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Embodying our future through collaboration: The change is in the doing

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Academic activism, poststructural ecofeminist epistemology, ecojustice, collaborative autoethnography

Abstract

Contributors to this special edition have agreed that we want a future of ecojustice and ecological sustainability. Our paper unpacks experiences of oppression within the context of middle class academic privilege, undertaking resistances and working, in relationship, learning to live more sustainably in the Year of Living Sustainably. In this writing we argue the case for activism in the academy and collaboratively build resilience towards more sustainable ways of being. By co-writing and analysing fictionalised stories we demonstrate how contemporary universities contribute to the unsustainability of social and ecological systems. This paper presents a love story grounded in poststructural ecofeminist epistemology using collaborative autoethnography. Rather than re-presenting a heroic masculinist narrative of transcendence and success, we describe how our loving relationships support our activism.

Introduction

We all grew up in *Noongar boodjar* (Southwest Australia) where we met and recognised shared commitments to environmental activism, environmental education, and social transformation. We now work across Australia in a broad triangle with our workplaces in *Yawuru buru* (Broome), *Wardandi boodjar* (Bunbury) and *Wurundjeri land* (Burwood). One of us is immersed in Aboriginal contexts with a focus on research to facilitate caring for country, wellbeing and education. Another practises by bringing voice against oppressive social and economic forces, using community gardens as real and metaphorical spaces from which to teach eco-social work theory and practice. The third is newly located in a large city and attempting to find spaces for living her environmental passion in academic and highly urban settings. Our collaborations began as friendly and supportive collegiality yet quickly required transformation into something more formal; something that could generate metrics. We used each other as 'sites of resistance'. We supported each other to resist highly disciplining academic environments (Agger, 1990) and then felt pressured to produce outputs that demonstrated the worth and value of our time commitment. The irony of this was not lost as we capitulated to the neoliberal agenda while positioning gender as an issue. This is our first joint writing project and will not be our last as there is much to resist and transform, in collaboration.

In this paper we consider theoretical perspectives and establish research approaches related to gender that remain under-addressed in environmental education research. Gough (1999; 2013) speaks to the 'othering' of non-masculine agendas in environmental education. The existence of a special edition on "Gender and Environmental Education" reifies and proliferates the positioning of gender inequality and the continued lack of women's empowerment. Hence our desire to research and write in this space: because it is a matter of survival. As female academics, we choose to carve a space and practise in ways that honour our colleagues and ourselves. We need to work in support, not competition. We hope to provide a model for how three women can take up resistance work and call it good research while critiquing the neoliberal academies, inspired by the work of Davies (2013) and others. Our collaborative work is driven by the question: How can we work as transformative, activist, environmental educators in academic institutions? We take up the position of poststructural ecofeminists, practise collaborative

autoethnography and fictionalise our writing for safety. There is much still to be done to bring equality and sustainability to the academy.

In this Year of Living Sustainably (UNESCO, 2016), we foreground the notion that universities provide an ideal site for practising ecojustice, a term which “holds together concerns for the natural world and for human life, that recognizes that devastation of the environment and economic injustice go hand in hand, and that affirms that environmental and human rights are indivisible” (Pedersen, 1998, p. 254). In this paper we demonstrate that the ab/use of oppressive power in academic workplaces is an ecojustice issue, which, in the context of environmental education, benefits from a gendered (poststructural ecofeminist) critique. We then show how, through our method of *nurturing conversations*, we have arrived at key findings: 1: that love and other emotions are necessary in workplaces which commit to ecojustice values; and 2: that the application of critical thought without activism or action is not enough for progressing an ecojustice agenda.

Theoretical perspectives

In this section, we spare the reader a detailed description of poststructuralism and ecofeminism. Rather, we describe how these intersecting theoretical perspectives implicitly inform our projects, ideas, and understandings. Our work is framed theoretically through ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Warren, 2000) and poststructuralism (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Hopkins, McCann, & Wihlborg, 2006). The relativist ontology of poststructuralism unsettles the lure of certainty, troubling the grand narratives of social science, including those of the feminisms (Weedon, 1992; Lather, 1991). We share an understanding of the obdurate nature of patriarchy and the structural basis of power, which coalesces across various forms and dimensions of oppression, most notably gender, ethnicity, class, and species (hooks, 2000a; Gaard, 2011). We apply poststructural ecofeminism to the field of environmental education taking up a position of resistance to the ‘gendering’ of academic activist practice naming ecojustice practice as transformative through our collaborative autoethnographic research.

