

Going Remote: Ecofeminist Education for the Reluctantly Contained

LeAnn M. Holland, St. Lawrence University

Going Remote = Going Stir-Crazy

There are so many buzzwords being introduced to the English language that most of us never took great notice of before 2020: the “new normal,” “pandemic,” “uncertain times,” “maskne,” “Zoom,” or “social distancing,” just to name a few. One I have been ruminating on these strange days is “going remote.” I don’t imagine K-12 teachers expected, entering their profession years ago, that there would be a time when a significant portion of their work was held online. The e-classroom has wonderful potential, but we might agree that there are many aspects of *teaching* remotely that are not what we wish they could be. Remote learning can conjure other associations, like how a remote control works: with limited batteries, easily lost or distant, robotic, and programmed. It’s easy to imagine that teachers everywhere feel this strain most keenly, with jobs already so pressed upon by public views and culture.

As months drag on through managing a worldwide virus, the pseudo-idiom “going remote” has become synonymous with exhaustion and feeling stir-crazy. Teachers are quick to recognize that students struggle being away from their cohort of friends – their primary social environments – and strive to modify their remote environments to the best of their abilities so that students don’t wiggle out of focus by using Zoom backgrounds or music montages to capture young senses. An easier, more “natural fix” seems to be going outside. After all, the accumulation of environmental education research confirms the many health and learning benefits of nature. Below are a few examples of teacher and parent resourcefulness.

My second graders went outside as “Nature Detectives” with plastic magnifying glasses and explored their yards for 20 minutes. They came back inside to our Zoom meeting to share

the treasures of nature they found — colored leaves, seeds, grass blades, feathers, small stones, small plants with roots still attached, flower petals, acorns, pinecones and seed pods. *Laura Avolio, second grade [teacher], Orchard View Elementary School, Grand Rapids, Mich.*

I am trying to encourage students to go outside and take notice of the nature that surrounds them. This can be on a large or small scale, a piece of moss, a line of ants, or their favorite spot in the woods. The assignment simply boils down to go outside, slow down, and take notice of your surroundings. *William J. Gunther, eighth grade [teacher], Valley Central Middle School in Montgomery, N.Y.*

I go to the lake near my house to watch a blue heron each week. *Fatima Shiliwala, kindergarten, Piscataway, N.J.*

Moreover, with the rising tide of research on climate change, many teachers see it as a moral imperative to teach environmental sustainability to the next generation, no matter their subject expertise. It may not be in their class’s purview to discuss science content like greenhouse effects or political content like the Paris Agreement, but it is undoubtedly the responsibility of all adults to be sure that our next generation can stay alive on this planet. Herein the remote classroom can suddenly become a place of opportunity to teach empathy for the natural world and awareness of one’s

effect on it that an indoors, moderated, climate-controlled school building might not otherwise teach. When we are together in one classroom, the shared environment is clear but also easily monitored and moderated. This allows the learning environment itself to blend seamlessly into the background - there even if we are not aware of it. Throughout the pandemic our students have been spread out in unique environments, each of them in their own home-place, sharing one world but further apart than before. The new variety of classroom environments, particularly outdoor environments, gives us a fresh opportunity to teach and make nature connections with our students.

The primary aim of this paper is to showcase how the philosophical research on ecofeminist education as a social ethic is worth the attention of those who work with children and adolescents, especially now that many schools have gone remote. To do this, I describe the perfect storm of events that has led the American public to seek outdoor experiences to alleviate negative effects of social distancing, the differences in student access to outdoor spaces as a feminist issue, then outline some foundational environmental education philosophies to ethically guide students participating in this new migration. The secondary aim is to share ideas and exercises that teachers might do with students – as simple as using our words about nature strategically – to assist our students in building a relationship with their natural environment that is most likely to support a sustainable future.

The 2020 Great Migration Outdoors

Many teachers and students today are reluctantly contained. One possible remedy for going stir-crazy is to go outside. An interesting effect of us all attempting this at once is what I call the “2020 Great Migration Outdoors,” when many Americans try to conquer remoteness, paradoxically, by embracing their deepest feelings of isolation in the most primitive environments, via distance hiking or peak bagging challenges.¹ It is promising that so

¹ One might recognize the irony of naming any privileged migration “Great” in light of the social

many are enjoying the great outdoors, but notable research says outdoor recreational escapism does not result in moral choices or learned environmentally sustainable behaviors: for example, behavioral psychologists have observed that the more errant trash we see on a path, the more likely people are to [deposit even more trash](#) where they see it. How can this happen? We continue depositing trash, because humans do not always connect with their environment. We also add to the trash because of unconscious biases against nature. Our language and culture has views nature as effeminate, which often equates in a paternalistic society to being lesser, expendable, or necessary to control, use and abuse, rather than harmonize with. [Ecofeminism identifies gender biases like these as problematic, especially in relation to Human supremacy over Nature](#). Ecofeminism argues that we must understand the necessary inherent value of the environment, prioritize its health, and correct the dominant attitude (and [attitude of dominance](#)). If we do not take action against environmental discrimination, our other baser behaviors or values will take precedence.

