methodological deliberation.

Gavin Kitching's (2008) critique of postmodern theory included a unique study of the deployment of 'post' theory in post-graduate dissertations in the social sciences. Kitching's empirical study proved to be highly critical of the *educational costs* of postmodernism. Kitching examined 27 Honors theses selected from 253 dissertations completed in his School between 1983 and 2006. His selection criteria were: extensive use of poststructuralist, postmodernist or discourse theory as the principle analytical tool, and; received a grade of at least a Distinction (>75%) upon examination.

Kitching's conclusions mirrored Lasch's 'social' criticisms of the academy. Kitching also anticipated Kakutani's concerns about the new hybridities and fusions she alleged of postmodern/poststructural thought and theory, and the claims on deconstructed truth where its confusion undermines reason, and where the objectivities of various sciences and commonsense, participative democracy are,

increasingly, undercut by the combination of the post valorization of intuition and subjectivity. Kitching, generally, found a failure of the theses to come to terms with the philosophical conception of language underlying postmodernist theory where those graduates uncritically approved certain views about that theory's insights into, and understandings of the social construction of reality they purported to reveal via the methods of deconstructionism. He recommended that such intellectually "question-begging political radicalism" be replaced by intellectually "rigorous political radicalism."

Once again, in this rare empirical study of the representational authority of a particular perspective of thought in postmodern theory, and claims on knowledge production, we witness the 'post' politics of inquiry. In Kitching's instance, research theses whose legitimated and credentialed performance were found to be lacking when engaged by critical concerns about theory that inform, and mirror, the historical concern about the role of theory and associated intellectual exchange in postmodern academic settings.

In anticipating the future (of EER), due to word limitations, I am unable to critique the numerous 'post' intuitions, opinions, commentaries, studies, and publications that have contributed to the textualized reframing of EER over the past two decades. I can only flag, ominously, the intergenerational problem created in this, so far, thirty-year long history of the escalation, intensification and individualization of performative abstractionism and its 'globalizing' exchange and circulation. And, because this critical theory of theory, and its role in EER, is organized in a chronological sequencing, there are 'other' imperatives that for far too long have existed on the margins of 'preferred' or prioritized/valorized theory.

Performative abstractionism in global intellectual exchange: New academic imperialism?

Raewyn Connell's (2007) critique of Northern theory commenced with a focus on its 'centrism' in educated and affluent Europe and North America where 'cosmopolitan' theorists like Foucault, Connell asserted, 'dominate' and 'universalize' the imaginaries of social scientists, inter-national development opportunities and organizational/institutional arrangements and, even, the reading lists set by professors for students. Connell's 'general' view of theory in the North is critiqued sharply for the hidden assumptions contained in certain metropolitan viewpoints, perspectives, and problems. These blind spots, Connell declared, perpetuate a range of parochialisms 'newly' reinstated as theories of globalization. Connell's critique of theory sought/seeks to reclaim the vast 'southern theory' that is produced internally in, for example, postcolonial Africa, modernizing Iran, contemporary India, post WW2 Latin America, and Antipodean (including Australia) Indigenities.

Noteworthy in relation to Connell's examples of the importance of southern theory is Claudio Canaparo's (2009) critical theorization of "geo-epistemology" in the cultural/global construction, conception, and consumption of 'Latin America.' Canaparo's promotion of "reversal thinking" highlighted how "locations of knowledge" should inductively and logically serve as generators of social criticism, theory-building and critiques of colonialisms and imperialisms. Canaparo's approach and Connell's 'presencing' of southern theory are valuable additions to broadening, as well as historicizing, how this critical theory of theory, and its performative abstractionisms, in EER can more sensitively, circumstantially, and contextually be tackled in 'global' research. And, again for empirical purposes, their 'reversal' of theory/knowledge generation is well on conceptual-empirical and methodological display in EER (Payne, 2016a) in studies deliberately *assembled* from within the North and South.

And, in affirming a critical/global future of EER, a decade after Connell and Canaparo, and with Payne (2016a), Harini Nagendra, Bai, Brondizio, and Lwasa (2018) examined the structural biases in global knowledge systems in relation to 'sustainability'. For empirically informed knowledge productions in journals, they recommended: 1. Top cited journals need to increase the share of empirical research rooted in under-represented issues or emanating from homegrown conceptual framings in the global South, even if each does not conform with mainstream dominant theoretical framings or methodological interests. 2. International funding programs need to change because most successful grants and publishing opportunities favor North-led agendas. 3: Academic institutions in the North and South need to reform evaluation and incentive systems that put too much emphasis on single indicators or measures. 4: That 'capacity building' for young researchers in the global south need to be revamped in ways that

do not unduly or ignorantly import training in theories and methods provided by senior scholars from the north.

Mindful of Nagendra et al's recommendations, Connell's "southern theory", and Canaparo's "locations of knowledge", as contextualized in EER via an earlier Special Issue of this journal *JEE* dedicated to "the politics of policy in ESD" (Payne, 2016), there is a forthcoming Special Issue of *JEE* that deals assertively with the "Global politics of knowledge production in EER: 'New' theory and North-South representations" (Rodrigues, 2020).

But what else might this critical history of theory anticipate in drawing from the past of knowledge productions and their changing performativities of abstraction in globalizing conditions of academic/intellectual exchange? Yet again, understanding history of theory is important!

Anticipation 1: Performative abstractionism and digital imperialist platforms of knowledge/information circulation

Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1979/1984) "report" on "the postmodern condition" of knowledge is a classic text due to its ushering in of the philosophical 'turn' away from "modern *systems*" of knowledge production that had prevailed 'mechanically' from, at least, the (European) Industrial Revolution of the late 18C. Lyotard's critique of the performative legitimation of research and education, in "computerized societies", were influential then, but now need updating due to the accelerating 'conditions' of changed 'global *systems*' of knowledge production now valued in the postmodern, neoliberal university. Environmentalist critiques of Lyotard's postmodern theory of knowledge (for example, Gare, 1993), at that very crucial 'turning' point in EER, are also incorporated into this critical theory of theory for EER.

