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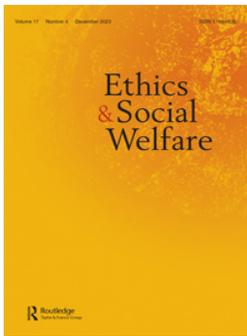
*Youth and Community Work for Climate Justice:
Towards an Ecocentric Ethics for Practice*

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Youth and Community Work for Climate Justice: Towards an Ecocentric Ethics for Practice

J. Gorman ^a, A. Baker ^a, T. Corney ^a and T. Cooper ^b

^aInstitute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; ^bSchool of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper traces an expanded ethical perspective for youth and community work (YCW) practice in response to the climate and biodiversity crises. Discussing ecological ethics, we problematise the liberal humanist emphasis on utilitarianism and reject it as inappropriate for YCW in these times. Instead, we argue for an ecocentric practice ethic which intrinsically values the non-human world. To advance an ecocentric ethical perspective for YCW we draw on decolonial and posthuman theory. Inspired by a Freirean dialogical approach, we apply these theoretical domains as lenses to problematise YCW practice, seeking a generative dialogue between perspectives. Through this, we identify three emergent tasks for ecocentric YCW: (a) thinking and acting beyond the individual; (b) cultivating reciprocal care and connection and (c) practicing critical pedagogies of place. This third element builds on YCW's social pedagogic tradition and provides a practical means to incorporate ecocentric ideas into practice. We conclude that, given the unprecedented implications of climate crises and biodiversity collapse, a YCW ethics that does not consider these implications for young people is insufficient for the context of practice today. Enacting an ecocentric YCW ethics requires ongoing collective praxis and dialogue between young people, practitioners, educators, managers and students.

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Introduction

This paper traces an expanded ethical perspective for youth and community work (YCW) in a time of change, challenge and opportunity brought about by the climate and biodiversity crises. We present a discussion of ecological ethics that considers how YCW and social occupations more broadly have related to the environment (section 2). This highlights a need for greater ethical theorisation in response to the eco-crisis (section 3). To advance such a theorisation, we draw on ethico-political perspectives of decolonial and posthuman theory (section 4). Inspired by Freire's (2000) dialogical approach, we apply

CONTACT J. Gorman  Jamie.gorman@vu.edu.au  Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities, Victoria University, PO Box 8444, Alice Springs, NT 0871, Melbourne, Australia

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these theoretical domains as lenses to problematise YCW practice, seeking a generative dialogue between theoretical perspectives.

At the outset we note our positionality as authors, which is shaped by our history, context and intellectual/practice traditions. All four authors are trained youth and community workers living and working in Mparntwe on Arrernte Country (Alice Springs) and on lands of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne) and Wadjak Noongar Country in Boorloo (Perth, Western Australia). Three authors are of white European descent. Jamie and Alison were born in Ireland and Canada respectively, while Tim is an Australian-born descendant of Cornish and Scottish migrants. Trudi was born in the UK, of European heritage, but with Indonesian ancestry. Australia is a settler colonial nation with a history marred by systematic dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through frontier violence and assimilationist policies and practices which continue to this day (Walter 2010). This colonial history in which colonisers remain and continue a culture of domination reflects the ongoing impacts of what Moreton-Robinson (2003, 38) calls post-colonising: 'the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions [First Nations people] as belonging but not belonging.' Australia is a self-proclaimed multicultural nation with a paradoxical history of creating systems, policies and practices that are rooted in white supremacy (e.g. White Australia Policy and Northern Territory Intervention [Barton 2011]).