Perhaps when we go outside we are socially distanced, but we are not considering the effects on the places we visit. Humans are carrying their “social isolation” mentality from indoor spaces into outdoor ones, assuming inadvertently (and irresponsibly, in a colonizing way), that there are not already social others present in the new locale. There is a difference between practices for environmental sustainability and escapist behaviors, and the latter can easily occur if not kept in check. For example, climber and local of the small Sierra Mountain town Bishop, California, Paula Flakser expressed, “I, personally, am livid seeing people use this as an opportunity to take a climbing vacation ‘away from it all.’ You are not away from it all. [You are just going to a different type of community.](#)” Every time you travel, you can leave your home safely behind, but you are entering another community space, another town, a home of others. Ecofeminists take the idea of entering a different community a step further, extending the concept of “a

justice issues and history surrounding the last U.S. “Great Migration.”

different type of community” to the non-human world. When you go outside, you enter the domestic realm of creatures that already work in delicate communion. An ecosystem is a community in a deep sense, created carefully over time and in constant motion. It is a key principle of ecofeminism, much like the popular critical race theory (ecofeminism itself is categorized as a “critical theory”), to be able to see the autonomy or the intrinsic value of another's perspective. Recognizing that going outside is traveling to a *new* community is a human lesson in our privilege of picking our existential plotline. The extra privilege we have as humans to oscillate between human-only and human-animal is socially constructed, and as such, it carries with it a social ethic.

Humans have a flair for the dramatic, for freedom, for pushing boundaries and rules. Going outside to let our animalistic side reign is romantic, and romance is art. Our capacity for aesthetic feelings is what makes us into meaning-making creatures. Surely students can have freedom of expression and imagination without abandoning their moral obligations; some might say that it is even through aesthetic feelings that we find reason to act ethically.² People are defined by being both specifically human and necessarily of nature. Just as we cannot pretend to be human yet apart from nature, we cannot operate as an animal without still being human. We are an amalgamation of animal and human in all places and at all times; this fact is as inescapable as the reality of a pandemic.

Again, this is particularly viable in light of the 2020 Great Migration Outdoors, including parents attending to their children outside for non-school or work time now that indoor spaces are associated with more effort, students being assigned outdoor activities for classroom curricula supplementation, and the fear of indoor spaces spreading COVID-19. Couple this with 2020’s year of social justice and liberation

² Philosopher Emily Brady makes the argument that appreciation for what Immanuel Kant famously called the sublime in nature leads us to being better eco-citizens. See her 2013 book *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*.

protests, and we see spark at the meeting of justice and the outdoors. Who is able to go outside? Who can “control” and make safe the political outdoor environment? Who can afford balconies, private ski trips for gym class, expensive sports gear,³ or going mask-less on hiking trails? Who has a right to the outdoors and to geo-spatial travel? Outdoor spaces are taking on new meaning again, shifting our mindsets with our new patterns of behavior, and we are presented with an unexpected but globally opportune ecofeminist teachable moment. Huey-li Li tells us that ecofeminist pedagogy is an ongoing ecological project. We need a pedagogy that combats climate change and reconsiders the relationship between humans and nature. Today, we need a philosophy for going remote.

Philosophies for Going Remote

There are historical conceptualizations to aid teachers wanting to teach students how to emplace, to orient, their human nature in a broader non-human environment, to help students build a more sustainable relationship with their various environments, indoors and outdoors. Henry David Thoreau is a great example of someone who has theorized a way of honoring what is wild within us but also what is socially responsible, taking our romantic attitude toward nature and giving it ethical force. He was a social and environmental activist, a counterculture rebel, famously quoted for saying, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” At first glance, such a claim seems to play into the wishful spirit of reckless abandon, the aforementioned desire for recreational escapism to a wild and primitive land. However, this is a sentence so often taken out of context. Thoreau makes it clear that walking in nature is an activity to be taken only while deliberately, keenly aware of the stirring sounds of nonhuman life everywhere. For example, in his most read book *Walden*, Thoreau spends a chapter devoted

