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MAKING A CASE FOR ECOFEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism offers a framework that brings together patriarchy, capitalism, and the degradation of the environment, and helps to make sense of and address a world in desperate need of radical transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has magnified existing fault lines of inequality, poverty, gender-based violence, and turbulence in the biosphere. This paper uses an ecofeminist lens to critically investigate the case of a woman's health course that employs a popular education approach. As imbedded activist researchers, we question how the curriculum should change so that the knowledge generated really becomes useful for transformative action. Thus, the paper brings together popular education theory and ecofeminism. After an overview of ecofeminist principles, we introduce a case study to apply these principles. We conclude that elements which relate to the participants' lives in immediate ways, like food security and water, are entry points for challenging the perception of Nature as a "thing" rather than as a complex interrelated ecosystem. We argue that ecofeminist principles have widespread relevance for popular education and its transformative impulses beyond Covid-19.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, popular education, Covid-19, transformative action*

RAZLOGI ZA EKOFEMINISTIČNO LJUDSKO IZOBRAŽEVANJE V ČASU COVID-19 – POVZETEK

Ekofeminizem ponuja ogrodje, ki naslavlja problematiko patriarhata, kapitalizma in degradacije okolja ter pomaga osmisliti svet, ki nujno potrebuje radikalne spremembe. Epidemija COVID-19 je še bolj očitno zarisala prepade neenakosti in revščine, spolnega nasilja ter turbulenc v biosferi. Članek v luči ekofeminizma kritično analizira primer zdravstvenega tečaja za ženske, zasnovanega na podlagi ljudskega izobraževanja (popular education). Avtorici se kot aktivistki in raziskovalki sprašujeta, kako bi bilo treba spremeniti učni načrt, da bi pridobljeno znanje postalo resnično uporabno in transformativno. Članek tako združuje teorijo ljudskega izobraževanja in ekofeminizma. Po pregledu načel ekofeminizma je predstavljena študija primera v praksi, zaključek pa prikaže, da so elementi, ki se neposredno nanašajo

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na življenja sodelujočih, na primer zagotavljanje hrane in vode, vstopne točke, prek katerih je možno izpodbijati idejo narave kot »stvari« in vzpostaviti dožemanje narave kot kompleksnega in medsebojno povezanega ekosistema. Tudi zunaj konteksta COVID-19 so ekofeministična načela širšega pomena za ljudsko izobraževanje in njegove transformativne pobude.

Ključne besede: *ekofeminizem, ljudsko izobraževanje, COVID-19, transformativno delovanje*

INTRODUCTION

“Streetfighters and philosophers” – this is what Salleh (2017) calls ecofeminists. Like Paulo Freire’s praxis, educational activists, at best, combine sound theoretical and ethical reflection with empathetic critical action. Popular education, which is rooted in the radical tradition of adult education and grounded in the philosophy of Paulo Freire, is overtly political, concerned with people’s experiences, and orientated towards action (von Kotze et al., 2016). Its purpose is the collective production of “really useful knowledge” which is tested when translated into action. This paper is our engagement with ecofeminist socialist thinking in order to sharpen our popular education practice.

We begin with personal reflections on our own journeys to the point where we are asking questions as to whether, within our own educational practices, feminist popular education is addressing patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental degradation; if it is not, how can this be achieved?

In 1999, I (Astrid) developed educational materials for community workers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (von Kotze & Holloway, 1999). Recurrent droughts are a normal part of everyday life in Southern Africa and any efforts at community development must be mindful of the risk of water shortages and drought. The materials employed a popular education approach that was consciously anti-individualist, anti-capitalist, and critical of the status quo built on a history of colonialist relations. This enabled me to focus on the politics of water, food and particularly women’s work, and not simply accept natural hazards such as droughts as an “act of God”. Through popular education I attempted to forge horizontal and reciprocal subject-to-subject relationships between educators and learners to strengthen existing local understandings, knowledge and skills while promoting critical questioning of accepted and stereotypical practices in order to change them in sync with dynamic contexts and conditions. Respectful of varying local livelihood strategies, the educational processes were designed to support local resilience – as a Zimbabwean community leader said, “if hunger [drought] ever came back again we are prepared for it here in Banga. We learnt a lesson and are much wiser” (personal communication, March 1999).