Advancing an ecological ethics for YCW practice requires consideration of our historical moment. Colonialism shaped and continues to remake the globe, imbricated in capitalism and neoliberal governance to create our current power relations, with land, other species and each other. Acknowledging this, we heed the warnings of Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy (2014, 3) that decolonisation is not a metaphor or an abstract intellectual exercise. To be meaningful, they argue it 'must involve repatriation of land' (7). Similarly, we acknowledge the danger of 'settler moves to innocence' (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014, 3), where decolonial theory is employed to relieve settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, or indeed gain professional kudos, without giving up land, power or privilege. As such, this paper is not attempting to 'decolonise' YCW, rather we seek to think with decolonial theory – along with posthumanism – to gesture towards an expanded ethics beyond a liberal humanist frame. Liberal humanism is a worldview which emerged from the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. While liberal humanism contributed positively to the development of human rights, it also assumed that the white, male, straight human was the natural ideal in a hierarchy which ordered humanity and claimed exceptionalism regarding non-human others (Braidotti 2013). This has implications for how we think about the eco-crisis and requires critical reflexivity to examine the roots/assumptions of our own training/practices in a way that allows for reimagining. This paper aims to contribute to this reimagining along with other recent scholarly contributions (Montero 2022; Pisani 2023) while recognising it requires collective effort, in communities of practice with a diversity of perspectives.

Young people, YCW and the eco-crisis: impacts and responses

In this section we consider how the eco-crisis is impacting young people, how they are responding and the role for YCW in this. The unfolding climate and biodiversity crises

pose a direct existential threat to humanity which is being experienced in unique and diverse ways by all people, particularly those that are young. There is 'a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all' (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2022, 24). Steps must continue to be taken to reduce harm from human-induced climate change and biodiversity loss by rapidly phasing out fossil fuels, but human societies must also now adapt to this new normal (IPCC 2022). The task of responding and adapting falls most sharply on groups facing oppression (Sultana 2022), including young people and future generations who face an intergenerational injustice by being forced to bear burdens of past generations' inaction (Wiess 2013). Furthermore, young people experience risks disproportionately due to other intersecting identities, such as poverty, class, ethnicity, geography, gender and sexual identity which shape young people's varied exposure to environmental risks.

In the face of these differentiated risks and despite structural and symbolic violence of adultist structures of governance (Corney et al. 2022), young people are deeply engaged in and leading global movements for climate justice (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). YCW has an ethical responsibility to accompany them in this. Civil disobedience of groups like Fridays for Future has attracted much attention, but equally important are young people's 'Do-It-Ourselves' (DIO) world-building practices (Pickard 2022) and other everyday forms of 'quiet activism' (Steele et al. 2021). Given the unprecedented implications of climate chaos and biodiversity collapse – and young people's activism in response – we argue that a YCW ethics that does not consider the implications of the eco-crisis for young people is insufficient for the context of practice today.

YCW has a long tradition of environmental engagement (Williamson and Basarab 2019), yet lags behind the current wave of young people's climate activism (Gorman 2021). Williamson (2021) argues that:

Climate issues unavoidably impinge on youth work policy and practice. Youth work must unequivocally commit to addressing them. But at that interface, multiple options present themselves and are enabled or obstructed by familiar themes: the policy context, the context where the youth work is taking place, the knowledge and skills and capacity and confidence of the youth workers involved, the position, interests and aspirations of the young people taking part, and the resources available for deployment on the project in progress. (65)

YCW responses to the climate crisis will be diverse and situated as workers and young people navigate these themes and contexts. Yet however eco-social YCW may look in local contexts, a clear understanding of environmental ethics is essential. YCW – whether emancipatory or integrationist – promotes autonomy and agency of young people to support their capacity for critical thought and civic action (Corney et al. 2020). At its simplest then, an ethics of green YCW should seek to contribute to young people's capacities for critical thought and action when faced with the eco-crisis. However the unprecedented nature of the eco-crisis requires practitioners to reflect deeply on, problematise and unsettle assumptions about what ethical practice looks like in these troubling times.

Eco-social YCW has received little scholarly attention, particularly regarding ethical implications for practice. For example, the Commonwealth of Nations International Code of Ethical Practice for Youth Work (Corney 2014) has no specific reference to an environmental or ecological ethical imperative in YCW practice. An emerging body of