³ Witness the famous gear blog Trailspace trying to enter this public conversation. The racial and gender vitriol in the open comments section of this online article is evidence alone of students’ intense need to know these subjects.

to “Sounds” of the woods and another to “Brute Neighbors” describing the phoebes, mice, squirrels, and ants inhabiting their common area. He demonstrates how we can “speak” with the non-human world.⁴

One of the defining concepts of Thoreau’s work is *solitude*. Again, we might be inclined to interpret this as being alone, literally remote, like many of us feel at present. In fact, Thoreau means solitude to be an [exercise in introspection](#). As an American Transcendentalist, he was part of a small clique of intellectualists who believed humans could “transcend” or rise beyond our bodies to a special self-awareness. This is not quite ecofeminists’ goal today, though, as we spend plenty of time transcending natural experience with online learning. Instead of Thoreau’s solitude finding our *self* in nature no matter where one is or how many people are around him/her, we want to practice what I like to call “socialtude” – an attitude primed to find *others* no matter where we are.

Americans of the past and indigenous people from all civilizations have sustained communities with very few physically present people. Many native nomadic tribes stayed small and agile, teaching on the move and including non-humans to expand their social systems. Social remoteness was still a reality before Wi-Fi, but under quite different circumstances. In mentioning any minoritized or feminist perspectives, historical or modern, it is especially important to point out that students are embodying these roles anew with this type of social distancing. For instance, we recognize that the pandemic [disproportionately](#) affects the lives of Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the U.S. And educators know that issues are compounding so that students who previously felt less impact, now have new problems with their unequal access to either technology and/or outdoor spaces. Knowing these factors, Thoreau’s solitude as an exercise in introspection can be most helpful for bridging the gaps between distinct student experiences, especially relating to geographical limitations.

⁴ [Richard Higgin’s Thoreau and the Language of Trees](#) and [Ed Mooney’s Excursions with Thoreau](#) are recommended readings.

When we might otherwise assume that concrete exposure to non-human nature like plants and animals is paramount to development, we can now understand better how reflection and imagination might stand in and support the tangible, tactile sensory experiences we are missing in students’ most challenging environmental situations.

Ecofeminism: A COVID Social Survival Guide?

Earlier I made reference to the amalgamation of... that is human nature. I return to this point again to explain why we cannot just directly reference Thoreau with students. A new ecological relationship theory of nature is long overdue in our culture. Romanticists like Thoreau gave us ways to look at the natural world, and their laudation of wilderness has inspired the U.S. to create national parks. But, ecofeminism points out that being in nature is only one step to being good to nature. Thus, our traditional cultural ethic for nature in the US – a stewardship ethic inspired by America’s first Puritan colonists – is insufficient.⁵ You might recognize the stewardship ethic in [quotes from President Theodore Roosevelt](#) as the US was first setting aside public land for preservation or recreation: “We have fallen heirs to the most glorious heritage a people ever received, and each one must do his (sic) part if we wish to show that the nation is worthy of its good fortune.” The earth is treated as a *man’s* inheritance that he is required to spend wisely. More obviously today, it seems the stewardship environmental ethic only serves to rationalize mankind’s continued domination of nature. Relying only on a stewardship ethic is problematic, especially at a time when the U.S. is quite divided about social justice issues. This country has a long history of colonization and [subordination of women, indigenous peoples, and non-humans](#). Perpetuating a problematic ethic is mis-educative, especially if that ethic has proven to align itself with philosophies we might collectively wish to outgrow.

⁵ For this history, see Roderick Nash’s book [Wilderness and the American Mind](#).

Past cultures have constructed an understanding of all non-human nature as part of their *social* milieu. They educate their children with stories, religion, or logic that insists on birds, lakes, rivers, rocks, and insects having incalculable cultural and intrinsic value as guardians, friends, neighbors, or family. Thus, the solution lies in how we describe, model and explain [our socio-cultural relationship to nature](#). Language is our means of explaining to others our relationship to nature. Because ecofeminism is about redefining cultural relationships, ecofeminist education can be seen as intentional language education.

It is our current tendency to divide the word human from the word nature. I gave an example of this earlier with the term “human nature.” In the English language, even the personal reference to our natural selves, when it is meant to convey unity is two-worded. And, just like Thoreau’s word solitude differs from our colloquial usage, so too can teachers’ choice of words and their definitions impact how students perceive reality. What might be said as an ordinary, assumed distinction can quickly grow into a conceptual chasm. Language usage impacts students’ “possibilities of thought and being.” By introducing language that makes nature recognizable as another aspect of our social world, with creatures and things as entities to meet and know, we are doing ecofeminist pedagogy.