For us, poststructural ecofeminism aligns with an affirmative postmodernism (Roseneau, 1992), resisting binaries, and embracing the idea of fluid subjectivities and the significance of a power analysis as part of understanding human interaction with other humans, non-human species and our shared biosphere (Barrett, 2005; Bell & Russell, 2000; Davies, 2013). The value of poststructuralist analysis, as Gough and Whitehouse (2003) note, is that it “presents an opportunity to challenge the privileged certainties of meta-narratives and the configurations of power carried within them. It also provides opportunity for exploration, deconstruction, and re-invention” (p. 40). And therein lies its value, because as they further note, “[T]he outcomes of deconstruction are not nihilism as many have argued, but the reconstruction of acute understandings” (p. 40). In writing collaborative autoethnographies we take painful, hurtful, and denigrating experiences and fictionalise these. The practice provides some humour and relief, but also ways of unpacking and sharing understandings that enable transformation towards developing non-combative, non-competitive ways that reaffirm and support. The question addressed in this paper, of how to work as transformative, activist environmental educators, is located within a critique of what is referred to now as the neoliberal or corporatizing university (Hil, 2014; Thornton, 2014; Westheimer, 2010). The corporatizing university models itself after corporations and as such:

seeks to maximize profit, growth, and marketability. As a result, the democratic mission of the university as a public good has all but vanished. And many of the (never fully realized) ideals of academic life – academic freedom ... intellectual independence, collective projects, and pursuit of the common good – have been circumscribed or taken off the table. (Westheimer, 2010, para 2)

In critiquing the neoliberal university, we draw on ecofeminism to assert that the neoliberal paradigm fosters a rationality of oppressive power (as it must) in order to continue to support, and be supported by, the hegemony of an industrialised, militarised, and corporatized hyper-capitalist economic system (hooks, 2010; Mallory, 2009; Shiva, 2005). Neoliberalism demands and provides, sophisticated mechanisms for denial of the current global situation (Klein, 2014), one where human beings are now confronted with the probability of ecological overshoot and collapse (Atkisson, 2011). Springer (2016), after having theorised neoliberalism for many years, recently presented a call to “Fuck Neoliberalism” suggesting that we “actively work against it in ways that extend beyond the performance of rhetoric and the rhetoric of performance” (p. 289). This is our intent. To enact resistance through transforming our personal/political practices. Researching with/through poststructural ecofeminism informed collaborative autoethnographies enables us to practise ecojustice and enact anti-neoliberalist values. With attention to our sustainable living choices and work ethics (but mindful of the inevitable contradictions and hypocrisies involved in

these practices), we attempt to bring resistance to the neoliberal academy. We write about it and use the neoliberal metrics to share our love and ensure our career trajectory, aware (as no doubt Springer is) of the inherent irony.

To answer our research question, we respond to the challenge posed by Giroux over a decade ago, that “in the face of a virulent liberalism that spawns a vast educational propaganda machine, educators, cultural workers, and others need to rethink the entire project of politics within the changed conditions of a global political/pedagogical sphere” (2005, p. 1). We address Giroux’s ‘rethinking’ of the political project through collaborative autoethnography: reflecting and writing on the doing of our everyday practices. We fictionalise our narratives, mindful that the political is personal as much as the personal is political.

We do this work with a view to acting for a sustainable future, acutely aware of the privileged position we hold as academics. We understand this as contradictory within the context of the neoliberal hegemony (Carroll & Greeno, 2013). We witness and theorise the ways in which neoliberalism acts against principles of ecojustice. In resisting the dominant ideology of our institutions, we risk undermining our status and access to the resources (time, libraries, stimulating relationships with students and colleagues), much of which made it possible to develop the critique in the first place. We need to act in ways that simultaneously acknowledge our privilege to critique, while being reflexive, humble, taking risks and developing transformed ways of acting. This is the personal and political context of our practice.

We seek a more critically reflexive capacity to understand and act for ecojustice; the inextricable binding of human rights to environmental sustainability (Hawkins, 2010; Ife, 2013). Our activism is informed by an ecological ethic, recognising a deep, spiritual, interconnected view of land (for example Poelina, Perdrisat, & McDuff, 2012; Woollorton, Collard, & Horwitz, 2015). We plan for our practices to resist the assumed positional superiority of western knowledges (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012); are wary of hierarchical structures; and seek to *build community* (Ife, 2013; Muirhead, 2002; Hopkins, 2008). As Pope Francis reminds, “an ecological conversion is also a community conversion” (2015, p. 160). Working towards more sustainable living practices in our academic lives, while genuinely attempting to practice ecojustice *is our resistance*.