I embraced the “Buen Vivir” (living well) philosophy that had already been incorporated into the Peoples’ Climate Summit in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010. However, a number of experiences had to come together before I learned to regard Nature not as a “thing” but as a complex interrelated and living ecosystem. An enduring drought

created awareness of how we squander the most precious life-giving resource, water; a 400 km hike across six mountain ranges and through arid countryside parched by crippling drought told stories about the destruction of people's livelihoods and dreams; the hunger experienced by thousands of landless unemployed people during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis demonstrates how not just zoonotic viruses, but food connect us with Nature and without nutritious food we are more vulnerable to pathogens and may become hopeless. We need to be actively conscious of Nature (von Kotze, 2020). I had listened to people, but not the soil, the trees, the waterfalls. I now consider an ecofeminist socialist approach to popular education as the philosophy that makes me a better streetfighter. This requires a clearer focus on the question "which way of knowing and what kind of knowledge is most helpful in a time that cries out for affirmation of life?" (Salleh, 2017, p. 283)

In the mid-1980s, being active in the women's movement, I (Shirley) connected with a network of feminist popular educators through the Women's Programme of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE). This was a time of popular democratic struggle, where the resonances to anti-colonial and feminist struggles in other parts of Africa and Latin America were obvious. The still banned work of Paulo Freire (1970) ensured that many activists and educators wanted to learn more from Brazil and other parts of Latin America, but political isolation and language made this difficult. Two conferences in Canada and Peru in the late 1980s cemented my long-term relationships with feminist popular educators from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America, which spawned much activist-scholarship and solidarity relations in the following decades (e.g. Manicom & Walters, 2012; Walters & Manicom, 1996).

Feminist popular education developed in the early 1980s as a critique of the male-biased popular education that was dominant in social movements in different parts of the world. Parallel feminist challenges to educational practice and theory were developing in different sites of social action and feminist pedagogies were beginning to impact adult education; my intention was to encourage these developments.

While feminist popular education is embedded within socio-economic and environmental contexts, it was only during the drought of 2017/18 that I began to focus more intentionally on what the climate crisis means and to question how we as adult popular educators should respond. I wrote (Walters, 2018) of "the drought as my teacher", as we individually and collectively rethought our relationship to water. The crisis, as with many crises, heightened awareness of the inequalities in society and, in particular, of water injustice. The classed, raced and sex-gendered nature of the drought was obvious, with working class and poor women and men, the majority of whom are black, experiencing different issues from me and from one another. The drought-as-teacher reinforced my understanding of the connections amongst all forms of energy and the implications these choices have for the future of society. The entangled nature of water, food, energy, health, climate, economy, politics, sex-gender relations was amplified.

As ecofeminist popular educators we need to integrate feminism and ecological consciousness into our praxis. But how? Addressing this question is the purpose of this paper. We do this by first situating ourselves within the Covid-19 crisis, second, presenting the case study of the feminist popular education Women's Health Course, and third, by developing an ecofeminist framework for analysing the course. We thus move from the basis of the analysis and discussion towards approaches to ecofeminist popular education at this time of multiple crises.

