

## Taking risks: Exploring ecofeminist, climate-just popular education

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### Abstract

*The climate catastrophe is a clarion call to humanity to change how we live. How do radical popular educators respond to this call? We 'join the dots' using climate justice, ecofeminism and our own insights from our engaged activist scholarship as theoretical positions to explore this question. Dominant Western worldviews which separate humans from other life forms contribute to ecological degradation. For climate justice, this hard-wired worldview needs to be disrupted. Drawing on multiple examples from Africa, we conclude that ways to do this require the foregrounding of cognitive justice which includes recognising the validity of multiple knowledges, learning from others and supporting communities' in their struggles for reparation, reclamation and conservation of their land. These actions can be amplified in engagements which disrupt the unsustainable behaviour and policies of the wealthy. We argue that radical popular education in these times is climate just and ecofeminist.*

**Keywords:** popular education, ecofeminism, risk, climate justice, Nature

### Introduction

Twenty people from different countries, speaking different languages, are constructing a risk profile of the Southern African region by naming the risk factors that impact their daily lives. Many of these reflect the Western capitalist, colonialist histories of the participants. They label old tin cans with them. Next, the precarious exercise of stacking the tins on top of one another. The first tin is labeled 'colonialism', that carved up the land and denuded the earth; there is 'capitalist economics' that turned people into competitive individuals and elevated profit above people; there is 'patriarchy', the

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continued domination and degradation of women and Nature; there is ‘rapid urbanization’ that turned people into migrants without homes; there is ‘unemployment’, stacked on top of ‘poverty’, balancing precariously on ‘inequality’; lack of access to clean safe ‘water’ teeters on ‘food insecurity’, and ‘ill health’ without reliable accessible health care, is topped by ‘violence’ against women and children. As we build, we hold our breath: how high can we go until the tower collapses? Just how many risk factors do working-class people and peasants juggle in their daily lives? Finally, ‘drought’ tumbles the stack – it is both the cause of many named risk factors and the final straw that topples survival capacities of communities in this drought-risk prone region. The process is an example of a popular education activity conducted with development and aid workers who participated in a Southern African disaster mitigation course, in 1995. (von Kotze & Holloway, 1996) Since then, 26 years on, the risk factors have increased many-fold, climate crisis ground has shifted further and become more unstable, and there are strong winds blowing.

In the context of the climate catastrophe that is unfolding, we explore and imagine what role radical popular education can play. We follow the interpretation of ‘radical popular education’ as education that leads to the production of ‘really useful knowledge’ (Thompson, 1997) but goes beyond conscientisation towards organising for action. We argue that a climate-just popular education is ecofeminist. We explore parameters of climate-just popular education and provide examples of climate-just popular education in action. We begin with a brief setting of the scene, including a questioning of whether or not we

## Setting the scene

We are both activist-scholars from South Africa. The climate emergency is very much in our hearts, minds and bodies as scientists have declared the Southern African region, which consists of 14 countries, a ‘climate change hotspot’, particularly for women who are the main growers of food, care-givers to the vulnerable and preservers of local Nature – even if their work is not counted in the economy. This means that we will experience much more severe impacts with more frequent droughts, less regular rainfall, less certain food supplies, more cyclones and flooding. The fall-out from such events will be borne particularly by women who are always on the frontline of disaster-risk. Average annual temperatures across Southern Africa may increase by up to 3 degrees by the 2060s and 5 degrees by 2090s – a temperature that would render human life nearly impossible. (WFP, 2021) The drought is no longer just the final straw but infuses every aspect of living and livelihoods: social, economic, environmental, political. This is not just a problem for Southern Africa - the whole planet is impacted. Faced with a deluge of dire warnings from scientists and alarming signals from the environment, confronted with the trauma of starvation and the ongoing violence of displacement, war, migrations, living feels ever more precarious and it is hard to stay positive and hopeful. Especially, as van Diemen (2022) reports, oil companies claim record profits and, ‘In a time when rapid and drastic emission cuts are required, the global economy has been rebooting from a once-in-a-century pandemic, and this is largely powered by burning more coal and gas than ever.’

The planet is in trouble and our survival as a species is in jeopardy. Dilworth (2010, p. 394) suggests this has been known since the early 1970s. Governments at that time either refused to face the ecological facts or played down their seriousness. This is a situation that has not changed in the ensuing 50 years. A central message has been that the current growth trends cannot be sustained, and this has been reconfirmed every year by thousands of headlines, hundreds of conferences and many new scientific studies,

including the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022) report, as much as people's direct experience of increasing global climate events.