Methodologies and methods

Our methodology is collaborative autoethnography which Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez (2012) describe this way:

Similar to other group research, collaborative autoethnographers adopt a team research model in which a group of researchers conduct research and produce reports together. However, this collaboration model is unique. Instead of studying others outside their research team, collaborative autoethnographers turn their interrogative tools on themselves, generating and utilizing their autobiographical data to understand social phenomena. (p. 37)

We name our practice “Nurturing Conversations” as this reflects the purpose of our conversations: to nurture. Over the past two years, our collaborative autoethnographic work has developed into a regular practice: one that is valued by each. We meet online using Zoom Conferencing every two to three weeks. Having secured ethics approval to publish this work, we write notes and/or record our sessions where we talk about our personal and professional challenges, successes, thoughts, and plans. Occasionally we physically meet up to co-teach, enjoy face-to-face conversations, and/or collaboratively write our experiences in academia as activists and sustainability practitioners working towards ecojustice and against the neoliberal, gendered agendas of our respective institutions. Initially, we told our stories to debrief, but then recognised these stories as data. As a collective we attempt to explore the nuances and complexity of these stories through embodied practices of individual and shared reflections, mutuality, caring, writing, and conflict resolution.

We draw on elements of what Tillmann-Healy (2003) refers to as ‘friendship as method’, a qualitative research approach, which “involves researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship” (p. 730). We share stories and fictionalise them as protection, which brings humour and relief to complex, real situations. Fictionalising enables us to search for spaces of resistance and enactments of academic activism: to see beyond our pain and personal investment. We write one another’s stories to bring ourselves closer to each other’s experiences. This facilitates a genuine co/de/construction and analysis of what the stories represent to us individually and collectively as women, activists, scholars, and environmental educators.

What we have seen: rationalities of oppressive power

Two of our stories of lived experiences brought to life through our nurturing conversations and fictionalised in the writing process, are presented below. The complexity of each story is simplified so that the instances of ecojustice and inequity are foregrounded. Stripping the detail allows bald-faced gendered injustice to reveal its power.

Joanna, the Superintendent, and the Shire President

Joanna, an educator and social researcher at her local university, has a depth of knowledge and experience in southern Italian ways, having inherited culture and language from her Italian-born parents. As well, one branch of her family has married into a local Aboriginal community so she is widely culturally connected. Through local environmental education groups, she expresses her passion for her environment and all beings.

Joanna is asked to lead a well-funded study into the impacts of an operating mine on the local community. Initially nervous about taking on the project, she worries that the company only wants positive outcomes to obtain a social license and eventually government approval to expand the mine. In her ethics application, Joanna attends to issues of cultural sensitivity and protocols.

The project initially proceeds well as she gathers quantitative data on economic advantages in terms of employment and local business opportunities. To collect qualitative data, Joanna spends time with visitors, as well as recent and long-term locals; this stage of the research brings the community together at formal and informal gatherings. When she visits Aboriginal meeting places, she yarns, waits, and considers, then yarns again.

Joanna finds that, there can be little doubt about the economic advantages of the mine to the town. However, she becomes aware of a division of opinion within the community and families about whether the mining operation should continue into the future. Some small businesses have been negatively impacted and there are pollution concerns. She reasons that through careful liaison and negotiation with the company, there are possibilities for renewal, community gain, and optimism.

At a local football match Joanna is introduced to the Community Relations Superintendent from the mining company. He asks her about her previous experiences and connections to the area through her extended Italian family. His specific questions lead to conversations about activists who have campaigned against the mine's contamination of local rivers and air pollution. Some of them are Joanna's friends and relatives, information she carefully, but appropriately, shares with the Superintendent.

The next day, Joanna has an arrangement to meet the publican who is also the shire president. When he arrives he is furious, has worked himself into a state and yells at Joanna, accusing her of not gaining the correct permissions to be researching in the town, alleging that the locals think she is snooping and don't trust this 'ethics' business. He advises her to leave immediately; she is no longer welcome in the town.

Joanna is affronted, disappointed, and embarrassed. She has correct ethics approval and has rigorously followed the pre-determined processes, adhering to all protocols. However, this is not a fight she can win on this day in this space. She retreats. The company conveys to the university that they would like another researcher appointed to the project.

Audrey wants to work with Bob

Audrey is an engineer with a strong career, recently broadening into academia. Her large-scale inner city construction experience is extensive yet she is new to academia. She is self-conscious about her recent change of career.