CONTEXT OF COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic hit South Africa at a particularly weak moment: umpteen corruption cases against political leaders and corporations intersected with a floundering economy, a loss of trust in leadership, unemployment, increasing rates of gender-based violence, child abuse, and food insecurity. In addition, the climate crisis made itself felt particularly through escalating droughts and soaring costs of food. Electricity switch-offs returned to interrupt everyday life because of poor management and insufficient political will to replace coal and fossil fuels with renewable energy sources. "What we're experiencing right now is the catastrophic failure of the capitalist market system", said McNally (2020, in Gallacher, 2020), adding that "[t]he convergence of these two – an economic downturn and a global pandemic – is what is making this situation so catastrophic" (p. 2). Money needed for healthcare had gone into repaying debts and inequalities sky-rocketed. While being shaken on the same stormy sea, people in South Africa and elsewhere were not in the same boat: disproportionate numbers of Black people, urban poor, foreigners, "others", were infected and affected, losing their jobs, unable to access emergency social support and funding, tossed out of housing and into endless food queues.

In South Africa, the government reacted to the crisis swiftly with a severe lockdown that only permitted the sale of essential items. Informal traders, mainly women, were unable to sell their stock and generate income over several months. The lack of access to comparatively cheaper vegetables hurt people badly. While the strict lockdown was enforced by the army and the police, regular public media addresses by the Health Minister and President, data-free access to Covid-19 crisis website information and limited economic support aimed at reassuring the public. There were various new legal regulations such as laws that forbade evictions – often ignored by property owners and the police who on occasion forcibly removed residents. The severe lockdown gave the health system time to prepare for the deluge of patients. While the numbers of infections have been high (over 1,337,926 as of 18 January 2021), Covid-19 confirmed deaths number 37,105 (Daily Maverick, 2021). But the lockdown took another toll: the increasing isolation of people from each other, ongoing uncertainties, fears, grief and loss, which have led to spiralling stress and depression. Gender Based Violence (GBV) figures have soared (Farber, 2020; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020) as women were confined to their homes with abusive men, both their labour and their torture now invisible to family and communities. And the hunger

grew – so that people began to say: “we will not die of Covid-19, but of starvation” (personal communication, October 23, 2020).

Throughout history, pandemics have shown up inequalities in the distribution of health and wealth, the conditions of life and work in societies. Ecofeminists have warned in the past about the “epic contest” between “the rights of Mother Earth and the rights of corporations and militarized states” (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p. xix). Covid-19 has served as a pretext for tactics of repression: curbing media freedoms and criticism, introducing laws that cut rights and instil fear – all kinds of forms of authoritarianism under the guise of protection. The image of George Floyd pleading “I can’t breathe” resonated with the way the coronavirus disproportionately choked disenfranchised people all over the world. Covid-19 happened in the context of a collective global climate crisis; the roots of both the pathogen and climate warming are in the extractives sector of global capitalism (Oxfam, 2020). As WoMin Alliance (Badoe et al., 2019) portrays in the film, *Women Hold up the Sky*, the system exploits the cheap labour of Black working-class people in mines and plantations and rests on the unpaid labour of women as they work to house, provide water and food, care for and generally satisfy the needs of labour and create the conditions for some measure of “peace” that capital needs. The system profits from the dispossession of the peasantry and the working classes of land, water, forests, fisheries, and minerals. It relies on Nature as a free or cheap input to production and a “sink” for the external environmental costs of production. Capital also depends on women’s unpaid labour as the absorber of externalised social and economic costs of production and the rehabilitation of damaged Nature.

For us, Covid-19 offers a glimpse of what is yet to come, and the need to learn from this pandemic for the future has become urgent. It heightens the fault-lines which feminist popular education addresses and it is directly linked to environmental breakdown – therefore, ecofeminism and popular education are important strategic responses to the Covid-19 context. The pandemic offers an opportunity to trigger radical transformative change. As Jacklyn Cock (2015) has previously warned, “We are in a crisis. Survival is threatened and the only way out of this crisis is to build an ecofeminist socialist movement” (2:54).

POPULAR EDUCATION WOMEN’S HEALTH COURSE

We turn now to a description of the Women’s Health Course (WHC) as a case study of popular education in the time of Covid-19.