The Western worldview with the distinct separation between humans and other life forms, its belief in the validity and importance of modern science, its emphasis on technological development remains strong, especially in the hands of the powerful. While Sachs (2019, p. xi) had already questioned the notion of 'development' in 1993, as a 'ruin in the intellectual landscape', development as limitless economic growth with the maximisation of profits continues to dominate within the global capitalist economy. It also enables access to 'natural resources' which humans are destined to control and conquer for their own ends. There is a symbiotic relationship between the ideology of endless growth, more extraction and consumption by the world's elite, and the ecological crisis. 'The fast-moving climate crisis represents not just an economic threat to people invested in the extractive sectors but also a cosmological threat to the people invested in this worldview' (Klein, 2022).

The impacts of the 'climate crisis' are nothing new for Indigenous people who have for 500 years fought off the social, cultural and environmental genocides of racist settler-colonialism, patriarchy, global capitalism, the 'externalities' of toxic, industrial and consumer waste, the killing, starvation and sickening of their people, forests, lands, air, seas and rivers. (Walter, 2021) We give one example below of how local peasant communities view risk in relation to the destruction of their community structures and cosmological beliefs. Here, it is important to note the importance of our own learning through attentive listening to local perspectives and old wisdoms.

The environmental crises around the world are highlighting multiple and interrelated economic, political, cultural and environmental risks. This is the complex, dangerous environment through which popular educators must navigate and in which we explore radical popular education's role.

We begin by questioning whether there is a purpose to writing this article, given that so much has been said before. We resolve to proceed, drawing on our immersion as ecofeminist, climate justice activist-scholars in order to share our own questions, conundrums and emerging insights.

### *To write or not to write – what is the point?*

As ecofeminists we identify in Salleh's (2017) terms, as 'streetfighters and philosophers.' Much of our praxis is rooted in the belief that we must view the world and struggle intersectionally: by joining the dots amongst racism, sexism, patriarchy, capitalism and ecological degradation. We are clear that the deep social, economic and political problems of our times are not signs of a passing "moment" or a single issue; they rather signal a crisis made up of multiple accumulated risk factors, whose components all strengthen and reinforce each other. In these circumstances we asked ourselves whether we could justify accepting the invitation to reflect on the role radical popular education can play and what shape and form it should take. The following dialogue ensued between us:

I find it hard to write this. We have nothing new to say. Radical popular education continues to play a role in social movements and progressive NGOs. We have been writing about it and have explained why the move to ecofeminism was/is necessary.

Yes and no. Indeed, many of the arguments we have been making again and again over decades. And the context is changing – the planetary limits are being reached and the conditions under which radical popular educators are working are shifting. I believe that it is still important to support ecofeminist movements and groups who are challenging

patriarchy, racism and capitalism on the ground. One of many ways of supporting may be to write about what they are doing in order to amplify their struggles so they do not feel alone – so writing can also be an act of solidarity.

I would agree that empathy and solidarity are crucial, but since we believe that the struggle must come from below, people on the ground are much more knowledgeable and better placed to tell their own stories. The women in the countryside and informal settlements experience the crisis much more directly, and in order to cope and adapt, they call on old wisdom and skills. Besides, will we not be accused of becoming complicit with ‘her words on his lips’, in other words: muscling in and speaking for people?

Is it not more a case of ‘learning from the other’? We read about and are inspired by the many initiatives of ecofeminists in different parts of the world and we recognise that they have a lot to teach us.

So, the tables have turned: it’s no longer the middle-class, formally educated educators who do the teaching. If only we could find a way to really listen, with all our senses!

Given the precariousness of the planet, of our tentative knowledge of how to respond, let’s write the paper as a process of emergence. Let’s take the risk of uncertainty as a starting point and see what insights emerge for radical popular educators in our uncertain present and future.

So, we proceed. We have briefly sketched the realities of ever-present risks confronting poor, working class, marginalised communities vis a vis the climate crisis. We begin by presenting our understanding of climate justice. We then describe ecofeminism which we understand to be an integral part of climate justice. Once we have introduced these concepts, we proceed to discuss radical, climate-just, ecofeminist popular education with its various dimensions.

## Conceptual frame

### *Climate justice*

Language is culturally weighted: The words we use to interpret and make sense of the world colour the way we see it. They are not ‘objective’ tools for description, as the natural sciences would claim. The language used is imbued with power and the knowledge framework or system it draws on is equally representative of specific power relations. As Motta and Esteves (2014) have argued, the politics of knowledge is deeply monological, authoritarian and violent. For example, in isiZulu the word ‘imvelo’ means environment, ecology, and nature. The perception by English-only speakers that the lack of separate words demonstrates the language’s conceptual shallowness builds on racist colonialists’ ideas of the inferiority of ‘natives’ whose language was described as ‘mumbo jumbo’ and whose knowledge was eradicated, deleted, eliminated under colonising regimes. In spoken language, words with multiple meanings are differentiated and clarified through the addition of other words, and references to context. The result is precise, specific and illustrative. For example, ‘drought’ may be endemic to Southern Africa, however, particular drought events are often described by outlining coping mechanisms, rather than one word, for example ‘the time when children were sent to town’, or ‘the time of picking wild berries’.