Audrey has an opportunity to work with Bob, senior to her and a well-published academic. Bob presents with an air of superiority and aloofness towards students and more junior academics. Audrey becomes aware that Bob has bullying tendencies, beginning with being disrespectful. For example, he seems to want her expertise on a small project that could lead into a Category 1 funding proposal but negotiates with the industry partner and then tells Audrey when the meeting will be, indifferent to her schedule. One day, Bob tells Audrey, apropos of nothing, that his daughter (whom Audrey has met once) doesn't like her.

Audrey wants to make sense of this inappropriate statement. What power and discipline was being enacted? Why did Bob need to declare Audrey as unlikeable? What did this afford him in their beginning relationship? Was he threatened by her, testing her, or being intentionally hurtful? Audrey seeks support from her collaborators and they urge her to take action. She's encouraged to see how Bob's comment crossed a line; to practice some assertive

messaging in response; to hold Bob to account and explain his intention. Yet, Audrey has to work this out for herself. She still feels stuck; maybe she is letting silly personal politics get in the way of her professional practice.

In the end Audrey has the tough conversation with Bob. She explains why she finds his behaviour difficult and at times inappropriate. She states that she would like to continue working with him but his behaviour needs to change. Fortunately Bob is somewhat contrite. He says he is sorry and they find a way to move forward.

Using practice to signpost disruptions

In the stories of Joanna and Audrey we see how the nurturing conversations have operated. Our nurturing conversations and writing collaborations have helped us to analyse the situations in order to craft the stories of Joanna and Audrey and develop theoretical understandings and enactments of resistance. In this way, the political does not simply remain as the personal.

In Joanna's story, the company exploits its substantial economic power over the townspeople, the researcher, and the university itself. Manipulating the research project to avoid hearing and responding to any critique of the mine, the company fails to exercise social responsibility, demonstrates a lack of respect for participation in democracy, and marginalises efforts by community members to determine what would be best for their community in the long term. Using its economic power, the company undermines the community's collective power; justice is not the way of the mining company in Joanna's story. We would have liked Joanna's story to have a happier ending. Perhaps Joanna and the Superintendent could have established a dialogue to find a way forward. Perhaps a productive outcome for both parties would have been for Joanna to publish the views and experiences of the people in the town who want the mine to stay but would like the company to take more care of the people and the environment.

Audrey's story illuminates some of the implicit and explicit hierarchies in academic workplaces and the exploitation of young academics establishing their careers. Some senior academics exercise their own form of positional power to marginalise those who threaten the status quo of established power/knowledge. Audrey's story ends on a happier note. Bob is contrite and so, at least for the time being, she is hopeful that her respectful challenging of Bob's use of power and privilege may have effected a truce and the door stays open for future negotiations.

In these stories are stereotype of gendered behaviours with women being oppressed by men. However, the stories would be equally plausible if the genders were reversed; for hooks (2010) patriarchy "has no gender" (p. 170). The exploitation of power and privilege in both stories illustrates how patriarchal values, hierarchical status, and economic power become mutually reinforcing, undermining, and challenge attempts to develop post-patriarchal values in our communities and workplaces.

Using disruptions to signpost theory

According to Pelling (2011), the stages for transformative change are: building resilience; transitioning from usual practices; and becoming the transformation we want to see "where social contracts are renegotiated, the causes as well as the symptoms of *vulnerability* are addressed and actions taken" (p. 11, emphasis added). In working together, we realised that *our* vulnerability was our dismay and sense of impotence at the ways in which many in the academy (ourselves included) struggled to respond. Academics can be overwhelmed by the demands and dominance of the neoliberal governance (and governmentality) of universities: an inevitable outcome of what Ryan (2012) refers to as the zombification of universities, where academics retreat into passive resistance to survive the consequences of regressive organisational change instigated by neoliberal hegemony.

Our feelings of frustration and dismay were instrumental to our developing a collaborative research methodology to generate and embody ideas we could theorise and act through as sites of resistance. Our fictionalised co/de/constructed stories help us to ground our understanding of oppression within the context of the 'neoliberal plague', which has now established itself firmly within Australian universities (Davies & Petersen, 2005). We witness and experience the consequences of our workplaces embracing neoliberal ideology and the concomitant practices of corporatisation, managerialism, cost-cutting, cost-shifting, and the imposition of rigid metrics for funding, teaching and research, devoid of any concern for the well-being of employees, much less the biosphere. The key findings from our small-scale study have demonstrated the value of the advice of Pulido (2008) and others (such as Flood, Martin & Dreher, 2013) that a strong sense of self and nurturing relationships with colleagues are requisite to successfully combine activism and academic work, allowing us to generate resistance to eco-injustice in our individual workplaces.

