Allowing Ecopedagogy to Take Root in Our Classrooms, Imaginations, and Beyond: Some Initial Notes

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The world is burning, both literally and metaphorically. Discussions of the multiple, complex, and interrelated issues confronting life on Earth in the Anthropocene usually begin with facts about the perilous state of the world. We are told about devastating effects of global warming and mass pollution, dwindling water supplies, mass species extinction, the swelling numbers of global environmental migrants, and the overlap between environmental degradation on human health. The time is ripe to address these and related concerns in college classrooms. What follows is a reflective conversation from the perspectives of a professor (Baldelomar) and student (Dickinson) in a course that attempted to explore some pressing eco-social issues. As a class, we found ourselves collectively exploring topics much deeper than the manifest symptoms of climate change and overall ecological degradation. The following traces our dialogue concerning the value of ecopedagogy in the classroom and beyond, and tentatively concludes with some notes on imagination in order to grow out in unforeseen ways.

Ecopedagogy Amid Dread, Despair, and Skepticism

In the summer of 2023, I (Baldelomar) was asked by my department chair at Mount Holyoke College to plan two courses on religion and the environment for the fall semester. At first, I was elated at the challenge, looking forward to the thoughtful discussions that are a hallmark of Mount Holyoke College. But as I began planning the course and selecting the readings, I was suddenly overcome with dread, despair, and skepticism. My dread stemmed from humanity's seemingly bleak prospects for enacting any change that might ensure a sustainable future. The readings cohered around the theme of our barreling toward mass catastrophe(s) and the only viable solution, it seemed, was to prepare for the collapse as best we can. Dying societies, of course, do not typically entertain their own demise, much less

encourage teaching about it in classrooms that are meant to empower students to enter the workforce and contribute to the economy.

Despair has always been a companion throughout my research, not least because I explore atmospheres of violence and precarity, following Michel Foucault's assessment that domination upon domination has been and will continue to be foundational to societies.[1] Could Augustine have been right: Is our human nature so tainted and wholly/utterly depraved? Likewise, how do we cope with the reality that life preys upon life for its survival? Such precariousness foments a search for existential and physical security at any and all costs, often resulting in domination or subjugation of those considered weak and of little value. From this emerges precarity "as the hierarchized difference in insecurity [that] arises from the segmentation, the categorization, of shared precariousness."[2] Instead of acknowledging our interdependence and entanglements with other lifeforms, precariousness and precarity prod "rational life" to manage life as much as possible to secure–through degrees of separation–one's existence for as long as possible.

This question of how to live amid such violence and indeterminacy guided my planning of the courses. It was only natural for skepticism to also creep in. My skepticism centered around the value of approaching such problems within a privileged liberal arts college–problems that our ecologically anxious students understand all too well.[3] "What's the point of only adding to that?" I wondered. With uncertain, unstable futures the norm on a nebulous horizon, what good is it to just study the issues through the discipline of religious studies? Halfway through the course, I began to introduce notions of paradigms, cosmologies, and worldviews. Our conversations accordingly took a deeply philosophical and theological turn. We went from simply talking about religious movements that focused on ecology to the very ideas and patterns that have shaped collective thoughts on our relations to the cosmos, the natural world, and to all lifeforms.

These conversations coincided with the release of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis, *Laudato Deum*.[4] Francis notes that though eight years has passed since *Laudato Si'*s publication, "our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing a breaking point." In *Laudato Si'*, Francis blames environmental degradation partly on a "technocratic paradigm," by which "humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object."[5] The consequences of this paradigm are nefarious. The rational subject, using the latest

techniques, can dominate the deep processes of the natural world, reducing life to an extractable resource for the sake of profit and progress, "as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such."[6] The paradigm teaches that unbridled production is crucial to human progress (defined narrowly as economic or technological advancements). Unlimited confidence in the power of humans to control all destiny is a byproduct of the paradigm–a paradigm that is very much guiding the technocratic purposes of education today.