The choice of the words ‘climate justice’ rather than ‘climate change’ allows us to point to the interconnected struggles when responding to multiple accumulating crises. If

we speak of climate justice, instead of climate change, we are already drawing attention to the ethical and political dimensions, and to the injustices and inequalities that must be driving any suggested adaptation or mitigation measures. Debunking the notion that accelerated climate change is natural and normal cannot be overstressed: The increase in carbon dioxide through growth-lead industrialisation, the greenhouse effect, the acidifying of oceans, over-exploitation of fisheries and forests, the poisoning of soil, are results of human actions. Further, ecological degradations and related conditions of livelihoods often give rise to or coincide with social conflicts involving matters of ethnicity or gender, class or caste, or territorial rights. Climate justice implies that human actions skew conditions so they benefit some, while harming others. This process is deeply political.

‘Climate justice’ is a term and, more than that, a movement that acknowledges inequities and addresses them directly through long term mitigation, adaptation and transformative strategies. The term ‘climate justice’ began to gain traction in the late 1990s following a wide range of activities by social and environmental justice movements that emerged in response to the operations of the fossil fuel industry and, later, to what their members saw as the failed global climate governance model at COP15 in Copenhagen. The term continues to gain momentum in discussions about sustainable development, climate change, mitigation and adaptation (Holifield et al, 2018; Tokar, 2019).

Climate justice, as elaborated in the Climate Justice Charter (SAFSC, 2020), is concerned with food sovereignty, health, economic activity, gender equity, housing, transportation, and more. It demands fundamental change in the political and economic order towards socio-economic, gender and racial justice. It is about foregrounding those people who have contributed least to ‘crises’ and are most affected by them, both in terms of their adaptation and in acknowledgement of the knowledge they bring to the finding of just solutions. Women often occupy the frontlines of environmental justice movements because they experience climate instability more acutely than other groups. Therefore, gender justice is a crucial part of a just transition. Climate justice activists call for ‘systems change not climate change’. They also call to be recognized as knowledge creators in their own right and not just consumers of knowledge (Chiponda, 2022; Visvanathan, 2005). Ecofeminism can be seen as an elaboration of climate justice.

### *Ecofeminism*

Ecofeminists argue the inseparable connection of capitalism, patriarchy, racism and ecological breakdown. Salleh (Institute for Global Development [IGD], 2021, p. 3) states that compartmentalizing issues as ‘single issues’, for example, drought, health or gender-based violence, inadvertently ‘disguises existing, often, intersectional power relations because it stops people “joining the dots”’.

Mies and Shiva (2014, p. 47) have traced the historical roots of the connection between capitalism, patriarchy and ecological breakdown. Put succinctly, an ecofeminist perspective posits that current dominant development processes and decisions are shaped by the view that Nature is at the service of humans (Randriamaro & Hargreaves, 2019). This view reduces Nature to ‘natural resources’, inanimate ‘things’ to be exploited for human consumption and profit. Additionally, dominant divisions of labor assign women primary responsibility for production, processing and preparation of food, provisioning of water and fuel, and caring for family. Because of these roles, women – working-class, Indigenous and peasant women in particular – rely on Nature and healthy environments.

Even though provision of sustenance and care-work are vital, a masculinist economy treats them as non-work.

Ecofeminism holds that patriarchy, where men's perspectives and interests are at the apex of hierarchical systems, dehumanizes women, excludes women from decision-making, brings women's labor into exploitative service of the economy and men's interests in households and communities. It is why ecofeminists argue that poor women must be central in strivings for climate justice. An ecofeminist framework holds promise for both the understanding and attainment of climate justice.

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.

Ecofeminist orientations challenge one of the core reasons for advancement of climate emergencies - the invalid barrier between knowledge (held by 'specialists') and ignorance (the 'non-specialist'). This has led to knowledge of Nature being articulated either as raw material to be used for beneficiating production or as fragmented pieces separated from human systems and human lives. As Burt (2020) elaborates, non-specialist knowledge is often viewed as raw material to be interpreted and formulated by 'the specialist', and in the process local knowledge and practices are distorted or reformulated within a capitalist frame. The global extractive food system is a good illustration of this. Another example of what knowledge is seen as valuable is how formal education curricula are geared for the production of economic actors, and not for ecological caring. Orr (2004) argues that western educational systems and practices equip people to become more effective vandals of the Earth.