'Love' as key to theorising activist practice and ecojustice in the academy

In our early nurturing conversations we discussed 'love'. How did we understand this word in academic settings? Should we use it in academic writing and theorising? Initially, we were not all comfortable with the academic application however, we who were doubtful found resolution through our nurturing conversations. The application of 'love' is useful in reflecting on our stories and in our deepening relationships (which feel loving) and through reading the works of hooks (2000b), West (1993), and Pope Francis (2015). We now theorise confidently about the application of 'love' in our research and towards enacting sites of resistance and ecojustice.

Defining what it means to be working well as transformative, activist environmental educators has taken long discussion and embodied action, which we present here through our collaborative autoethnography. We took time to develop trusting relationships we now describe as being grounded in 'love', going beyond respect and friendship. To ground our work we turn to Pope Francis, who, in his encyclical letter *On care for our common home*, envisions development towards a "civilization of love". He says:

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity, which affects not only relationships between individuals but also "macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones"¹. Social love is the key to authentic development: "In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity"². In this framework, along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a "culture of care"³ which permeates all of society. (2015, para 231)

Like West (2011), we must "[N]ever forget that justice is what love looks like in public". Love is a central element in ecojustice work, activism, and environmental education. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to inspire a love of nature in their students in the belief that people will fight to save what they love whether it is remnant bushland, beach, forest, or wetland (Payne, 2002). Social workers are taught the value of unconditional positive regard towards others, initially as a demonstration of the Christian ethic of 'love thy neighbour' which underpins traditional social work practice but now, in modern times, this acts as the foundation of social justice, a core principle of social work (AASW, Code of Ethics).

Critique without action is not enough

Our meeting space is carefully constructed as an online, safe place. Through our nurturing conversations we realise how we have been positioned and how we respond, requires considered action. We bring together a nexus of personal, professional, and political understandings to generatively co/construct a consciousness around our desire to practise sustainable living and ecojustice. This means that over our personal and professional lives we (re)learn how to live in ways that reduce our ecological footprint, we consider the implications of our actions, and we each practice living the resistances. We feel the responsibility of these choices. We read, discuss, wonder, and mull over how to perform ecojustice. Nurturing, in our context, means deep listening, providing advice, being authentic, giving time, and behaving as if each person matters. Being nurtured by one another allows us to act as sites of resistance, destabilising the efforts of the neoliberal university machine through our teaching, research, and university service; we consciously enact, where possible, consideration for others, self-value, generous attitudes and gratitude. These gestures are central to our focus on practising collaborative autoethnography from a poststructural ecofeminist position.

Conclusion

Through our research method of 'friendship as method' we developed a practice of nurturing conversations using a collaborative autoethnographic methodology. We sought to implement our idea of activism in the academy by

¹ Pope Francis cites BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009) 2: AAS 101 (2009), 642.

² Pope Francis cites PAUL VI, *Message for the 1977 World Day of Peace*: AAS 68 (1976), 709.

³ Pope Francis cites PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 582.

nurturing each other and (where possible) our colleagues, while in our daily lives acting in ways that facilitate social and environmental sustainability. We attempted to establish sites of resistance with ecojustice ontologies rooted in an ethic of care and compassion for others and ourselves. Our research process affirmed that, for us, we can find the 'voice' which Ryan (2012) found was missing for many academics, in seeing ourselves as part of the emerging cultures that will replace neoliberalism as it continues to flounder, and eventually fails (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010).

Our research question was: how can we work as transformative, activist environmental educators in higher education? We found we needed to begin with a critique of our everyday workplace experiences as the foundation for transformative action. Recognising critical reflection on our experiences and collaborative, thoughtful analysis leads to a deeper, empowered understanding of academic work and can lead to radically different practice (hooks, 2010). However, critique is pointless without action in the form of changed policies and practices.

Emotions are highly significant in this venture where 'love' and the knowledge of being supported and cared-for enables the resistance of oppression through collaborative action. Thus, we have found that a socio-environmental activism is possible through active rather than passive resistance comprising practices based upon a rationality of love as justice. However, love and an understanding of justice are not enough by themselves; we also need to be optimistic and determined to make a difference, or as Hopkins (2013) notes, just get on and do it.

At the end of this paper we are still at the beginning of our project. As a research group of three, we have developed a shared language and series of experiences that reward and motivate us to continue our nurturing conversations. We are coming to understand neoliberal, patriarchal workplaces in ways that shift our established patterns towards poststructural ecofeminist awareness through actions. Our practice is making a meaningful difference, even if that difference is only to us at this early stage.

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