literature has explored eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2022) and practices of resilience, hope and action (Brophy, Olson, and Paul 2022). Cognate social practices to YCW have more fully considered implications of the eco-crisis. There is an emerging literature in social work theorising eco-social practice (Besthorn 2012; Boetto 2019; Coates and Gray 2018; Panagiolanos et al. 2022) and social work codes of ethics have a burgeoning focus on environment (Bowles et al. 2016). Eco-social community development is also receiving scholarly attention (Harley and Scandrett 2019) and informing practice standards (International Association for Community Development [IACD] 2018). Yet Schusler, Krings, and Hernández (2019) note that consideration of young people is largely absent from environmental social work literature, a gap that community development has only recently begun to fill (Batsleer, Rowley, and Lüküslü 2023). Within liberal humanist traditions, human rights remain a powerful means to articulate concerns about ethical implications of the climate crisis (Daly 2022). However, while recognising the value and importance of human rights, this paper seeks to extend YCW's ethical basis beyond liberal humanist frameworks towards a more ecocentric ethics.

Ethical approaches to the environment

Is it morally right to permit logging companies to clear-cut rainforests? Should we protect rainforests because of their role in sequestering carbon pollution? Should they be protected as a home to billions of creatures? These questions are the domain of environmental ethics which considers moral dilemmas around human relationships to nature. In this section, we consider how an ecocentric ethic differs from other ethical perspectives on environment and make a case for an ecocentric YCW ethic. How the questions above are resolved depends upon one's perspective on ethics. One key distinction is whether one values the non-human world instrumentally (for benefits received, i.e. the forest's carbon sequestration) or intrinsically (in its own right, i.e. forest as home to manifold manifestations of life). Affording nature only instrumental value is a central tenet of utilitarian ethics, and much Eurocentric (i.e. rooted in European intellectual traditions) ethical theory has been utilitarian (Hinman 2013). Utilitarian theory proposed (with variants and caveats) that ethical decision-making should only focus on outcomes for human beings. Ethical decision-making should be informed by whatever act or rule brought the greatest good (happiness/ pleasure/ use-value) to the greatest number of people. Utilitarian ethical decision-making requires a calculus whereby perceived benefits for human beings are weighed against perceived harms for human beings. A fundamental presumption is that non-human species have no intrinsic ethical claims, and other species have ethical salience only to the extent that their suffering or extinction affects humans. Thus, all utilitarian theory is inherently anthropocentric.

Deontological ethical theories such as Kantian ethics (Kant and Wood 2018), bases ethical decision-making upon assessments of intentions and respect for persons. Like utilitarianism, Kantian ethics prioritises rationality but unlike utilitarianism, rejects any consideration of emotions or outcomes when applying rationality, to determine a person's duty in any situation. Svoboda (2015) suggests that deontological ethics can be applied to environmental ethics. However, deontological insistence that outcomes should not be considered when making ethical choices sits uneasily with an environmental context where outcomes of continued inaction are likely to be devastating to the planet.

Aristotle, whose thinking provides a foundation for virtue ethics, claims in *Politics* (Bk. 1, Ch. 8) that 'nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man [*sic*]', a view in concert with Judeo-Christian subjugation and domination of the earth¹ (Primavesi 2013) and with Locke's doctrine of the earth as property of 'Men' [*sic*] which is foundational to liberal humanism. An important counterpoint to this view within Judeo-Christian thought is ecologically sensitive theology that emphasises human stewardship of the earth (Liederbach 2022), and the perspectives of ecological liberation theology (Vuola 2011) and ecofeminist theology (Gebara 2023). Although some faith-based responses question anthropocentrism, anthropocentric instrumental approaches that prioritise human self-interest remain dominant in Eurocentric faith-based thought. This leads to seeking to exploit or protect the environment to further human interests, whether that be profit, or a basis for development. Such an approach lies behind discourses of ecological modernisation (Mol, Sonnenfeld, and Spaargaren 2011), and the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) definition of sustainable development: 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987, 1).