An important component of climate justice and ecofeminism is cognitive justice, and Nadeau (2020, p. 5), as a 'white settler', describes how decolonisation is a 'process of unlearning a worldview and values and ways of acting and being in the world that have prohibited and continue to prohibit any meaningful and mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people'. It is a process which is both deeply personal and political.

## **Ecofeminist climate-just radical popular education**

The description of 'the tin can' workshop at the beginning of the paper contains the essence of all the 'ingredients' of popular education: community-based, working class people participating actively in dialogue, constructing the knowledge they need to develop a deeper understanding of the dire conditions that threaten their lives. The process of learning together draws on all the senses and faculties, engaging 'hands, hearts and heads' as much as different roots of knowledge and insight, recognising embodied ways of knowing, as illustrated by Menakem (2017) who describes racialised trauma and resilience expressed through the body. Yet, while radical popular education, clearly defined as education for deep transformation, would build on new insights towards action, popular education often 'stalls' at the point of conscientisation. Radical ecofeminist popular education is collective, deeply participatory and democratic, with the 'really useful knowledge' built through critical dialogue giving rise to organising for action. (Thompson, 1997; Crowther, Martin & Shaw, 1999; Crowther, Galloway & Martin, 2005; von Kotze, 2022)

So, what makes radical popular education climate-just and ecofeminist? In a previous paper (Walters & von Kotze, 2021), we highlighted what we understand by ecofeminist popular education. It does all that feminist popular education does, and more. As Mohanty (2012) succinctly 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. (Mohanty, 2012, p. viii)

Ecofeminist climate-just radical popular education deliberately pursues socio-ecological justice; however, it requires organising for progressive action in response to new insights, to become ‘radical’. A key to this is cognitive justice which acknowledges and incorporates multiple knowledges (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

### *Cognitive justice: Recognizing multiple knowledges*

Calls for including other knowledges from Indigenous, working class people, in particular women, have long been part of bottom-up development discourses and community education (Chambers, 1983). Capitalism is built on alienations and hierarchical arrangements that are re-produced through separation, dispossession, divisions. Lange et al. (2021) describe Indigenous knowledge systems as profoundly relational and argue that we need to move from the ‘separation paradigm’ which carries the techno-industrial values of Western Eurocentric culture, towards the ‘relationality paradigm’ that can take us beyond entrenched ways of thinking and being. Lange et al (2021, p. 25) are careful not to reinforce the dichotomy and argue that they do not see one paradigm replacing the other but there is a need for understandings ‘to be stretched toward deeper approaches that transform our very patterns of our thinking/being/doing’.

de Sousa Santos (2014), informed by decolonial theory, highlighted that the struggle for global justice is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice and he introduced the idea of epistemicide, as ‘the murder of knowledge’. The ideology of science and technology has long dismissed other knowledges as ‘old wives’ tales’ with women’s embodied knowledge being ‘intuitive’. Knowledge systems built over generations as cultures developed expertise in survival within particular ecological contexts have been undermined and deleted. Ecofeminist critiques of science arose out of women’s lived experience in a world of gender discrimination, heterosexism, environmental devastation and threat, increasing militarism, and nuclear proliferation. As Glazebrook (2017, p.437) has pointed out, ‘Changing this world means understanding it through historical and other analyses that uncover the role of science and technology in supporting and enabling the degradation of ecosystems, labor conditions, and lived experience.’ Cognitive justice is at the root of ecofeminism which recognises different and diverse knowledges, also as a way to avoid what Adichie (2018) termed ‘the dangers of a single story’. Arguing for an embodied materialism, Salleh (2017, p.206) outlines how women’s activities and work are punctuated by the complex rhythms of life. Observing how hydrological engineers would control water flows by stochastic calculation, she comments how this very process of knowledge-creation constitutes illusory epistemology. Furthermore, “The time-negating separation of body and mind, earth and water, is an early gesture toward the steadying of women’s subaltern wisdoms.”

## *Nature as educator*

Resilience for the 1% of humanity is a very different matter than for the 99%. For many agrarian people, farmers, fishers, Indigenous people, whose lives are intertwined with Nature, the catastrophe has already happened, and some have found ways to survive. They have also developed deep understandings from which others could learn. People living in close proximity with Nature form close alliances because their mutual survival depends on it. We give two short examples to illustrate learning from / with Nature.