In March, the civil society based Popular Education Programme (PEP) decided to continue offering its annual Women’s Health Course, physically distanced, using WhatsApp (Popular Education Programme, 2020). The course was based on the work and experiences of popular education activists and working-class women in and around Cape Town. The previous two years’ WHCs, which had been face-to-face, had provided some indications about the information, skills and experiences that were considered useful and would facilitate post-course action on the part of participants. In 2020, as in the

past, the course was not intended to be an information, fact-packed course, but rather a guided opportunity for participating women to explore and communicate with others on health issues and to practice skills related to improving wellbeing – their own, and that of community members.

This case study is based on data from four main sources: previous reports of WHC, participant observer notes taken by Astrid, a detailed report produced by PEP in 2020 after the completion of the course, and the WhatsApp notes and e-mail communications of participants and facilitators, which were accessible to all WHC participants. Permission to use these data was granted by participants who were keen to see their ideas in the public eye and expressed the wish to have their real names disclosed. Critical comments on the curriculum with regards to ecofeminism, however, are attributable to the authors of this paper alone. Primary data were reviewed by both authors of this paper and analysed by means of dialogues guided by the emerging ecofeminist principles outlined below.

Working-class women are often seen as “the buffers” who suffer disproportionately under the load of everyday responsibilities and additional demands in emergency conditions. Health is a political issue that relates directly to sex-gender, economic systems, cultural norms, the history of colonialism – not just women’s bodies. Given the division of labour, the responsibilities of care work, rendered invisible, reproductive responsibilities in addition to exposure to infections, women face much greater risks of disease and poor health. As much as the course addressed health issues particularly for women, it did so with a strong view to analysing power and interests and investigating how patriarchy and capitalism inscribe particular exploitative practices. As one WHC participant commented:

Women have no equal rights in society. Like women must be seen and not heard. Capitalism is that sad side that some women must depend on her husband’s money for a living, depending on the situations we live in. The impact is that it makes our health inferior, at the end of the day. (Marie Petrus)

28 women enrolled in the course; in age they ranged from 20 to 60, with 5 in their 20s, and 5 over 50, an intergenerational mix. The majority had Afrikaans as their home language, with other languages including isiXhosa, Bemba, Shona, and Sesotho. The majority resided in Cape Town, but the online platform allowed participation from elsewhere. While the lingua franca was English, participants were free to respond in their home languages. The educational background ranged from incomplete schooling to post-school qualifications. Several of the participants are long-term unemployed, others work for NGOs or have jobs in the formal economy while belonging to community organisations.

The 10-week course included weekly three-hour tasks and feedback. The participants examined the historical, socio-economic context and its effects on women, how body systems reflect and are intertwined with larger social systems, issues relating to mental, emotional, and physical health, negative attitudes around disease and finally, after envisioning a hopeful future, they sketched preliminary ideas for a different health system for

all. The participants valued learning together and articulated how they emerged stronger, with a sense of determination for change in the future – as one participant said:

The group has helped me immensely in the area of anxiety and control. As women we often have too much on our plate and we neglect taking care of ourselves. It has given me time to think of my own wellbeing and to also implement more me time so as to get more organised and disciplined so that I can offer my family a better... me. GBV remains a huge concern but as a past survivor I urge women to stand up for themselves. (Anthea Wehr)

This comment encapsulates important points raised by the course: firstly, for the majority, the course provided psychological support – the mere possibility to discuss anxieties in a “safe” space with other women, to gain further information that dispelled insecurity, and to feel reassured that one’s personal problem is actually collective. Secondly, GBV emerged time and again as a common experience both of the participants themselves and their female family members and friends. While GBV is very much in the public eye and media, this seems to have made little difference. Given the history of South Africa, violence still plays a huge part in all aspects of everyday life, reinforced through competitive individualism, social injustices and inequality and, of course, the prevalence of patriarchal relations in most institutions.