To temper anthropocentrism, Singer (2015 [1975]) argued from a utilitarian perspective that sentience is the relevant ethical consideration, meaning that animal suffering should be considered as ethically relevant by utilitarians. Others have extended Singer's argument by contending that plant species are sentient (Bakker 2022). Some states have sought to incorporate nature into existing legal frameworks, such as Ecuador's granting of constitutional rights to nature in 2008 and Aotearoa New Zealand's 2017 Te Awa Tupua Act recognising the legal personhood of the Whanganui river (Salmond, Brierley, and Hikuroa 2019). Singer's position is considered controversial by some ethicists (Villanueva 2018), but from an ecological perspective it offers only indirect ethical justification for sentience-centred basis for preserving ecosystem. Standard critiques of utilitarianism include the problem of choosing yardsticks to measure benefit and the difficulty of assessing future benefits and harms. Furthermore, in the context of the climate emergency, utilitarianism has serious shortcomings as it assumes that natural systems have no intrinsic value, and are only of value according to how they benefit or harm humans, – or following Singer – sentient species.

In contrast to Singer's reformist approach, ecocentric ethics questions the assumed superiority of human beings over the natural world and recognises the innate value of nature. Ecocentric ethics critiques instrumental environmental protection as shallow, calling for a 'deep ecology' that promotes a 'biospheric egalitarianism' (Naess 1973, 95) recognising rights of species and ecosystems regardless of their value to humans. An ecocentric approach which intrinsically values the natural world is commonplace in non-Western and Indigenous cultures (Gratani et al. 2016). Within Eurocentric intellectual traditions, ecocentric ethics have informed thinking in systems theory (Capra and Luisi 2014), alternative economics (Schumacher 1993) and the posthuman turn, discussed below. Common to this disparate literature is calling into question liberal humanist assumptions about human beings' relationship of domination over the natural world.

The eco-crisis raises ethical dilemmas for all social occupations, requiring these human-focused practices to reflect on their assumptions about humanity's relationship with the planet. Pisani (2023, 703) identifies 'an element of human exceptionalism [...] at the heart of youth work'. Similarly Banks, Shevellar, and Narayanan (2023, 14) identifies a 'tacit

anthropocentric bias' in community development traditions, which has also been noted in social work literature (Thysell and Cuadra 2022). Pisani (2023) advances a proposal for an ecocentric theorisation of youth work drawing on critical posthumanism to frame 'an ethically and politically committed youth work practice that might imagine and work towards new possibilities for human and non-human co-existence' (2023, p. 703). Responding to and building on Pisani's (2023) call for a posthuman YCW, we now turn to consider an ecocentric ethics for YCW.

Towards ecocentric YCW practice

Acknowledging that the eco-crisis is a product of an anthropocentric worldview, we advance the claim that an ethics of eco-social YCW should be constructed from an ecocentric viewpoint which sees the ecological and the social as ontologically entangled and equally intrinsically valuable. To expand YCW's ethical theorisation to respond to the eco-crisis, in this section we draw on thinking from posthumanism and decolonial theories. While these literatures are distinct, both reject human exceptionalism and centre interconnectedness between humans and non-human entities. Furthermore, both seek to undermine and transform individualistic, possessive, and competitive values and practices of colonialism and capitalism (Zembylas 2018).

Introducing the theoretical perspectives

Next, we introduce these theoretical perspectives before identifying three tasks for ecocentric YCW.

Decolonial theory

Decolonial theory emerged from Indigenous and non-White scholars' attention to ongoing dynamics of colonialism, including settler-colonialism. Decolonial theory has been one of three primary epistemic approaches, alongside anti-colonial and postcolonial studies, to challenge coloniality. For Quijano (2000), coloniality is the dark side of modernity, which relies upon violence towards and dispossession of Indigenous people globally and exploitation of non-European populations. The mechanism of this violence and dispossession is the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2007, 216) which includes control of economy (including exploitation of land/natural resources and labour), gender and sexuality, authority, subjectivity and knowledge. This system perpetuates dehumanisation based on 'race', gender and religious categories (for example) and separation of human/non-humans through institutions, discourses and practices (Lugones 2010). Relentless exploitation of natural resources and environmental destruction has led colonialism to be a significant driver of climate crisis and climate-related vulnerability (IPCC 2022, 12). But it has also driven the erasure of Indigenous ontologies, cosmologies, knowledge systems and languages (Grosfoguel 2007).