Sicelo Mbatha grew up in a remote rural village in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa. He says,

We humans have acquired much information, but have lost much wisdom. We have enough information to dig out the last lump of coal, to drain the last drop of oil, yet we lack the wisdom to protect our one and only home and source of life. (Mbatha et al, 2021, p. 273)

He is a wilderness guide who dedicates his life to ‘rekindle the wildness in all of us, to bring people into the presence of wildness and help open their souls to its beauty, wisdom and infinite power to heal’. (Mbatha et al, 2021, p.4) He has a deep understanding of the coexistence of all life forms. He, like Vandana Shiva, believes that if we have deep recognition of our interconnectedness we will act to conserve and preserve Nature. Mbatha’s life’s work is dedicated to this end. Drawing on his Zulu culture, he knows that humans are socio-ecological beings, entangled with Nature. He acknowledges that his wilderness stories don’t come from him but are told by the rivers, the lonely buffalo, the butterflies, ‘I am one with them. I breathe the same air as the lion roaring for the moonrise and the dung beetle foraging underfoot’ (p.3) and describes himself as lucky ‘to receive teachings from more living beings than I can count – from the fragile butterfly to the great, ponderous elephant.’ (Mbatha & Pitt, 2021, p.7) Mbatha is addressing one of the major questions confronting educators globally: how do we humans redefine our relationships with Nature through co-existence?

Mbatha gives detailed examples of how animals and plants have been his teachers. He describes how openness to listen and learn brought about unlearning and changes in perspective, but also embracing new lessons and enacting new insights:

I have learned about the power of forgiveness from the jaws of a crocodile. I have learned about grief from a bereaved baboon. I have learned about resilience from the burnt protea. I learned about ubuntu from the elephant. By walking on the ancient elephant pathways, I have learned that love can wash the dust from our eyes, and I have seen what wisdom these pathways have brought to so many others. (Mbatha & Pitt, 2021, p. 273-274)

As a wilderness guide he shares this learning with many groups of people helping them to heal and recognise their oneness with Nature.

Similarly, Jacklyn Cock (2018, p. 134) writes the biography of an ancestral river because she believes ‘Supporting living rivers involves supporting human needs and rights, as well as local ecologies.’

Rivers can connect us not only to nature, from which many urban people are alienated, but also to questions of justice. Understanding that we are all part of nature in the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe means recognising both our ecological and social interdependence and our shared vulnerability. (Cock, 2018, p.12)

In particular, as rivers have a destination:



we can learn from the strength and certainty with which they travel. I believe this learning is valuable because acknowledging the past, and the inter-generational, racialised privileges, damages and denials it established and perpetuates, is necessary for a shared future. (Cock, 2018, p.13)

The land, too, is a holder of knowledge, a keeper of memories, an ontological mirror and ethical teacher. A long walk through a drought-ravaged semi-desert can teach us about the past and how it came to be parched; relics of human habitation will tell a story of activities that asked the earth to yield and give – but also of exploitation and violence. Like the river, the land is not a passive object – and anyone who has seen protea plants emerging out of a burned, charred landscape will know that there is much below the surface, unseen, that will sprout new life. Mbatha and Pitt (2021) and Clegg (2021) illustrate this clearly as they talk about initiation rites and passages of growing up. The land is sacred: it connects us to the ancestors and their counsel. It offers identity and belonging, comfort and security.

### *Indigenous knowledge and skills*

In his study of hunter-gatherers and the agricultural system, Brody (2002) suggests that hunter-gatherers were much more settled than farmers because they needed to know the land like the back of their hands. Their knowledge and skills are tied to specific locations as they need to meet their needs now – not as a result of long-term strategic planning:

Far from being simple or primitive, the economic and cultural techniques of hunter-gatherers were hard to see and difficult to assess precisely because they were meeting needs of mobility, decision-making and resource harvesting that were both varied and subtle. (Brody, 2002, p. 122)

Living frugally and sustainably they demonstrate how most of the world had lived for most of human history. The daily livelihood activities of poor and homeless people often resemble those of hunter-gatherers yet their actions are often derogatively described as ‘hustling’, rather than ‘resource mobilising’, as they live off the shards from the affluent. Like traditional knowledge and wisdom, their knowledge is contextual as the stories and testimonies of Indigenous and marginalised people are usually connected to a ‘home-place’.

Snively et al. (2016) make the distinction thus: while to ‘settler minds’ land is property, real estate, capital, a resource, to many local people it is their library and pharmacy, their grocery store and the source of everything that sustains them. They use the metaphor of braiding to illustrate the intimate connection:

We braid cedar bark to make beautiful baskets, bracelets and blankets. When braiding hair, kindness and love can flow between the braids. Linked by braiding, there is a certain reciprocity amongst strands, all the strands hold together. Each strand remains a separate entity, a certain tension is required, but all strands come together to form the whole. When we braid Indigenous Science with Western Science we acknowledge that both ways of knowing are legitimate forms of knowledge. For Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Knowledge (Indigenous Science) is a gift. It cannot be simply bought and sold. Certain obligations are attached. The more something is shared, the greater becomes its value. (Snively et al, 2016, p. 4)