Two recent texts by Gary Hall (2016) and Nick Srnicek (2017) are used to update Lyotard's Report and extend this critical theory of theory into outlining how the acceleration of *systematically* mediated global knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimated. We now witness 'fast' knowledge systems whose imperializing tendencies or colonizing practices flagged by Connell and Canaparo further jeopardize the 'slow' and 'local' praxis of EE and the configurations and framings of EER.

Here, I am particularly mindful of the 50th IfP where we were asked to 'anticipate' the likely future of EER. Briefly, my concern now is, first, acknowledging the *systematic* (digitalized/abstracted) elevation of performative theory within the intensifying and individuating dehumanizing and denaturing of the embodied, praxical interests of critical EE and EER. Second, to counter this 'new' 'universalism' of digitally performed abstractionism, in Anticipation 2, I then conclude this essay positively and constructively with the outline of an empirically-based and tested 'politics of inquiry,' or 'a critical ecological ontology for inquiry.' This praxis oriented view of a *stratified* ontology ~ epistemology in EER remains acutely aware of the digitalization of EER but outlines ways to resist and reverse the faster flights of 'new' post-modern theory(ies) and intensifications (and 'legitimation') of the neo-liberal performativity condition of knowledge implicit to the deepening theory-practice schism in EE.

Hall's (2016) *Pirate philosophy* focused on the still highly influential role of the (post)humanities as 'knowledge' is conceptualized, constructed, represented, consumed, and legitimized from within the rapid digitalized transformations of that 'late/high' postmodern economy. Srnicek's (2017) *Platform capitalism* outlined how Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and other monopolistic techno-instrumental business/corporate forms are reconstituting new tendencies within hypercapitalism and, in doing so, provide an ongoing and extraordinarily powerful challenge to any vision of a post-Anthropocene, post-capitalist future of relevance to EE/EER and their 'un/sustainabilities.' Hall's critique of academic publishing is noteworthy, historically, as it was written fifteen years after Arena's prescient critique of academic publishing (James & McQueen-Thomson, 2002) and forty years after Lyotard's classic Report.

A key method employed throughout this paper in, now, anticipating the future of EER and associated amnesia of EEs roots in Tbilisi is to locate 'theory' like the postmodern digitalization and abstract platforming and performing of 'global' knowledge in some sort of a historical context that loosely parallels the *JEEs* 50th contribution to knowledge production, representation, and, increasingly, corporate/entrepreneurial demand for global circulation, transfer, download, and uptake. Here, to capture

this accelerationism of abstracting knowledge systems, I sense useful protologisms are needed (for readers) like the ‘abstractionism of materialism,’ or the ‘digitalization of thinking,’ the ‘disembedding of being,’ the technics of relational beings,’ or ‘the virtualization of things.’ Other ‘old’ theory deeply relevant but rarely cited in EER also becomes useful, belatedly. Marc Auge’s (1995) account of ‘super-modernity’ articulated the rise of the “non place.” Yet, Auge’s ‘critical’ theory, and Trigg’s (2012) phenomenological ‘un-place,’ amongst numerous accounts of ‘displacement’ have *also* been ignored, textually and practically, in the seductive abstraction of ‘place’ theory and ‘pedagogy’ that swept through EER, outdoor education and ‘other’ curriculum areas in the 2000s (Payne, 2018a).

Lyotard’s classic Report on knowledge was first published in French in 1979, at about the same time as the Tbilisi recommendations were finalized, and ten years after *JEE* was first published. The ‘stand-off’ between allegedly modern and postmodern knowledge production in EER demands reconstructive critique if we are to narrow the post-Lyotard gaps of the rise of performative abstractionism in EER ‘transforming’ now into the hyper digitalized/platformed mediations of imperializing theory, and those mundane, everyday practices of EE that once occupied the ‘field’ and its ‘grounds.’ As Marshall McLuhan (1964) also concluded a little over 50 years ago, “the medium is the message.” For McLuhan, the term ‘message’ would later be qualified as “mass age,” “mess age,” and “massage.” To such anticipations, we can now add that the *collectivity* of the social and ecological has been replaced by the *connectivity* of the digital and abstract. In the same rich vein of critique of new ‘mediations,’ Chun & Fisher (2016) provide an indispensable, comprehensive, current, and critical account of the archeological materialisms of new:old media. Their co-edited archeology specifically targets globalized ‘theoretical inquiry.’ Put simply, another buzz word or slogan uncritically deployed textually and abstractly in new EE theory is ‘connected.’ What, ‘materially’ does it mean in EE/EER praxis?

Lyotard (1979/1984, p. xxiv) is also widely credited for ushering in deconstructionist ‘thought’ that, foundationally, demonstrated “incredulity towards metanarratives,” in particular those that defined and promoted ‘modern progress,’ the ‘hermeneutics of meaning,’ ‘emancipation of the rational or working subject,’ and the ‘creation of wealth (p. xxiii). Lyotard targeted any modern science of knowledge production that sought to legitimate itself through reference or appeal to a metadiscourse which reconstituted any metanarrative he was (selectively) troubled by in modernity. In retrospect, one wonders what Lyotard might have thought about the newly named (meta/global) ‘ecological crisis.’ His ‘report’ avoided that grand/global narrative, or even the possibility of any (progress?) on ‘universal rights’ that forty years later are in conservative ‘regress’ as extreme ‘right’ wing politics around the globe are politically and socially ascendant, as indicated earlier in Kakutani’s critique of Trumpism and the paradoxical role of the pseudo-radical Humanities.