Decolonial scholarship and activism seeks to counter structures and impacts of colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2018). Decolonial theory seeks to centre voices and knowledges on the margins and engage in 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo 2009, 160) to challenge and subvert Western-centric ways of knowing. This requires a move away from

universalist assumptions towards the ‘pluriversal’ (Escobar 2011) and supporting movements of resistance and liberation for colonised and marginalised communities including returning of land in settler-colonies (Tuck and Yang 2012). Decolonial approaches are diverse and complex, reflecting geographic, social and political nuances and drawing on a range of theory and disciplinary perspectives. For this paper we focus on decolonial ‘critical pedagogies’ which recognise place and land as a political site of knowledge-making and grassroots action (Simpson 2017) as a powerful starting point for reimagining an eco-centric YCW approach.

Posthumanism

Posthumanism is a theoretical approach which emerged from the humanities and social sciences as scholars grappled with changing ecological, economic and technological conditions of the late 20th and 21st centuries (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013; 2018a; 2018b; Haraway 2016; Hayles 1999). Posthuman scholars point to how technology is reshaping our subjectivity and nature is re-asserting its agency following centuries of colonial and capitalist exploitation (Braidotti 2013; 2018a). Posthumanism questions taken-for-granted assumptions about liberal humanist worldview which underpin the colonial worldview (Spivek 1988) and have mired us in our present planetary predicament. Posthuman scholars such as Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (2016) call for critical creativity and collective thinking and acting in response to this situation.

Emerging tasks for eco-centric YCW

Through a dialogue between these perspectives, we identify three emergent tasks for an ecocentric YCW. These are thinking and acting beyond the individual, cultivating reciprocal care and connection and practicing critical pedagogies of place.

Thinking and acting beyond bounded individualism

Liberal humanism, provides an intellectual foundation for colonialism and capitalism, proclaiming that ‘Man’ [*sic*] is a sovereign individual with rights and entitlements. This understanding remains hegemonic today. It responsabilises individuals, obfuscates structural inequality and prevents greater understanding of our interdependence as we face wicked problems like pandemics and climate crisis. To overcome this outdated conceptualisation of what it means to be human, we must listen deeply to those cultures which never thought like this, as well as to posthumanism scholars who are expanding it. Indigenous worldviews emphasise a relationality where ‘one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory’ (Moreton-Robinson 2021, 16). Other non-Western worldviews are similarly based on a radical interdependence between human, non-human and spiritual worlds (Mbembe 2016). The notion that these worlds exist together in a non-linear temporality (McGrath, Rademaker, and Troy 2023) and that they are interconnected and mutually enhancing is captured through Escobar’s (2011) idea of the pluriverse as a world where many worlds fit. Escobar (2011) stresses that:

We need to stop burdening the Earth with the dualisms of the past centuries, and acknowledge the radical interrelatedness, openness, and plurality that inhabit it. To accomplish this goal, we need to start thinking about human practice in terms of ontological design, or the design of other worlds and knowledges. (139)

What Escobar identifies is a current ontological struggle, where the Eurocentric worldview is colonising and erasing alternatives so that we are unable to imagine alternative ways of being, knowing and doing. From within the humanist intellectual project, post-humanism advances such an alternative way of being by foregrounding relationality as well as our complex entanglements with non-humans. Rather than understanding the world from the perspective of 'Man', our 'frame of reference becomes the world, in all its open-ended, inter-relational, transnational, multi-sexed, and trans-species flows of becoming' (Braidotti 2018, 18). Similarly, Donna Haraway (2016) seeks inoculation against human exceptionalism and eschews humanist ontology of autopoiesis (bounded individualism), emphasizing instead the 'sympoiesis' of collective and interdependent systems. As Haraway (2016, 4) puts it, 'We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations ... We become with each other or not at all'.

For YCW, this ethical task requires an unsettling of power relations that maintain not just individualism but white supremacy and human exceptionalism. Pisani (2023) suggest that the ethical praxis of posthuman YCW is to engage:

[t]he young person, as a knowing subject ... in a pedagogical process that seeks to step away from the normative Eurocentric humanist and anthropocentric lens, to decentre the self, and critically reflect on one's position (and privileges) within broader power relations. (711)

In settler colonies, this includes problematising land relations which see the earth purely as a resource (Liboiron 2021) and supporting Indigenous self-determination, land rights and cultural security. As settlers in settler-colonies (the authors) our task as YCWs is to find ways to embody humble allyship and deep listening to First Nations people who can guide us beyond bounded individualism.