After reading these documents with mostly non-Catholic students, we concluded that talk of paradigms and cosmologies was crucial to imagining other possible ways of being. Ecopedagogies were a necessary partner in the collective task to dig deeper. Emerging in the wake of the 1992 Rio Conference (Earth Summit), critical ecopedagogies traces their theoretical genesis to Latin American grassroots organizations, critical theory, and critical pedagogy, especially as informed by the work of Paulo Freire.[7] Ecopedagogy moves beyond the confines of North American ecological education models, which privilege sustainability and ecoliteracy through a focus on wilderness preservation, outdoor recreational excursions, and the romanticization of nature. These lack what Richard Kahn describes as "transformative socioeconomic critiques" and insights into "emancipatory life practices" that alter the current dominant paradigms of dualistic human/nature relationships.[8]

It is necessary then, as Greg Misiaszek observes, for ecopedagogy to venture beyond the confines of the classroom.[9] Ecopedagogical work, as he calls it, should examine how institutions, governments, and cultures obfuscate their logics and suppress any knowledge not in line with their neoliberal, technocratic aims of accumulation. This necessitates several interdisciplinary lenses and the collective wisdom of all involved in the inquiry process. Only intersectional analyses can unveil the hidden mechanisms, techniques, and politics of oppression, domination, and overall violence. Recognizing the violence inherent in life, as well as "teaching to read … the degrees of who benefits and who suffers" from violence, is a necessary component of any ecopedagogy or ecopedagogical work.[10] Doing so should disrupt an artificial distancing from other humans and the rest of the natural world created by precariousness–allowing new forms of relating and education to emerge.

To that end, some questions to consider in the classroom include: How do our everyday actions–informed by our worldviews and imaginations–contribute to environmental degradation and injustice? How can we, within our multiple limitations, decenter ourselves to close the gap between an imagined self and the ecosphere which contains all life? And how can

recognition and acceptance of mortality (through an examination of death and decay) transform our thinking, being, and relating? Such questions manifest ecopedogogical embrace of multiple epistemologies, various knowledge, and overall widened ways of knowing. An unequivocal stance against a or *the* singular epistemological lens is a hallmark of any ecopedagogy that aims to confront the senseless violence and death within the Anthropocene. Collaboration of all sorts, in other words, is the best hope for imagining what never was.

A Student's Perspective: Weaving Knowledges

When I (Dickinson) was presented with the opportunity to explore my fascination with the intrinsic parallels and intersections between our body's mind and our natural surroundings, I knew it was a challenge I needed to entertain. And, to say "present" is to acknowledge it as a gift—structurally equal in both its integrity and fragility—and one our species often blindly and roughly holds. To have a moment to honor the times I have looked down and noticed is the first step to weaving its precarity into common consciousness. I wholeheartedly believe addressing its presence in our classrooms will, of course, encourage attention to and patience with its meticulous nature. Yet, acknowledging its *permanence* in our lives, whether invited or not, remains the pinnacle of acceptance. Only then can we allow ourselves to be schooled by such complexities, and to own and honor the role of the student. Ecopedagogy exists under the premise of re-educating the inhabitants of this planet to nurture and protect life in all its forms. Its presence suggests the most precious citizenship our species can possess, namely that which allows us to simply *be*, only as we are, on Earth.

As a student, I have learned a plurality of ways to understand and value ecosystems: through a Montessori education while living in Mexico, a Waldorf education when I returned to the United States, then progressing through an International Baccalaureate high school before beginning college. The theories have varied from classroom to classroom, some emphasizing anthropocentrism and others ecocentrism. But there was a consistent understanding of the world's visible elements and place. Less discussed was the paralleling, more *unresolved* questions our ecosystems encourage: questions about the world around us that engage interdisciplinary attention, thorough translation and individualized perspectives—questions I have, until recently, been unable to explore in a classroom setting.

The basis of an ecosystem, and how it renders us fluid and transplantable, has been a point of fascination for me since I was ten. For the

proceeding decade I would spending every summer in the woods of Vermont, immersed in a Quaker-based community where every structure, bunk bed, green bean, and egg was built or harvested by its members. It was a place of upcycled love and respect, where nothing created was ever misused or wasted. I still credit it as the origin of my devotion to our planet and all it lends those lucky to be living in it.