A secondary target of Lyotard’s deconstruction was the ‘modern’ German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, a key figure in the 20 C. Frankfurt School of critical theory which was also mentioned earlier. Habermas’s approach to a critical theory of modernity addressed, amongst a wide-ranging sweep, an extensive critique of knowledge productions, sourced in positivism and the empirical-analytic sciences, the hermeneutic or interpretive sciences, psychoanalysis and emancipation, and the rational reconstruction and critical self-reflection needed for critique of advanced capitalism culminating in the rational demand, or warrant, for practical action of a communicative, ethical, and political type. Without naming Lyotard, Habermas (1989) would later critique the intersection of neoconservative thought and what he referred to as the “young conservative” or “postmodernist” position. And, here, to add to the confusion about critical theory and abstractionism that, to this day, befuddles any attempt to anticipate the future based on the past, I simply reference the ‘difference’ between the ‘rival’ Frankfurt ‘critical’ (Habermas) and Freiburg ‘ontological’ (Heidegger) ‘schools of thought’ (for example, Dallmayr, 1991). This ‘tension’ of a ‘critical ontology’ was central to my doctoral efforts in the early 1990s to reconcile, following Dewey’s logic of inquiry, the two competing ‘lines’ of thought/theory about epistemology and ontology, leaving aside questions of axiology and methodology, while reconstructively developing for praxical purposes in EER/EE ‘a critical ecological ontology’ for (environmental education inquiry (Payne, 1999, 2006). The very same logic was used in my ‘lifeworld and textualism’ post-critical reconstruction of McKenzie’s poststructural inspired ‘theorization’ of EER outlined above in Digression 3 (Payne, 2005a, see also James, 2017).

In general terms, the Frankfurt School of critical theory was highly influential in the formative development of EE in the early 1980s in what became known in the late 1980s and early 90s as the ‘socially critical’ curriculum theory and its ‘critical pedagogy’ praxis (for example, Fien, 1993). This reconstructive, practical action project for EE drew on Habermas’s critique of modern knowledge interests and their underlying political ideologies. This critical, praxical project was disinterested in Lyotard’s epistemology and postmodern turn, highlighting a deep shadow that surfaced in EE discourse in the early 1990s. What differentiated the critical praxis project of EE from other theories and practices of EE of the 1970s/80s can be tracked to the post-Tbilisi inclusion of the pedagogical imperative of EE for the environment (for example, Robottom, 1984, Henry, 1984). And, this historicizing of theory for, including in and about, EE invites the reader to ‘join the dots’ with the earlier mention of the 1978 Deakin piloting of the critical curriculum theory as a *praxis*, or nexus of ‘real’ problems supported by theorization (Payne, 2015).

The knowledge issues critically generated, and shadows depolitically cast by researchers’ conservative theoretical interests are significant in EE and EER but rarely engaged, be it in EE or EER. EE’s genesis in the 1970s was ‘alternative’ to mainstream education theory and practice whose complicity in *reproducing* the ecological crisis cannot be underestimated. The crisis had been clearly articulated in the 1960s, at least, by authors in the USA (prior to the founding of *JEE*) such as Rachel Carson (1962) with her classic material/scientific account of *Silent Spring* and Stewart Udall’s (1963) rarely cited collection of essays in *The Quiet Crisis* was policy background and included works from Thoreau, Marsh, Muir, Olmsted and, of course, Leopold’s *Land Ethic*. Most figure prominently in *Environmental Ethics*, whose discourse remains ignored in ‘new’ EE/EER theory. Udall was President J.F. Kennedy’s Secretary of the Interior. Udall’s crisis was ‘all’ politics. Kennedy wrote the Introduction. Udall’s account of the crisis was a fore-runner to what some now refer to as ‘ecocide,’ and with Carson, and others might, in a sad twist of forty-years of fate, be labeled ‘post’ Anthropocene.

The ‘simultaneous’ emergence of the ‘new’ fields of EE and environmental ethics in the late 1970s has already been mentioned. Generally, in each case, epistemological ‘wars’ were prioritized and preferences suffocated ontological understandings or insights. Arran Gare is one of the very few early environmental/political philosophers to have tackled the ‘postmodernism’ of the ecological crisis, including Lyotard’s contribution. Lyotard’s anthropocentric text and ‘theory’ never explicitly ‘connected’ knowledge to ecological and environmental realities, or cultures (of knowledge) and natures (as represented in texts). In *Nihilism Incorporated*, Gare (1993) argued at that crucial time for EE identified here that Lyotard’s deconstruction failed to understand that Habermas’s critique of knowledge/ideology and Luhman’s on performative criterion were, indeed, critiques of the *systematic* mechanistic materialism and social Darwinism legitimated by the underlying theory of being that then dominated various discursive strategies of those times. Lyotard’s deconstructionism, alleged Gare, “seems blind to these broader intellectual struggles” (p. 159). Gare proffered the view that the postmodernisms of Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan rested upon some “magical assumption” that the deconstructed fragmentation of knowledge would somehow break the grip of an oppressive social order and was, or is unsustainable in the real world of social interaction and relations.