Cultivating reciprocal care and connection

Reflecting through decolonial and posthuman lenses opens us to the ethical task of developing an ethic of care and responsiveness in the face of eco-crisis. First Nations activists and scholars have long prioritised an affective ethic of care for one another and the earth (Whyte and Cuomo 2015). This Indigenous ethic of care is grounded in a relationality (Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth 2020) which challenges individualism and patriarchal order (Moreton-Robinson 2021), sharing similarities with the ethics of care advanced by Gilligan (1995) and Chatzidakis et al. (2021). However, while a non-Indigenous ethics of care centralises human relationships and care for each other, First Nations ethics extends what Kimmerer (2017, 368) calls the 'covenant of reciprocity' to recognise that mutual wellbeing is fostered through reciprocal care for both people and land.

Posthumanism has also sought to extend human relationality to the non-human world. Braidotti and Braidotti (2016) advocate an ethical practice of developing new social imaginaries that engage with the complexities of our times. For Haraway (2016), this requires a commitment to:

training the mind and the imagination to go visiting, to venture off the beaten path to meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met. (130)

Critical dialogue and problem-posing will be familiar to YCW, particularly in Freire's (2000) social pedagogic tradition (Corney et al. 2023). What may be unsettling is the ethical responsibility for widening and wilding our worldview to include non-humans in the dialogue. This is particularly challenging given that youth work has its origins in the rise of liberalism and industrial capitalism in nineteenth century UK (Cooper 2018; Edwards and Shaafee 2018). We must consider how our discipline of YCW – as a product of the capitalist age – can recoup what was lost in the Enlightenment while maintaining positive aspects such as a rejection of feudalism. This requires ongoing dialogue between First Nations and non-White youth workers and those of White European origin (Collard and Palmer 2010). It also requires us to become sensitive to the non-human world, which was silenced and denigrated in the Enlightenment worldview. We must cultivate 'response-ability' that avoids apathy, despair and naïve hope in techno-fixes. Thinking in such terms requires a 'repositioning of youth' and of community within YCW practice, 'a decentring that simultaneously also expands ethical accountability beyond the human and individualist autonomy creating assemblages of human and non-human others' (Pisani 2023, 711).

The ethical task which follows is to recognise our situated, embodied entanglement with one another in all the collective grief and joy of our times. For Pisani (2023, 710) a posthuman understanding of YCW favours 'processes of becoming', from heterogenous social locations, 'over identities of essence'. This is an 'understanding of YCW as simultaneously being transformed and transforming, affected and affecting, provides alternative possibilities for subjectivity, ethical frameworks, and hopes and desires' (710). This requires a radical love (hooks 1994) and a renewal of our response-ability to the here-and-now present – to the ongoingness of living and dying. This returns us to Haraway's (2016) 'sympoiesis': a concept with which to tell new stories that support our 'staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements [of the past] and in telling the tale of still possible recuperation' (125). This hopeful position recognises our agency and need for change while acknowledging the structural and historical forces we face. As Braidotti (2018, 184) reminds us, each present moment contains 'both the record of what we are ceasing to be and the seeds of what we are in the process of becoming, at the same time'. To support us in telling new stories, we now turn to critical pedagogies of place.

Practicing critical pedagogies of place

Indigenous scholars critique Euro-centric concepts of education as one of the primary structures in which the colonial matrix of power operates (Andreotti, Ahenakew, and Cooper 2011). Critical Indigenous pedagogies of place arise from the place-based epistemology of First Nations people which situates knowledge – and therefore learning – in relationship to land and country (for example Disbray and Martin 2018). By providing generative ways to understand and shift relations to land, and move toward an epistemic perspective based on reciprocity, place-based pedagogies problematise

settler-colonialism (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014) and can open-up spaces for an ecocentric pedagogy. Consideration of this approach is important for YCW, which is a social pedagogic practice (Corney et al. 2023), but has generally focused on the 'social', human aspects rather than 'place'. Many pedagogies of place share a common root with YCW in Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy (Ajaps and Mbah 2022; Gruenewald 2003; Johnson 2012). As such, critical pedagogies of place provide an embodied and practical means to support YCWs to incorporate critical and ecocentric ideas into practice and action.