Later, in college, I was introduced to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who argued that we are *all* connected, and whatever divisions appear are only created by us, *for us*.[11] Better put, *we* are responsible for the appearance and inclusion of other beings in our lives, and there is power in the reciprocity of "the other to the other." I found it to be a fitting segue into the importance of such movements that promote both collective and individual sustenance. These insights led to my enrollment in a course on "Religion and Ecological Movements" and grounded my developing understanding on ecopedagogy. During the final days of the semester, my peers and I crafted a presentation centered around a religion and an ecological movement, preferably inspired by one another. Given familial connections to Judaism, combined with a deep agricultural interest from my Quaker upbringing, I wrote of the historical and spiritual connection fueling what we still consider to be a monumental agricultural advent: regenerative farming. The time this assignment took allowed me to intimately learn that regenerative practices are not limited to sowing, but instead is the water in which the iceberg of religious and ecological understanding is suspended, floating.

I found that ecological cosmologies are ones centered around balance, interconnectedness, perspective, and of course, sustainability, in both the literal and holistic sense of the word. The "act" of sustainability, it is important to remember, does not revolve around being "less bad" than what already exists, but instead refers to the care put into a cycle that has the ability and resolve to continue indefinitely. Nature is one such cycle; it has been since its original creation, regardless of what story recounts it—or which cosmology seeks to *contain* it. I try to write in such a way that honors those who are trying to slow the fester (some) humans have inflicted, and often remind myself of this: We are all born from Earth and eventually must all return. Our undeniable responsibility to tend to Earth before we must succumb to it makes all that happens in between rooted in great significance.

I hired myself, in a way, when I was presented with the opportunity to write about such a complex subject. I told myself I had a job to outline how our strands of understanding translate into practice, both in a classroom, but more importantly, *far* beyond that. Now, presented with that

challenge to implement this into an educational setting, figuring the theoretical to fit practicality (however uninspiring that feels to write), I reflect on the communities I have been a part of, in which I was a learner, surrounded by other learners, and I admire the simplicity into which we boil down. We do nothing but learn, day in and out, tenaciously harvesting knowledge, thinning and spinning it out into something new, comprehensible, and just big enough to keep us warm. This practice, an almost anatomic tradition, is what renews our citizenships and allows for the reminder that it is not in the nature of ecopedagogy's reeducation to stunt our growth, but to gently let us to learn how we may grow *out,* not only up.

Some Ecopedagogical Notes: A Rekindled Sense of Wonder and Imagination

I (Baldelomar) often remember vivid feelings of fascination and wonder as a child. Worlds within worlds would open up to me while reading the latest *Goosebumps* book or while perusing a Shel Silverstein book with its peculiar but alluring drawings that complement its equally queer poetry. (*Falling Up* and *A Light in the Attic* still grace my bookshelves to this day.) But my most memorable sense of awe came when watching Carl Sagan's award-winning series, *Cosmos*. Listening to the series' opening track still brings me immense joy–perhaps mostly borne of nostalgia for a childhood partially reconstructed through fleeting memories. Sagan took me on several voyages as a child, all from the comforts of my parents' humble apartment in a working-class South Florida neighborhood. I visited Neptune and Saturn's rings, observed a black hole, and explored the complexities of time and distance. (But with that joy of exploration also came moments of sadness. I distinctly remember as a ten-year-old standing outside on a hot, humid Miami night looking at the night sky and realizing that I would never actually travel to the moon or any of the infinite number of stars.)