In arguing Education served as a form of “indoctrination in nihilism”, Gare’s ecologically oriented critique of knowledge is quick to focus on how the mechanistic materialism of society was ordered and arranged via a disciplined scheme of what counts as knowledge, and theory, that fits together in biased ways their bits and pieces. And, we cannot forget here, that in the formative stages of EE in the 70s and 80s, the ‘radical’ and ‘alternative’ nature of EE promised ‘multi’, ‘inter’, and ‘cross disciplinary’ experiments in knowledge production that were ‘accessible’, attainable, and ‘performative’ through ‘experiential’ approaches to curriculum and pedagogical studies and their ‘methodological’ enactments, including the ‘bodied’ participatory action research conducted *in situ* in the real/material everyday environments of the lives of learners and teachers. According to Gare, the sciences, whose privileging of physics was well known, but in the postmodernism of knowledge productions and performances began to include economics, business studies, and the further scientism of psychology and related human service efforts. According to Gare, the humanities had become a “rump,” (or elite enclave in Lasch’s observations) and ‘humanist’ intellectuals were displaced, largely by the deconstructionism internal to the linguistic/discursive ‘turn’ embraced in cultural studies and prioritization of literary ‘theory.’ ‘Meanings’ in texts only

were targeted by the new wave of deconstructionists and discourse analysts, as were the easy targets of binary/polar oppositions of dualistic modern thinking that, conveniently essentialized, ‘produced’ them via deconstructive interrogations of the author’s ‘intentions’ so as to reveal a text’s (hidden/inscribed) meaning and assumptions. According to Gare, this deconstructive ‘process’ eventually folds in on itself and melds into the ‘free market of ideas’ while serving to escalate the knowledge conditions of a nihilistic response to the deepening spread of, for example, the widespread nature of increasingly insurmountable environmental (and social) problems. For Gare (1993, p. 5), ecocide was “applied nihilism”.

To help the reader with this ‘otherwise’ critical theorization of (postmodern) theory for EER, Gare’s ecophilosophical critique of Lyotard’s epistemological commitments and other postmodern and post-structural theorists *underpins* (in different ways/foci) the respective critiques by Schwab of curriculum flights, Geertz on big ideas, Lasch on the humanities, Smyth on academic labor, the ‘post’-post-critical engagement in EER, Kitching’s empirical study of the politics of theses and, the more theoretically ‘gathering’ of such trends in theory and knowledge to the constitutively performative abstractionism thesis of the Arena group. New theory, despite the textual gestures to ontology, materialism, things, ‘non’ human, and so on ensures this negative legacy of epistemological/theoretical authority and priority of fast abstractionism will persist.

The fast ‘materialism’ of new digital EER

At the very least, this critical theory of theory for EER calls for a degree of skepticism consistent with, for example, the respective calls from Cooper (2002, 2016) in social theory, and Hart (2005, 2013) in EER to ‘recognize’ our historicity, complicity, positioning, and framing of what we ‘name’ and practice as EER and/or EE. That 50 year-long critique of performative abstractionism I have outlined above, rooted in and against Lyotard’s influential postmodern epistemology, and reiterating the field’s practical foundations in Tbilisi, now demands ‘updating’ in the accelerating ‘knowledge production/condition’ performancing of the increasingly digitalized, abstracted, and platformed hyper/postmodern of ‘knowledge’. This fast ‘new’ materialism and ‘technics’ of the disembodied subject and, indeed, the field of EER (Payne, 2003/2006) is likely to cyberspace the ‘non-placed’ future of EE/EER in most academic settings. If so, we can anticipate a globally universalizing production of knowledge and ‘post-intellectual’ colonizing/imperializing performance of theory, probably, *about* EER and, inevitably, the hyper intensification and individualization of a deepening of a theory-practice schism with/in EE. For example, on-line EE is available at ‘local’ universities with their centralized ‘learning systems’, including versions platformed and ‘delivered’ globally via MOOCs (massive open on-line course) by prestigious (private and public ‘mashed’) ‘partner’ institutions in the USA and UK. Social/new media is already being promoted, uncritically yet again, as yet another pedagogical advancement in EE, in particular.

The starting point of Hall’s (2016) “digital posthumanities” is used here to probe the extent our contemporary sociopolitical situation *also* poses a challenge to be, work and study in a university. Hall begs the question of how the ‘new’ struggle against the neoliberal corporatization of higher education now requires *us* to have the courage to transform radically the material practices and social relations of our academic lives and intellectual labor. Clearly, the Arena thesis of constitutive abstraction is unknown to Hall, and most of the readers of this critique of knowledge productions. Instead, Hall’s text, with a nose to the after burners of the fast flights of theory, engages a range of ‘post’ theorists and philosophers operating in ‘cutting-edge’ areas of the humanities today, such as Braidotti and her version of posthuman/new materialism, and in Harman’s object-oriented ontology. Braidotti is a ‘soft’ booster of technology. Hall does not engage Ihde’s phenomenological ‘instrumental realism’ (1991) or ‘postphenomenology’ (1993) or ‘other’ critical theory of the ontology of technology (Feenberg, 1991), including its major focus in the Frankfurt School of Herbert Marcuse’s (1964) classic *One Dimensional Man*.

Hall acknowledged how various theories like the digital humanities, posthumanisms, new materialisms, and ontologists can ‘produce’ new ways of thinking about the world but extends that call to action for new ways of ‘actually’ *being* theorists (or intellectuals) in the Capitalocene. He argued, not unlike Gare’s critique of Lyotard’s epistemology, that the ‘post-theory’ theories in the humanities now exemplified by Braidotti, Haraway, and Wolfe’s ‘nonhuman’ remain bound up in a contradictory liberal

humanism and the bourgeoisie imperative of the (northern) human in the performance of thinking *beyond* them in response to the difficult question of the politics of copying, distributing, selling, and reusing theory. Hall's hunt for alternatives models, modes, and practices of knowledge production, publication, and circulation provide serious challenges worth consideration in what he refers to as the digital 'post crash' socio-political and ecological contexts of the postmodern/neoliberal. For example, Hall's final chapter wonders about the future of the book. As an editor of various EE/EER 'forums' and 'mediums', I worry more about the future of the journal and the article, as well as environmental education in schools, and in neo-liberalized technocratic user pay pre-service teacher education programs!