How can we learn from the certainty and strength of a river? How do we go about hearing and seeing the lessons offered by animals, as described by Mbatha? How do we learn and

teach the mutual reciprocal relationships between Nature and humans? As educators, how do we initiate or guide such learning, when this learning is new to us as well? We suggest that education must include a wide range of different people, and other life forms, bringing different knowledge, perspectives, histories, cultural roots and experiences to the dialogue, so that new views and insights are opened. Educators must ask the difficult questions that uncover interests, power, privilege and damage. Respectful of others' dignity – whether they are an elephant, a plant or a person, as Mbatha describes, all our survival is mutually dependent on finding a common language and path. One place to look, as we show below, is amongst Indigenous, working class, peasant communities, women, and the more-than-human. Writing about public pedagogy, Motta and Esteva (2014, p. 5) suggest that, 'Practices of visibilisation (be that textual, visual, embodied, audio) are an act of public pedagogy embedded in ethical and political commitments to recognising the epistemological privilege of those represented as uneducated, irrational and illiterate'. Thus, 'bracketing' and suspending our preconceptions and understandings in order to better listen, is a good start.

### *Lessons from African wisdom*

At a drought mitigation workshop in 1987, participants were asked to explain the cause of the recent drought emergency in Zambia. One participant suggested that communities had not come together to worship their ancestors, and the disregard for cultural dictates had caused the disaster. Derisive laughter from disaster managers present was the response. Yet, analysing the deep, lasting effects of hazards such as drought in the light of current climate emergencies, it is clear how important community links and chains of care and support are. What s/he was suggesting is that drought emergencies must be addressed collectively - an action that requires organising. Mobilising for rituals rooted in past practices would be a way to do this. It is only by standing together, practicing 'ubuntu' that groups and communities can change their conditions.

Ubuntu is an African-wide ethical paradigm that expresses the obligation to look after one another and the environment. Ubuntu - abbreviated from 'Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu' - literally means: a person is a person through people'. It expresses an obligation to look after one another and the environment, believing that all our wellbeing is mutually contingent. Ubuntu, being for/through the other relies on an encounter with the other, a coming into being through the other, a building of relations and relationships. This is the core of care and, arguably, of education.

As an ethics of interrelationships, it is situated in the communitarian social fabric of caring and sharing. Terreblanche (2018, p. 169) states that ubuntu may equal and even exceed, socialist notions of a 'radical egalitarianism'. While ubuntu has been misappropriated and co-opted for opportunistic ventures there are contemporary moves to tease out those tenets of ubuntu that could catalyse a project of radical transformation to a more ecologically just future. There is complementarity between ubuntu and Latin America's buen vivir. Both reject modernity's nature-society duality and regard restorative justice as the principal mechanism to achieve harmony with the cosmos.

Nonhle Mbuthuma (2022, p. 91), the spokesperson for the Amadiba Crisis Committee of Xolobeni, a rural village in Pondoland, South Africa, describes how their community, and those still to come, would not survive if ubuntu was not practised. She illustrates ubuntu at work when she says:

This culture, it helps people love and care for each other. For example, barter exchange: If you know that that family does not have livestock, you think "no let me do that and let me share". You know sharing is very rare these days but my community has the kind of culture

where if I left my child at home with your children, there is no problem. I'm not worried that my child will be stolen.... I am very proud of our community to say that we are feeding ourselves. (Mbuthuma, 2022, p. 91)

Since the 1950s when colonial powers were trying to colonise the whole of Pondoland, the Amapondo have been fighting for their right to determine their own future. Their land is agricultural and ancestral. Their ancestors fought for the land so that the present and future generations can survive and live in a peaceful environment.

Today, Xolobeni is at the forefront of the fight for environmental and sustainable rights in their area. In 2021 the community won a legal battle against Australian mining company Mineral Commodities (MRC) which sought to access what is claimed to be the world's 10th-largest deposit of ilmenite, a core titanium ore, on the Umgungundlovu land. 'They must not bring us mines. We do not want mines. They must not carry out extractivism in our oceans because that ocean gives us life. They must bring clinics, hospitals and fix the roads; they must do what we want when we want it,' said a resident who called herself Mam'Sonjica. (Ngcuka, 2022)

Learning from communities who are conserving their land, who know how to live sustainably, with a sense of 'enoughness', is key for radical ecofeminist climate-just popular education. It's the practice of cognitive justice where Indigenous, working class, peasant women and men's knowledge, skills and understandings are placed at the centre. It's a source of inspiration in the quest to challenge the worldview which has humans as superior and separate from Nature. It can also be referred to as 'two-eyed seeing' which is the gift of multiple perspectives treasured by many Aboriginal people (Institute for integrative science and health, n.d.).