To embed critical pedagogies of place within YCW, we can draw from a range of scholarship focused on place as a site for renewed connection, reflection and learning. For example, critical place-based inquiry (Langran and DeWitt 2020; Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014) and place conscious learning (Greenwood 2019), which advocate for:

- Critical analysis and consciousness of colonial culture, examination of the past and confronting inequalities in their local communities (learning to read the world).
- Understanding the importance of place, understanding how land has nurtured each of us and considering how we can live with other-than-human entities.
- Apprenticing ourselves to places for mutual wellbeing and care, specifically learning from multiple and layered stories and histories.

Greenwood (2019) presents a framework for 'decolonisation of the settler soul' which is premised on 'human beings committed to reinhabiting their interior lives and their places'. Critical Indigenous Pedagogy of Place (Trinidad 2012) offers Indigenous young people a sense of agency and critical understanding of place as social context, through centring of Indigenous epistemologies that are rooted in place. Trinidad (2012) calls this indigenisation: specifically focusing on rootedness and spirituality to create spaces for retelling and reclaiming of language, history and cultural practices.

Such scholarship is echoed by bell hooks (2008) who argues that present social and ecological crises are brought about by our inability to experience empathy with the earth, each other and particularly for those people impacted by environmental injustice. hooks contends that it is dominator culture that has broken our sense of connection and empathy with earth. For her, the will-to power stands in contrast with the will to meaning, where humans 'survive soulfully' through culture: stories, myths, fables and folklore (hooks 2008, 29). She argues that making meaning together is central to our capacity 'to create community, to make connections, to love' (hooks 2008, 29). Trinidad's (2012) writing on Indigenisation from the Native Hawaiian perspective aligns with hooks' quest for soulful survival that moves us toward reversing ecological, and thus spiritual, destruction:

Reinhabitation consists of re-creating an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place. It is the art of re-storing detailed knowledge of a place and restoring a sense of care and rootedness (Trinidad 2012, 5).

Similarly, Greenwood's (2019) place conscious learning seeks rehabilitation of our interior worlds and localities through learning that deepens our place-consciousness, confronts our collective past and listens to stories of place that can 'foster curiosity and a sense of care and responsibility' (370).

Trinidad (2012) and Greenwood's (2019) pedagogies of place align with hooks' (2008) call to develop our roles as witnesses and custodians of earth through a pedagogic relationship with nature: 'if we listen, nature will teach us' (25). Relating to nature as a teacher challenges the extractivist culture of domination and offers possibilities for deepening place-based critical consciousness and can create conditions for empathy with the earth and drive regenerative action. Advocates of localism (Panagioloanos et al. 2022) call for projects like community food growing, renewable energy production, repair cafes and bicycle maintenance programmes as restorative acts of slow resistance that can generate feelings of wellbeing and fulfilment. Pedagogies of place extend this to a deeper consideration of reciprocity, mutuality and spiritual connection in care for the non-human world. For YCW practitioners, such place-based projects can be a first step towards 'quiet activism', which Steele et al. (2021, 1) describe as 'socially innovative community responses to the climate emergency at the local scale'. They offer a practice framework which aligns with the social pedagogic approach of YCW. Beginning by generating 'powerful stories' through dialogue that become 'the compasses by which we navigate our place in the world' (13), the authors outline a process of local consciousness raising, alliance building and action to drive and scale efforts to address the climate crisis.