While Srnicek (2017) is less focused on knowledge, theory, and the theorist, his 'book' examines the 'platform' and how the business forms of capitalism produced globally by powerful technology companies such as Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft are 'united' in the way their platforms are already 'materially' (commodifying) transforming the global economy. Again, as an editor of various EE/EER 'forums' and 'mediums', I worry about our global publishing 'houses' within the 'new' global economy and its demands on the neoliberal performativities of what it/we publish, represent, legitimize, and circulate in the digital postmodern knowledge production performance of promotion.

In short, the 'place' of EER and EE, founded in the 1970s as a radical alternative to mainstream Education is just as vulnerable to the 'stealth' of the digital means and modes of neo-liberal knowledge performances and academic intellectual exchange as any other field of constructivist human (and other-than-human) endeavor. Our on-line journals, conferences, and now MOOCs are testimony to how theory is increasingly malleable, mobile, and constituted abstractly/digitally as *the* message of (re)search, or even its practice by, for example, both universities and publishers in the corporate audits of impacts, ratings, and rankings.

This acute problem of the escalating performativities of abstractionism I have loosely traced over the past 50 years of the field and presented as a nascent critical theory of theory for EER demands, at least, the outline of a counter or resistance 'politics of inquiry' that 'assembles' a response to what this critical essay and 50 year history has labored over.

Anticipation 2: The politics of a critical ecological ontology for inquiry

Early in this essay, I highlighted the importance of this (negative) critical theorization of theory in EE/EER being interpreted from within my 40 year-long (positive) 'position' to advance - practically, conceptually, and empirically - 'a critical ecological ontology for educational inquiry, or 'education for being for the environment' (for example, Payne, 1999, 2006). That prescient 'ontology ~ epistemology' was simplified in practical curriculum and pedagogical terms to enable *access* to the environmental problematic of education for children, adults, researchers and, even, policy makers. 'Big' theory was avoided, resolutely. Nine only 'stratified' questions for sensitizing 'inquiry' commenced with a focus on, and locus of, the *embodied materialism* of environmentally problematic moving bodies/things, real *in situ* circumstances/environments, and engaging of the material-structural conditions of individual and collective agencies. For illustrative purposes only, the first two questions of that practice theory are - (i) In what ways do environmental concerns exist in a body/bodies? (ii) What pathways into and out of bodies do environmental problems and social issues take? For empirical insights only, 8-9 year-old students in a school setting can ably 'inquire' into these questions (Payne, 2015), as can third year undergraduate students (Payne, 1997). Question (viii) asks - what are the ethical and political consequences for self, others, and the environment, and for the pathways into and out of bodies if the environmentally problematic routines/rules/habits of individuals, the group, and the 'community/commons' are changed knowingly and/or unknowingly? (Payne, 2015).

Most recently, again for illustrative purposes of 'non-theoretically' representing a *practice theory* of a 'less' anthropocentric "ecopedagogy as/in scapes" (Payne, 2018a, 2018b), about 30 conceptual-empirical studies conducted by eight researchers in different 'locations of knowledge' around the world were 'assembled'. The reassembled researchers used different methodological approaches and theoretical explanations to elaborate their research problems. The 'stratified' (vertical and horizontal) assemblage provided an 'evidence-based' understanding of inductively-driven, 'grounded' theory *building*. This theorization

of ecopedagogy as/in scapes is, following Canaparo's locations of knowledge production, a *reversal* of the orthodox deductive logic and conventional 'trickle down' authority/hegemony of totalizing theory in EER and, more generally, conventional 'methodologically individualistic' case research in various educational and pedagogical sub-disciplines. In the same 'intersecting' vein of the horizontal and vertical re-assembling of otherwise (conventional) methodologically individualistic researchers working singularly with 'theory' (for example, posthuman) 'representing' equally selective 'authors' (for example, Braidotti, Barad), the chronic problem in EER of "politics of policy development in ESD" (Payne, 2016) was subjected to the same (re)assemblage of theory-building evidence and critique in terms of legitimizing a different 'voice' about the previously uncritical 'assessments' of the value and utility of the UN's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

One aim, therefore, of these theory-building assemblages of (a) practical ecopedagogical and (b) sustainable development policy actions and empirical research was to 'disrupt' that locally colonial and globally imperial hegemony of Theory by re'turning' research to its everyday embodied and embedded, practical grounds of de and reconstructive praxis.

In Payne (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) lengthy explanations of practice, theory, critique, methodology, and metamethodology of 'pluralistically' ontologically stratified and vertically theorized assemblage are offered (but see also Payne, 1997, 1999, 2006, 2016). Effectively, the practice theory building notion of a *critical* (epistemological and axiological) *ecological* (methodological and metamethodological *access* to the objects of epistemological inquiry) *ontology* (the objects of the beingness, thingness, and their relational becoming of the fields of EE and EER) aims to *rematerialize* the interactivities and relationalities of the (human and other-than-human) *eco/somaesthetics* (intercorporealities)~*environmental ethics* (ontologically deep and epistemologically alert)~*ecopolitical* (axiologically intersubjective and praxical) of EE/EER.

For the purposes here of outlining the framing (only) for critical inquiry into the practices of pedagogy, curriculum, policy, or research (and evaluation studies), and their interactions/relations in EE/EER, [Figure 1](#) captures the quest for a renewed practical politics of inquiry engaged in a critical ecological ontology.