It took me some time to realize the wonder right beneath my feet and all around me: the beauty of infinite lifeforms of all kinds (yes, bacteria included) that grace this planet we call home. Sagan also inspired wonder for the Earth in all its splendor, volatility, and complexity. The pale blue dot. Every semester, I show my classes a clip from *Cosmos* that first caught my attention as a child. In a way, I'm inviting my students into my childhood wonder by showing them the scene where Sagan discusses the pale blue dot we call home. The scene begins with Sagan's trademark voice and cadence asking us to ponder the iconic Voyager 1 image of Earth taken in 1990: "From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different; consider again that dot; that's here, that's

home, that's us."[12] Sagan continues by describing Earth as a small scene within a grand cosmic theater, the scene where our entire histories and dramas have unfolded, the stage where every character we have known has lived and died. Sagan then offers some powerful concluding remarks:

> It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot–the only home we've ever known.[13]

The only world we've ever known! Indeed, Earth is home to a vast array of life, of which hominins are only but a recent development. There are also worlds within worlds, as decolonial scholars remind us–or perhaps even more persuasive, as Shel Silverstein, Carl Sagan, Toni Morrison, and other artists *show* us. The metaphysical and the physical were never separate. Neither can be fully known, but one can intimate fragments of each. Imagination, wonder, and desire become crucial to piecing some of these fragments together into constellations of meaning that will eventually need to be undone so as to reconstitute and result in fresh meanings. And the process of decay, birth, life, and death and decay continues.

The wonder and amazement that I felt as a child have withered over the years, only to return with fleeting intensity at certain moments. Hard to capture with the limits of language, I ask myself how to channel those precious moments of ecstasy, awe, allurement, and desire into my teaching and learning. Questions of meaning and purpose, especially in relation to our shifting places on the pale blue dot and the expansive cosmos, are questions open to all, not just scholars and students. Systematic inquiry never quite spoke to me, especially on subjects too mysterious to capture with words and with the mind alone. As a teacher, I've been trying to promote departures of all kinds instead of arrivals.[14] The trips we take–even from our own limited spaces–can launch us into growths of all kinds.

Ultimately, an efficacious ecopedagogy should reignite the flames of childhood wonder–the creative fires that burn within, but which seem snuffed out, not least because of one-dimensional approaches to teaching and learning. Ecopedagogy leads to and benefits from imaginations that are unafraid to dream of connections beyond our immediate sight of vision. These connections or synapses are not, of course, limited to rational knowledge. The body and its multiple senses, the wisdom that stems from

experience, and those feelings that remain ineffable are all precious resources to dream capaciously and venture multidimensionally. The indeterminacy of life–brought about by our precariousness and precarity–demands an equally contingent imagination.

Like the stars that form constellations, the fragments of our existences (our collective wisdoms) can become the pieces for other constellations of possibilities–constellations that must eventually undergo similar shattering in an endless process of reconstitution where the old becomes new again. The process of ecopedagogy is never static, never ending. Worth repeating: We do nothing but learn, day in and out, tenaciously harvesting knowledge, thinning and spinning it out into something new, comprehensible, and just big enough to keep us warm. This practice, an almost anatomic tradition, is what renews our citizenships and allows for the reminder that it is not in the nature of ecopedagogy's reeducation to stunt our growth, but to gently let us learn how we may grow *out,* not only up. Growing *out* to infinite combinations to dream what never was: This is the stuff of ecopedagogy with a view to all possible worlds, not least our precarious pale blue dot and its infinite manifestations.

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[1] Michel Foucault writes, "Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010), 85. See also Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Eric Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[2] Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015), 21.

[3] See Britt Wray and Adam McKay, *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Anxiety* (New York, NY: The Experiment, LLC, 2023).

[4] Pope Francis, *Laudato Deum* (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), 2.

[5] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 106.

[6] *Laudato Si'*, 105.

[7] For more see César "CJ" Baldelomar, "Religious Literacy and Ecopedagogy: An Unusual Rhizomatic Alliance Within Atmospheres of Violence," in *Religious Literacies in Educational Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Sabrina MisirHiralall and Kate Soules (London, UK: Routledge, forthcoming).

[8] Richard Kahn, *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis: The Ecopedagogy Movement* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 17.

[9] Greg Misiaszek, *Ecopedagogy: Critical Environmental Teaching for Planetary Justice and Global Sustainable Development* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).
[10] Misiaszek, *Ecopedagogy*, 18.
[11] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. M. C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[12] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1994), 12.
[13] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 13.
[14] See Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, the Prophet* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1990).