Women have high expectations of themselves as breadwinners, caretakers, home-based school teachers, while suffering intense poverty due to unemployment and reliance on social grants. For example, in an early session we used a code of a woman balancing and carrying a heavy load on her head and asked participants to label the various loads, including additional burdens that the pandemic had added to their lives. Apart from the responsibilities associated with “women’s work”, anxiety and fear of GBV, locked up with an abusing spouse, featured strongly.

Women’s health emerged as a community issue, inscribed in gender, and a common problem for all. Given the highly unequal, racialized, and gendered relations in South Africa, the WHC related health and care-work tie in closely to the broader socio-economic and environmental living and working conditions of participants. This enabled understanding beyond the individual, towards more collective, holistic, political engagement. As one participant commented, “Covid-19 didn’t break the system. It was already broken” (Theresa Davids), and another said:

The different systems like patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism are contributing factors that shape people. It disables us and it is an infringement on your human rights. Our mental well-being was and is mostly affected and not everyone is resilient to challenge those in power. (Claudine Pretorius)

In many ways, the course was classic feminist popular education. Black working-class women deepened their understanding of their personal and political positions and

conditions in order to act in solidarity with others to change them for the better. The WHC is a small but ambitious intervention attempting to achieve a great deal with very limited resources. We present it here as an example to explore how the curriculum could be reshaped from an ecofeminist perspective. We turn now to a discussion on an ecofeminist analytical framework to help us do this.

ECOFEMINISM: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The basic premise of ecofeminism is the inseparable connection between capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological breakdown (Fakier & Cock, 2018). Mies and Shiva (2014) traced the historical roots of this connection:

Without turning a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship between humans and Nature into a one-sided, master-and-servant relationship, the bourgeois revolutions would not have been possible. Without turning foreign peoples and their lands into colonies for the White Man, the capitalist economy could not have evolved. Without violently destroying the symbiosis between man and woman, without calling women mere animal nature, the new man could not have risen as master and lord over nature and women. (p. 47)

Put succinctly, an ecofeminist perspective posits that current dominant development processes and decisions are shaped by the point of view that Nature, or natural resources, are at the service of humans (Randriamaro & Hargreaves, 2019). This view reduces Nature and natural resources to inanimate “things” to be exploited for human consumption and profit. Eisenstein (2020) argues that humans need to experience Earth as a being and as an organism. This will help “to transition away from systems built on the mythology of earth-as-thing” (Eisenstein, 2020).

Salleh elaborates (2017, p. 292) that the Woman=Nature metaphor draws attention to the massive theft of women’s reproductive labour, a theft that is the very foundation of capitalism. The Woman=Nature metaphor speaks of resourcing; an appropriation of time and energy that might be quantified as “embodied debt.” Women’s unacknowledged and unpaid reproductive labour is crucial to the workings of capitalism.

The dominant division of labour assigns women primary responsibility for the production, processing and preparation of food, provisioning of water and fuel, taking care of household members. Because of these roles, women – and working-class, Indigenous and peasant women in particular – have a fundamental reliance on natural resources and depend on a healthy environment. Vandana Shiva (2017, p. xvi) asks why women lead ecology movements against deforestation and water pollution, against toxic and nuclear hazards. It is not, she suggests, due to any so-called inborn feminine “essentialism” but rather a necessity that is learned through the sexual division of labour as women are left to look after sustenance. Even though provision of sustenance is the most vital of human activities, a masculinist economy that understands only the market treats it as non-work.

An ecofeminist orientation holds that patriarchy, in which men and their perspectives and interests are at the apex of a hierarchical system dehumanises women, excludes women from decision-making, brings women's labour into exploitative service of the dominant economy and men's interests in households and communities.

Furthermore, Mary Mellor (1992, p. 51) states that ecofeminists, like most Greens, trace the destruction of the natural world to the hierarchical dualisms of Western society: culture/nature, men/women, mind/body, science/folk knowledge, reason/feelings, materialism/spirituality. This division, she argues, has allowed the unrestrained development of science and technology, industry and militarism. It is a process of "mastering Nature and losing the Earth" (p. 51). Ecofeminists challenge these binaries.