'Politics' figures prominently in each level of the layered, stratified inquiry but in direct relationship with the researchable problem and practical questions! Axiologically, deliberations about each and all of the concepts identified in [Figure 1](#) should, initially and assertively, respond to, 'what is in it *for* Nature (and its derivative environments ranging from human-other than human 'natural/organic/intrinsic' to the historically, culturally, socially constructed artefactual, such as cities, suburban, parks, wildernesses). Second, in so doing, priority is given to the *critical* 'end-in-view' of the inquiry *for* environmental and ecological justices, as afforded and/or negated in the earthed and grounded body/ies ~ timespace contexts of that being inquired into, be it pedagogy, curriculum/program, policy, or research/methodology. Third, although word limits prevent a detailed account of the undertheorized pluralist 'politics of ontology' of [Figure 1](#) in ecological relation to epistemology, nature, materialities, and the *conditions* of an ethics *for* a politics (for example, Debaise, 2017; Grosz, 2004; Harman, 2016; Johnson, 2013; Rekret, 2016, 2018), deliberation about that ontological politics *in* inquiry is prioritized ahead of the already well-established debates about the singular/mono cultural 'politics' of epistemology (for example, 'ways of knowing,' axiology (for example, values hierarchies), and methodology (for example, positivist, post-positivist, interpretivist, critical).

In emphasizing the pluralist politics of ontology(~epistemology), inquiries of the type recommended here will examine the basic question *for* EER and EE about what *is* or *are* the 'best' points of *access* to the historical, material, structural, real, and ecological natures of 'Nature' and their 'correspondence' (or non) and 'co'relationality (or non) with symbolic conceptions, constructions, representations, and legitimations in cultures and their 'natures.' Unavoidably, or inevitably, the (eco) esthetics, ethics, and politics of inquiry are irreducibly grounded (far less abstractly) in 'practical' environmental problems, social issues, and comparative eco-anthropologies of experience. In so doing, we need to do much, much better in specifying the practical research problem and questions upon which pedagogical, curriculum theorizing and research are 'based.' Once that crucial 'reversal' logic task is prioritized, only then might we look into what approaches to methodological selection and theory/ies selection, or

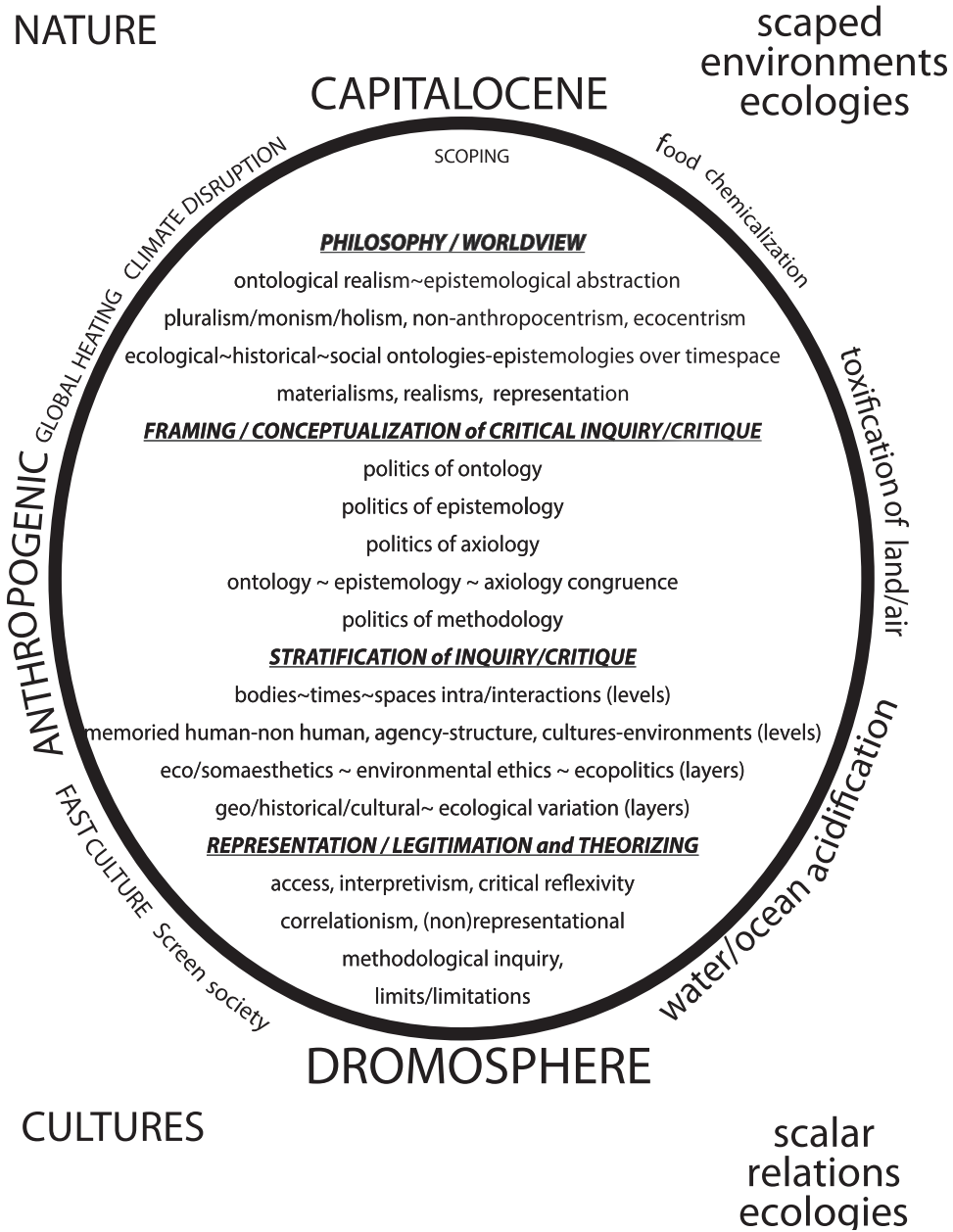


Figure 1. A critical ecological ontology of stratified inquiry/critique for EE and EER.

preferencing’, that elaborate and (textually) articulate or express or represent the research problem/questions under scrutiny.