Implications for YCW practice

What are the implications of the ecocentric perspective for YCW practice? From a holistic and radical perspective, eco-centric YCW means more than just avoidance of activities that are actively damaging to the environment and/or occasional conservation activities. It means fundamentally questioning how goals and methods used in YCW promote values (e.g. greed or altruism; competition or reciprocity) that sustain worldviews that are damaging to connection and a caring approach to the environment. This means we must engage in a critical dialogue and apply a thorough-going critique of purposes, practices and activities of YCW in ways that respond consciously and deliberately to the eco-crisis. We have argued that most Eurocentric ethical theories are found wanting because of their anthropocentric focus. While recognising that the ethics of care (Chatzidakis et al. 2021; Gilligan 1995) may provide a useful basis for eco-centric ethics, adopting such an approach requires YCW to critically reflect, problematise and unsettle some deeply held worldviews and assumptions in order to extend the 'covenant of reciprocity' to the non-human world (Kimmerer 2017, 368). What is the nature of 'youth' if we think beyond bounded individualism to reveal our interdependence and sympoiesis? What does promoting young people's autonomy and agency look like from the vantage point of a relational and communal social imaginary which connects us to place, to one another and the non-human world? How should YCW, particularly in settler colonial contexts, respond to historical and ongoing processes of colonialism to support respect for Indigenous cultures, sovereignty and land rights?

An ecocentric ethic requires YCW to consider questions such as these, which have no easy answers and cannot be addressed by YCW alone. However, practice can begin to imagine and enact responses through critical praxis (Freire 2000). We suggest that a place-based critical social pedagogy presents potential for ecocentric critical consciousness raising and action. Through such praxis and prefigurative action, YCW practitioners can be 'quiet activists' supporting climate action at a local scale (Steele et al. 2021). There

are challenges to this work. Neoliberal youth policy focuses YCW on individualised and programmatic interventions and a stultifying emphasis on value for money (McMahon 2021) which may preclude collective and critical pedagogy. Bodies concerned with preparation, training and professional development of YCW practitioners such as universities and occupational associations can play an important supporting role in expanding space for eco-social YCW. Educational programme structures may need to be expanded, guidance developed (e.g. All-Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work [AIEB] 2022) and Continuous Practice Development opportunities provided for current practitioners (Nolan and Gorman 2023). Research that supports collaborative learning with practitioners and generates knowledge around good eco-social YCW practice will also be invaluable. Revision of existing codes of ethics and practice will be required, and jurisdictions which are yet to develop codes should consider eco-social ethics at the outset.

Conclusion

This paper traces an expanded ecocentric ethics for YCW practice with the aim of supporting practitioners, educators, managers and students to respond to the eco-crisis. Our theorisation draws on decolonial and posthuman theory to problematise liberal humanist hegemony tacit to YCW practice. We identified three emergent tasks for ecocentric YCW: thinking and acting beyond the individual, cultivating reciprocal care and connection and practicing pedagogies of place. Ethical responses to the eco-crisis may be guided by theory but must emerge from the ground up through an embodied and situated praxis. We therefore invite readers – YCW practitioners, scholars and students – to engage discursively with these ideas, to reflect on YCW practice from their own location and to reach out to share these with us and others. We extend this invitation with the caution of Tuck and Yang (2012) in mind. Writing from a decolonial perspective in the United States, they remind us that ‘until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism’ (19). Whether we are living in settler colonies or elsewhere, meaningful solidarity with people, place and planet has real material consequences which must be ethically embraced and acted upon.

Note

1. *Genesis* 1: 27–28 states: ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over fish of the sea, and over fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth’ (King James Bible).

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Notes on contributors

J. Gorman is a Research Fellow at Victoria University. His research, teaching and practice interests lie at the intersections of youth and community work, social pedagogy, environmental social movements, climate justice and climate policy-making.

A. Baker is Associate Professor at Victoria University. Her teaching, supervision and research interests include youth and community work practice, youth and community studies, community psychology and creative and participatory approaches to research and action.

T. Corney is a Professor at Victoria University. His teaching, supervision and research interests include human rights, youth policy, youth transitions, education and social pedagogy, vocational and apprenticeship training, young workers and professional youth and community work practice.

T. Cooper is an Associate Professor at Edith Cowan University, Australia where she leads the Youth Work degree programme. Her research includes youth work education, and youth work theory, and social programme evaluation. She is an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow. Previously she was a youth worker in the UK.

ORCID

J. Gorman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5153-2045>

A. Baker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6830-3185>

T. Corney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1980-6835>

T. Cooper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4758-5881>

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