### ***Radical ecofeminist popular education – creative solidarity in action***

Lange (2018) suggests,

[...] in a process-based pedagogy, restorative and transformative learning are continuously unfolding into each other like spiraling water. [...] Restorative learning welcomes intuitive knowledge as a process of growing attunement and ancient practices that 'speak' outside Western frameworks. Restorative learning is open to stories, rituals and ceremonies that can help us to access forgotten channels of knowing / being. (Lange, 2018, p. 40)

Given the hard-wired belief in Western society that humans are separate and superior from Nature, and that the individual is more important than the collective, radical popular educators, along with many others in society, will need to grapple with how this is best achieved. If Nature is in crisis, so are we.

In order to do the hard work of unlearning, re-imagining and planning for cultural alternatives that nurture and respect life on Earth, are critically important. Which ways of knowing and what kind of knowledge is most helpful in this time, and how can the education affirm life, rather than sow more fear and uncertainty? Radical popular education has long traditions of challenging the hierarchical dualisms of culture/nature, mind/body, science/folk knowledge, reason/feelings, materialism/spirituality. It does this through use of creative, participatory methodologies which include play, aesthetics, drama, storytelling. One of these is song. Singing has always played an important role in popular education – as people sing together they form stronger bonds and the trust grows. Johnny Clegg, South African songwriter, musician, dancer, describes how song and song-writing became the lessons of migrant culture and 'instructions' for children and youth regarding what lay ahead of them when it would be their turn to leave home, as migrant

workers: ‘The cycle of leaving and returning became ingrained in migrant culture [...]. The leaving (rupture), the struggle for sustenance in the city (the fight), and the return (either with booty or a broken spirit) were the main themes of songs in this genre.’ (Clegg, 2021, p. 160).

Dramatic performances in community venues and public spaces that told stories of struggles were a useful tool by unionized workers to draw attention to the wider ramifications of their struggle and call for solidarity and support. Plays about climate justice by/for working class people performed in public spaces and community ‘commons’ will hopefully emerge again, now that the COVID pandemic lock-down conditions have been lifted.

Focusing on what we eat and drink, food systems and food insecurity, nutritional health and hunger are a good starting point for radical popular education. Beginning with what people know from their daily lives can light a spark about climate justice easier than talking about carbon emissions. The biggest impact of the climate crisis will be on agricultural and food systems, says the IPCC’s (2022) recent report on food security and impacts. Current processes of food production, availability and access to nourishing foods, especially in vulnerable regions, undermine food security and nutrition. The bottom line is that by eating more plant-based foods and less meat, the affluent world can drastically reduce the carbon emissions that come from the food systems, by a third. However, as the IPCC report shows, the ability to produce food relies on water, soil fertility and pollination and as global warming weakens soil health, overall food productivity is undermined. Those who attempt to grow the food will feel the effects most.

One task for educators has always been to put seemingly disparate pieces together, connecting the dots to tell a whole story and stretch learners’ critical imaginations to see the interrelatedness and connections in life. For example, the connections need to be made between the exploited, casualised workers on a fruit farm, and the shiny ‘perfect’ fruit on the supermarket shelves. Similarly, while peasants raise and consume fowl sustainably, the consumption of meat by the affluent is often disconnected from the animals who were slaughtered. The task of a radical ecofeminist popular educator might be to make the food system that produces hamburgers and steaks visible: the story of using animals as food should include an account of their brutal treatment in factory farms and slaughterhouses, the environmental impact of animal agriculture, and the impact of meat production on world hunger and human health (Sulcas, 2022).

The emotional component of learning/teaching is strong because we are dealing with fear: the fear of climate destabilisation, the fear of hazardous events, the fear from continuing uncertainty, the fear of impending doom, the fear of having to make changes irrespective of whether ready or not, the fear of ridicule, and so on. Importantly, the message delivered (for example regarding diet) may be perceived as threatening people’s values which may result in hardening their resistance rather than encouraging openness to change. Therefore, educators need to respond empathetically and with care, providing safety and support, for exploring the unknown. The aim is to surface moral and ethical sensibilities which link to the integrity, honesty, respect, courage, and responsibility necessary to explore alternative ways of living.

### *Imagining alternative futures*

Much of the learning about alternative ways of being and creating livelihoods happens in concrete physical living conditions of communities and neighbourhoods in working class areas and informal settlements. Increasingly, young and old people come together to establish community gardens, food growing initiatives and clean-up operations. The

direct agency exercised in participating to re-claim the commons within the constraints of structures contributes to healing and forges a collective spirit. As described elsewhere, many of these initiatives include education. (Walters & von Kotze, 2021; Walters, 2022)

An essential element of climate-just popular education is imagining alternative futures. There are community organisations educating and organising both to support immediate struggles on the ground and to imagine alternative futures. A network of ecofeminists, the WoMin African Alliance has a programme on Advancing African Ecofeminist Development Alternatives (AAEDA) that is ecofeminist, post-extractivist and transformative:

This entails building African ecofeminist perspectives, conceptualizing, and advancing an African Ecofeminist concept of the Just Transition, defining just renewable energy alternatives, and supporting the democratization of decision-making through struggles for consent rights of women and their communities. (WoMin, n.d.-a)

WoMin African Alliance are working across Africa in solidarity with peasant, Indigenous and working-class women who are leading communities to challenge degradation of their land and destruction of their livelihoods. WoMin collects inspirational ‘stories of struggles and resistance’ that illustrate what women, collectively, do to defend the commons. (WoMin, n.d.-a, WoMin, n.d.-b) For example, a group of women in Bargny in Senegal (Coalition for Fair Fisheries [CFFA], 2021) have been bound to the ocean over centuries. Commercial fishing and changes in climate are threatening their ways of life. They are defending the ocean and their land – they are imagining alternatives which allow them to continue with ancient ways. In Burkina Faso, women are saying no to gold mining as they defend a future for their children. Over 500 women’s associations in West African countries, the NSS (Nous Sommes la Solution), have organised themselves into an ecofeminist movement that promotes agroecology and food sovereignty. They promote sustainable farming practices, often rooted in traditional practices held by women. As the leader, Mariama Soko, says: ‘It’s the Indigenous knowledge and the practices that have always supported food sovereignty and this knowhow is in the hands of the women ... Ecofeminism for me is the respect for all that we have around us.’ (Shryock, 2021)

WoMin runs a Feminist Political School which crosses national boundaries, brings people together when possible to learn from one another, to deepen their analysis of the issues and to build solidarity amongst one another. An ecofeminist analysis is not a theoretical construct – to many African women who are defending their lives and livelihoods, it makes practical sense.

In the educational and organising work, they invite possibilities of other knowledges and ways of seeing and being in the world, interrogating how Eurocentric thought, knowledge and power structures dominate present societies, and how that thought and knowledge have consistently undermined colonised people. These processes help in the imagination of alternative futures.

With the urgent need to re-imagine, revise, re-create an alternative, more just, healthy and sustainable world, a greater number of educators are using the imagination and aesthetics – they use drama, play, artistic forms, film, experiential learning of various kinds (Spring & Clover, 2021; Butterwick & Roy, 2016). Art-making can create impulses towards an alternative future; strong rhythms, drums, singing, dance are part of any collective rituals as much as healing ceremonies performed by traditional healers, and they offer cathartic as much as aesthetic experiences. Plays can ignite, they can light fires and elicit strong affective responses both in the makers/performers and in the audience because the process appeals to the senses and emotions. Participants of performance event engage with ‘hands, hearts and heads’ all at the same time: they act, they feel and they

reason. (Walters & von Kotze, 2021) Experiences as feminist popular educators have taught us this; we now need to consciously add ecofeminist sensibilities to strengthen our efforts.

## Conclusion

The title of this paper suggests ‘taking risks’: for us, this has meant trying to find something useful to say that has not been articulated over and over again. We think, we both learned much in the process of writing and hope the emergent messages are clear. The climate catastrophe is a clarion call to humanity to change how we live. As Oksala, (2018, p. 231) states, “the reason for calling capitalism into question today is no longer merely our exploitative social and economic relationships to other human beings but the immeasurable devastation we are causing to the non-human world”. In the process of dialoguing and writing we have discovered many communities, networks, movements, and organisations around the world that try to prefigure ways of undertaking collective action which is more just, equal, respectful – and thus contributing to an inclusive movement for feminist ecopolitics. We recognise that our practice as radical ecofeminist popular educators will deepen through active support for those at the forefront of confronting capitalism, patriarchy, racism and ecological degradation. Dawson (2022) argues:

In the face of mounting environmental and social calamities, the only coherent stance must be to join Indigenous and local communities around the world in demanding the return of stolen land, respect for their sovereignty, and a radical transformation of the Colonialism that characterizes the unsustainable behavior and policies of the wealthy. (Dawson, 2022, para. 13)

As radical popular educators, inspired by climate and epistemological justice and ecofeminism, we can usefully learn from and support communities’ struggling for reparation, with reclaiming and conserving their land. Those lessons can be amplified in engagements which disrupt the unsustainable behaviour and policies of the wealthy. If social movements’ educational practices decentre ‘the knowing-subject of capitalist coloniality through unveiling the violent logics at the heart of this practice of knowing’ (Motta & Esteves, 2014, p. 9) radical popular educators can contribute by asking questions that deepen collective understandings of how best to unsettle the Western worldviews about relationships between humans and Nature. They can contribute through research and by using their access to power for raising issues. In this way we give credence to the feminist assertion that ‘another world is possible’.

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