Ecofeminist perspectives are generally weakly represented by most mainstream liberal feminists or women's rights organisations, where the focus is on individual women's advancement in order to compete with men on a more equal footing. The ecofeminist African network, WoMin Alliance, has found that ecofeminist perspectives resonate powerfully with the experiences and perspectives of women in peasant and poor urban communities across the African continent. Environmental crises are crises for social reproduction – water, soil, food, energy, fires, forests, air quality – they are all interconnected and of primary concern to women in the sustenance of households (Randriamaro & Hargreaves, 2019). Other crises like that of health, dramatically illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have major effects on livelihoods, including water, sanitation, and food. Social and environmental crises magnify the socio-economic inequalities in society. Ecofeminists note the exhaustion of soil, water, forests, air, and ask: what is the alternative?

At the centre of ecofeminism is praxis. Theory is forged in the struggles to challenge the brutality of patriarchal capitalism and to form alternative ecofeminist visions of the future. As Gough and Whitehouse (2019, p. 333) argue, ecofeminism is decidedly transformative rather than reformist in orientation. Ecofeminists seek to radically restructure economic, social and political institutions. It makes explicit the links between the oppression of women and the oppression of Nature in patriarchal cultures. This means coming to terms with a number of cherished and widespread beliefs, most notably the anthropocentric assumption that humans are different from, and superior to, the rest of Nature and therefore ought to dominate. Gender justice and ecological justice are at the heart of the ecofeminist project. The feminism of ecofeminism is about collective empowerment, rather than individual advancement. Ecofeminism is about solidarity, standing together, fighting against domination in all its forms.

An ecofeminist analysis acknowledges that women, because of their assigned social and economic roles in society, have different perspectives on and needs in socio-economic development. Salleh (2017) concludes that the experiences of women, Indigenous peoples, and peasants must be at the centre of politics if we have any hope of confronting the violence and brutality of global capitalism today.

Building on these insights, an ecofeminist framework for analysing feminist popular education programmes would include analysis of the inseparable connections amongst capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological breakdown. There is an assumption that the exploitation of women and all Nature is central to capitalism. It would stand against that exploitation. It would place at the centre of its concerns, women as a constituency, particularly poor, Indigenous, peasant and working-class women. As Giacomini (2018) states, this would affirm life-centred alternatives.

There are many resonances between feminist popular education and ecofeminism but also some absences within feminist popular education. Drawing from the literature, preliminary “ideal type” propositions are presented. In our reading we observe that feminist popular education and ecofeminist popular education both work with women as a constituency, with a focus on poor, working-class, marginalised women; both valorise women’s knowledge, and have gender justice as a goal. Both analyse patriarchy and challenge patriarchal power relations. Ecofeminist popular education addresses the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism; feminist popular education *may* do so, depending on the specific context. It is in the area of Nature and environmental degradation that the absences within feminist popular education become more obvious. The integral connections of capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological breakdown are at the core of ecofeminism, whereas they are not necessarily as explicit within feminist popular education. Both would be looking to imagine a future beyond patriarchal capitalism; both are committed to action; but while feminists stand in solidarity with humans, ecofeminists resist domination in all its forms and also forge solidarity with Nature in a relationship that acknowledges mutuality and reciprocity through interconnectivity.

We suggest an ecofeminist educator might seek to integrate the following in contextually relevant ways:

- Nature is part of the curriculum and the hegemonic view of Nature as a “thing” rather than as a complex interrelated ecosystem is challenged. The mutually beneficial relations between humans and Nature are addressed;
- the curriculum deconstructs the idea of Woman=Nature and shows how this idea is critical to the functioning of patriarchal-capitalism;
- gender and socio-ecological justice are aspirant goals;
- the inextricable links amongst Nature, patriarchy, and capitalism are a centre-piece of the curriculum, implicitly or explicitly; the curriculum explores linkages amongst ecological breakdown, patriarchy, and capitalism;
- it analyses relationships amongst various socio-economic, financial, health, environmental crises in order to illuminate interrelated systems. This includes unpicking the sex-gendered nature of crises;
- the curriculum seeks to stimulate and articulate imaginings towards alternative futures beyond patriarchal capitalism;
- the explicit aim of the education is social action, in which collective solidarity, standing together, fighting against domination in all its forms, prefigures and rehearses social relations of solidarity.

ECOFEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION

Jacklyn Cock (2018) writes, “The climate crisis presents us with a historic opportunity because to solve it we need radical transformative change in how we produce, consume and organize our lives” (p. 210). However, she advises (Cock, 2015), “If we talk about climate change, this seems very remote for most people. If we talk about food, this brings it close. Food prices are real and immediate; people can unite around it” (9:55). Salleh (2018) also argues for a focus other than “climate change” – she states that “the emergent focus on water is a great chance to work in an integrated way on climate, in terms of both epistemology and politics” (p. 19).

In these quotes we hear the urgency of the times, the need for radical change and a clue as to how best to approach complex, seemingly abstract reality such as climate change. As Mohanty (2012) states:

Feminist popular education provides innovative feminist pedagogical and methodological lenses that allow us to ‘see’, analyse, and enact pedagogies of personal, cultural, and political resistance to inherited patriarchal and misogynist practices. It offers pedagogic and transformative practices, designed to speak truth to power, and transform ourselves in the pursuit of gender justice. (p. viii)

Ecofeminist popular education does all of this and, in addition, it pursues socio-ecological justice.

In the WHC outlined above, the dimensions of Nature and environmental degradation were absent from most dialogues. It was clear that for most participants the hegemonic view of Nature “as a thing” prevailed. This was reflected in food being understood as a commodity for consumption with little connection between food and land, growing and tending. Nature in the form of flowers featured strongly in sentimental images taken from the internet, bearing mostly religious messages – Nature was a passive resource, a backdrop for relaxation when wandering amongst the grass and trees. This prevailing attitude reflected what Shiva (2014) described as seeing ourselves outside the ecological web of life, “as masters, conquerors and owners of the Earth’s resources” (p. xxi). She urged that we would require a paradigm shift towards “seeing ourselves as members of the Earth family, with responsibility to care for other species and life on Earth in all its diversity, from the tiniest microbe to the largest mammal” (p. xxi).

The political economy of food, starting with analysis of soaring food prices, would therefore be a fruitful catalyst for unsettling the understanding of Nature as an abstract “thing”, and exploring connections to patriarchal capitalism.

Another generative theme is water and Covid-19 provides opportunities to engage people on the classed, gendered, racialised nature of water management and distribution, as well as in understanding water as a complex interrelated and living system, not just a commodity that is bought and sold.

The analysis of language, Saltmarsh (2020) argues, can also provide useful ways of uncovering underlying ideologies and power relations, including anthropomorphism. Metaphors need to be chosen carefully as talking about “fighting” the virus, “frontline staff” and “command centre” all suggest war: anti-democratic solutions, individualism, fear and limitations on people’s freedom and information. Instead, messages should evoke care, agency, the common good, solidarity and interdependence.

Popular educators and ecofeminists recognize that individual subjects do not enter into relationships, but subjects are “made in and through relationships” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012, p. 52). How did Nature come to be no more than land that serves as a growth medium for crops? How did people lose their relationship to agriculture, to growing and tending vegetables? What is the relationship between land ownership, agriculture, and consumption? If we accept that Nature, too, is a subject, we realize that we have silenced Nature as much as silencing marginal, poor people by taking away or silencing their voices. When we sever the possibility of “coming into presence” through our relationship with Nature, we collude in our own oppression.