Engaging a ‘post foundational’ politics of ontology in this reversal/grounded/practical way of framing inquiry/critique and their politics, and being clear about what presuppositions are ‘positioning’ and ‘naming’ such inquiry *in situ* will help reshape currently absent debates about the interrelated politics of epistemology, axiology, and methodology within the historical conditions and structures in which language and texts still reside. Critical praxis and critically reflexive EE and EER might ‘live again’ in an environmentally problematic everyday. A practices-theory ‘nexus’ or pluralist assemblage is enabling.

In addition to the ‘tensional’ ontological~epistemological starting point of embodied~timepace inquiries outlined above, strong ‘theory’ contenders for reanimated, revitalized, and rematerialized

critical EER include ecocophenomenology and ecological anthropology/environmental history, amongst other substantive fields like environmental ethics. As indicated, these ‘grounded’ perspectives have been excluded, or ignored, or obfuscated by the populism of theory in, for example, critical perspectives in educational research (Stanczyk, 2012/2018). For illustrative purposes in cobbling together this critical theory of theory, those framings for EER have been ‘memoried’ and re-presented above, even if only briefly explained or listed. Methodologically, co/sensuous/moving ethnographies, participatory action research, econarrative histories/critique are prominent starting points, as means, of *accessing* and eventually (non)representing the eco/somaesthetics ~ environmental ethics ~ ecopolitics of phenomena under study – practically, historically, conceptually, and methodologically. Empirical case studies are available (for example, Payne, 1999, 2014) as are assemblages of practice theory (for example, Payne, 2018a, 2018b).

Aspects of ‘new’ and ‘old’ *Theory* (and associated ideas) might then selectively be used to help interpret/describe and explain, and critique the object/subject of inquiry. Its abstractionism should be minimized, not be popularly and instrumentally pursued, and ‘universally’ imposed or imperially performed at the more immediate and grounded levels of stratified inquiry, pedagogical practices, research conduct and practices theorizing.

Closings; pessimism

This critical theorization of theory reveals a hegemony of abstractionism in educational research and, through repeat performances since the early 1990s, its mono-cultural and populist trickle downs to EER and EE in both the North and South in which the widening schisms of modern practices and postmodern theories are, as anticipated (Payne, 1999, 2003/2006), undergoing accelerated, intensive and individualized reconstitutions. Interpreted within and against the early ‘roots’ and *raison d’être* of EE, this is bleak news. In particular and, to an unquantifiable extent and unclear environmental purpose, ‘postmodern theory’ contributed to an academic and intellectual ‘turn’ away from the ‘modern’ critical materialist-realist, historicist, progressive, and praxis interests of the socially-critical theory and critical pedagogies of EE practices borne of the 1980s and 1990s. Other factors like the global rise of ‘sustainability’ policies, concepts, and languages contributed.

The critical theory of theory formulated above is offered as a reminder and counter critique of the often uncritical and ahistorical epistemological uses, interpretations, and privileging of abstract theory and its closely associated performances in poststructural deconstructionism and its textualism. Reconceptualized and, ironically, deconstructed in this critical way, theory of that type can *also* be characterized ‘negatively’ as;

- fast flights from slow practices,
- seductive big ideas,
- invoking pseudo-radicalism,
- lacking social and structural criticism,
- operationalizing nihilistic ecocide,
- disembodiment, decontextualizing and devaluing of academic Labor,
- intensifying of individualized intellectual technique,
- instrumentalizing academic exchange,
- troubling when empirically qualified and critiqued,
- performing universities,
- populist depoliticizing of critical scholarship and its praxis,
- marketing neoliberalism,
- digitalizing platforms,
- abstracting materiality,
- totalizing, bourgeoisie colonizing, and universalizing/imperializing,
- misrecognizing selves,
- auto-mediating socio—ecological relations.

The prospects for EER are bleaker. Allegedly ‘new’ theory now abounds in general educational theory and philosophy as, perhaps a belated acknowledgement of the anthro/andropocentric complicity of Education in the devastating local and planetary consequences of the Capitalocene. Fertile ‘grounds’ exist for even more populist ‘flights’ in and of theory, as new ‘big ideas’ like ‘posthuman’ and ‘new materialism,’ circulate wilyly in education discourses. Mainstream education discourses have always refused EE and, in research, EER, and remain anthropocentrically complicit in the environmental and socio-ecological problematic. The current bunch of acolytes of the fast/new, it seems, remain unaware of, or ignore the fifty-year history of EE, and before it, other sourcings of the ‘conservation education’ and ‘nature studies.’ ‘Post’nature is loudly Trumpeted.

Notwithstanding the 1980s discourse of the then ‘new’ field of environmental ethics, as outlined above, the ‘new’ of theory proposes, or promises, to ‘explore’ ideas like ‘non’ anthropocentrism and ‘anti’humanism, and go ‘beyond’ and ‘imagine,’ or have ‘conversations,’ about these allegedly ‘disruptive’ big ideas in new knowledge productions and their performances. Indeed, in failing to engage with the historical, embodied, and critical materialisms or realisms in EE/EER of the 1980s and 1990s, ‘new’ materialisms in EE and/or EER might ‘turn’ out to be new in name only and persist in name-changing of abstracting practices of everyday critical pedagogies in EE and empirical research and critique efforts in EER.

The new risks associated with the selective, uncritical uptake/download, and mediated intellectual exchange of abstractly privileged ‘new’ theory is already in evidence when any or all of the characteristics of the above critical theorization of theory are used to examine their penetrations into EER. Witness the sudden, populist interest in ‘material-discursive’ approaches to EE/EER. For example, Karen Barad’s (2007) post Einstein and Bohrs quantum physics “entanglement of matter and meaning” is now a ‘must’ include in reference lists, while Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze & Guattari fade into the recent past/passed of theory. It is not clear to a number of interpreters of Barad in education discourses whether her (and Braidotti, another popular theoretical icon) is a posthuman, or new materialist, or both, noting she/they is not an environmental education researcher or practitioner. (Con)text and history are missing from our new ‘field.’ Nor, indeed, is Barad an ecologist given her exclusion in important notions like ‘agential realism’ and ‘intra-action’ of ‘otherwise’ already well established basic ecological concepts (human and non-human) in EE theory and pedagogical practices. These (material-conceptual) ‘agencies’ include energy flow, cycles, diversity, community, interrelationships, change and adaptation. These flows and movements of matter are already well known to ‘old’ environmental educators (for example, van Matre’s Sunship Earth, and ‘new’ environmental educators (Earthworks, Forest/Bush schools).