Popular education, similar to eco-pedagogy (Misiaszek, 2016), works through dialogue between subjects; it involves listening to the other in a transitive relationship that is deliberate and active, a relationship of equality. Ecofeminist popular education is one way of drawing attention to the messages emitted from “out there”, connecting it to our experience, and urging people to act in response. Educators, therefore, are charged with asking uncomfortable questions that might bring even more uncomfortable responses.

In summary, we suggest that the elements that need to be interrogated through praxis in an ecofeminist curriculum are those which relate to participants’ lives in immediate ways, like food security and water – these are entry points for challenging the perception of Nature as a “thing”.

LEARNING, UNLEARNING, ACTING TOGETHER

It must be hardest on Rani [the dolphin], knowing that the young ones depend on her. There she is, perfectly adapted to her environment... then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can’t sustain you anymore and you’ve got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her. (Ghosh, 2019, p. 106)

Like Rani, we have to unlearn in order to develop new attitudes, understandings and capabilities for new conditions. Epistemology and politics are central to climate crises. In order to be effective “streetfighters and philosophers” we as ecofeminist popular educators need continually to be learning, unlearning and relearning (Harley, 2012). Our own personal reflections at the start of the paper clearly demonstrate this.

What can we as ecofeminist popular educators do individually and collectively to navigate climate crises and imagine gender and socio-ecologically just futures? The six-year process of collectively crafting a “Climate Justice Charter”, which puts forward demands, aspirations, and alternatives to build a society that can mitigate and endure climate change, is one example of re-imagining (South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, 2020). The set of “Principles for a Just Recovery” is another (Friends of the Earth International, 2020).

We need to have the courage of our convictions and remind ourselves and others that change is inscribed with power: if we aspire to a more just and sustainable future, then one of the great tasks before us is to make clear “*to the wealthiest people in the wealthiest countries in the world* [who] think they are going to be OK, that their privilege, their fortunes, and their physical safety are not predestined” (Abulhawa, 2017, p. 110, her emphasis). For this, we require what Rafeef Ziadah (Transnational Institute, 2020) called “a radical imaginary” to build an “infrastructure of dissent”, deliberately.

Vandana Shiva (2020) advises that activism without science can be attacked and science disconnected from activism lies hidden in publications. It is critical that popular educators engage with theory about broader socio-economic-political-ecological contexts. Ecofeminism is a theoretical frame insisting on the inextricable connection between capitalism, patriarchy, and socio-ecological breakdown. At the centre of ecofeminism is praxis: theory is forged in the struggles to challenge the brutality of patriarchal capitalism and to form alternative ecofeminist visions of the future.

CONCLUSION

As we teeter on the precipice of climate breakdown, we need to engage subversive ideas and revolutionary energies. Climate crises require the collective efforts of all sectors and levels of society, including ecofeminist popular educators, to work and learn together to produce the combined idealism and realism to reinforce hope with scientific rigour.

This cannot be an individual process – systemic change is crucial. Given the global pandemic within the context of the global climate crisis, we need a collective global response. Six years ago, Naomi Klein warned:

There is a desperate need for the different coalitions of the left to get far more engaged with climate change, because this crisis really forces us to decide what kind of societies we want and puts us on a firm, science-based deadline. (Klein, 2014)

Solidarity must include not just humankind but extend to Nature. The seed of most new infectious diseases lies “in the rapid expansion of the extractives sector – mainly logging and industrial plantation style mono-cropping (such as palm oil and cocoa) and livestock production” (WoMin Alliance, 2020). Thus pandemics, as much as wide-scale starvation

and climatic heating, are brought about through decisions made by people with profits in mind. These are “the enemy” who must be engaged through education and action.

Our actions must demonstrate our serious intent to change the way we produce, consume, and organise our lives. Popular education has developed particular relations and processes to help this negotiation and navigation. The calls for food, water and energy sovereignty reflect the orientation towards organising locally and remaining small enough to encourage direct democratic participation in collective decision-making processes. As Maria Mies reminds us, “The world is our household! Let’s take care of it” (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p. XXX).

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