Not acknowledged, sadly or strangely, in the trickle down of the performative abstractionism of new theory to the practices of EER, is Barad’s (2007) assertive dismissal of the excess and hubris of poststructural/posthuman versions of the linguistic turn,

“...it seems that at every turn lately every”thing” - even materiality - is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation...matters of “fact” (so to speak) have been replaced with matters of signification (no scare quotes here). Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters.”

Barad concluded,

“There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter” (p. 132).

Barad is what has now been ‘humanly’ reconceived, or reconstructed, as a material-discursive ‘practitioner’ theorist, but so too, amongst many dissatisfied with the politics (or lack) of the mono culturalism/imperialism of the linguistic turn, is the rarely cited in education theory and EER of, for example, Elizabeth Grosz’s (2017) “ontoethics’ as ‘politics’. Why, in theory only, is Barad so popular? Grosz is a rare example of a ‘human’ grappling with the implications of the ontological turn, ‘explored’ in posthuman/new materialism texts, for an ethics and politics beyond the narrowness of conceptions of the human. Her “post post” *extramaterialism* entwinements of materiality and ideality is sourced in the critical theorization of the incorporeal conditions of corporeality, and not in Barad’s matter-of-fact quantum physics that, for many of her acolytes, homogenizes and simplifies complex human and social (ecological) relations, with each other and other than natures, to mimicking the preexisting stasis of the discourse of matter, or what matters to humans. We await the next ‘new’ of quantum biology and ecological theory and theorists in (environmental) education theory, as we witness in the *Journal of Ethnobiology* with a Special Issue

dedicated to examining the relationship of that interdisciplinary field and the new theories of the Humanities and Social Sciences via the notion of a ‘botanical ontology’ (Daly, French, Miller, & Eoin, 2016).

Furthermore, the internal variations, confusions, and contradictions of each ‘new’ theory are well and truly masked by the abstracted treatment of the allegedly new in texts that uncritically rehearse *the* singularized theory/independent author, as well as in the assumptions made, ironically, those thoroughly human authors about, for example, humanism(s), reiterating the many forms of the latter, including the ‘ecological humanism’ variants deliberately sprinkled and gestured to in the ‘digressions’ and ‘anticipations’ re-informing’ and ‘memoried’ in this critical theory of theory. They are rarely examined and await, yet again, more ‘new conversations’ about conversations, following Schwab’s warnings. Conceptual inconsistencies and ethico-political contradictions are not exposed by the acolytes of new theory in education. Nor is the simplistic conflation, or ‘non dualistic’ mashing of, in particular, posthumanism and new materialism theory. Methodological implications of the new and their development for empirical research, study, and critique are lacking ‘beyond’ mere rhetoric, an absence that unfortunately cannot be presented in this essay.

‘Other’ new theories and big ideas equally concerned about the underlying epistemologies (and their methods) of the Capitalocene-Dromosphere are ignored, such as speculative realism and its empiricisms, critical/embodyed materialisms, ecophenomenologies, environmental justices, southern theory including its magical realisms, ecological anthropologies, ecohumanisms and eco/environmental criticisms, environmental histories, geo-philosophies, social ecologies, experiential learning, and so on. Even philosophically well established and justified theories like critical realism are evaded in the rush to ‘post’ rematerialize the new abstractionism of poststructural deconstructionism. Serious work needs to be undertaken among the tsunami of theory, mindful of Geertz’s observation, by those ‘less driven thinkers’ who need to ‘settle down’ the problems the *grand idee* has “...really generated.”

The future of ahistorical, theoretically ‘new’ academic EER/EE, mediated locally and globally through the intensification and intellectual exchange of its performative abstractionism fused by digital stealth within the neoliberal market of the corporate/platformed postmodern university can, unfortunately, anticipate many things. These include the simultaneous acceleration and obfuscation of the chronic mind-body, epistemology-ontology, subject-object, theory-practice, rhetoric-reality, disciplinary-interdisciplinary, discourse-material, digital-experiential, indoor-outdoor, culture-nature gaps/divides and binary opposites, values hierarchical thinking/doing in each and all of the ecological practices of pedagogy, curriculum, policy, and research.

The *IFP* for this Special Issue asked us to identify *what* is going wrong and what can be anticipated. Thirty years of performative abstractionism in EE/EER suggests, strongly, the prospects are depressing. EE has conservatively and popularistically become well and truly ‘mainstreamed’ and EER is abstractly performed in the neo-liberal, digitalized corporate/audit entrepreneurial university. On the alternative/radical ‘other’ and critical ‘old’ embodyed materialism and associated realism of EE/EER, [Figure 1](#) asks new (and old) theoreticians (and practitioners) to reflexively examine a number of entwined ontological-epistemological concerns, or entangled matters, listed into and layered into that re/newed starting point.

In the meantime, perhaps we should just leave it to the #climatestrike kids around the world, like the 8-9 year olds 40 years ago in the 1978 Deakin pilot study, to demonstrate how to *be* EE praxical and *do* EER research in the agentially real/material of the relational everyday *in*, *about* and *for* what really ‘matters’ to them, individually and collectively, in their not-yet-fully abstracted lived/embodyed, human, social, political, cultural, and ‘ecological’ experiences of the ‘planet’.

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