One consideration of practicing ecofeminism is to be sure we avoid an overly personifying or anthropomorphizing nonhuman nature. It can be easy to fall into the pattern of using nature language as we have been taught. For example, in my teaching I struggle to make animals seem neutral and not always either “cute” or “scary” to students. Animals are their own creatures and have value beyond humans’ [limited experience](#) with them. Experiential educator Karla A. Henderson believes, as I do, that [teachers](#) that use the natural environment as a tool in (or outside of) their classrooms have an ethical responsibility to do so wisely. Although we may have more experience with being outdoors, we can still inadvertently bulldoze minority ways of knowing. Instead, we might avoid anthropomorphic communication by embracing language of the social, feminine,

caring, communal and delicate. Awe and respect are good ways to promote concern, empathy and interest in natural others versus focusing on likes and dislikes or instrumental use.

Ecofeminist Exercises for Remote Learners

There are many great environmental educators, practitioners, and researchers working every day to create a new ethic for the care and valuation of nature. The exercises for ecofeminist pedagogy outdoors that I present here are not new ideas; they are time-tested by outdoor educators, well-researched in other areas of environmental or experiential education, and they continue to hold promise for making progress toward learning to interact with nature. Moreover, I have selected a few that I have personally witnessed or tried with students that would work well when going remote.

Can we guarantee ecofeminism is the be-all, end-all solution to saving the planet? No, of course not. But with so much at stake, why not use this moment of social experiment that we are otherwise engulfed in to try something for nature? The following are hopeful, thoughtful outdoor education exercises with ecofeminist, sustainable commitments.

1. Assign a moon walk where students and parents step outside at night to search for fireflies, strange calls, or bats. Tell them to wait seven minutes in the darkness first before turning on any lights, so their eyes can begin to adjust to the low light. Then ask them to notice something that surprises or inspires wonder in them, then ask them to research more about their observations. This instills interest in a world outside of our norm, especially a nighttime world where other plants and animals have skills for the dark and chill nights that humans do not. Nighttime in some areas may be daunting for those unused to being out. Try the same exercise in the daytime first.
2. Many natural pollinators like bats and bees are often villainized creatures. Start by introducing students to the more exciting facts

- about them, such as echolocation or hive minds. Ask students to practice gratitude and whisper or think a quiet “[thank you](#)” to a pollinator when they see one next.
3. This classic lesson is one borrowed from Thoreau: Assign students a nature journal to document their surroundings, human and non-human. Students should observe the grandest and minutest things to expand their awareness of unique beings that are not so distant, big and small. For older students, a teacher could assign specific ethical questions about nature brought about by the pandemic, such as questions of student access to natural environments.
 4. Start a photography project where students are asked to choose an animal, organism or natural object to watch daily. They document with one picture a day how nature is both stable and ever-changing. Ask students to relate this to their experiences of changing and growing each day to recognize our commonalities with non-human nature.
 5. Another classic: Assign [bird](#) identifications to students. Birds are often considered feminine-gendered animals, and in many languages take on the “female” form of their nouns. They are also dramatically reactive to their environment, and through bird behavior and species number tracking we can see many climatic changes and human impact. While some birds like starlings live relatively well in cities beside humans, others die daily encountering man made planes, glass, and cars, demonstrating their precarious relationship with humans. Moreover, birding or hobbyist ornithology, [a historically wealthy pastime for white males](#), could benefit from the expanding interest of young students and more inclusivity.
 6. If you teach older students, consider assigning a popular ecofeminist book like [Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass](#). For younger students, [Over and Under the Pond](#) or [Hey Little Ant](#) are good choices.
 7. Arrange a virtual field trip that connects classrooms with forest rangers on National Park sites or teacher-friends across the world, or borrow Nature.org’s similar [services online](#). Use your new chops as an ecofeminist to consider, with the aid of another teacher, which activities you can do to build inclusive human-nature-social networks. If you are someone from a privileged perspective, try to connect with a teacher-friend who can offer a non-dominant view.
 8. Maine early childhood nature educator Kristen Bullard recently shared with me her practice of her modeling outdoor activities for students who cannot be there with her, including the attitude that no weather is bad weather, by going outside in the rain during her online classes and staying on camera so the students can see her interacting comfortably enough with the wet environment. She also mails out sensory natural objects for students to “discover” from their own homes.

Going remote for school is already a record lifetime stressor, especially for teachers, so it is not my goal to leave you with tasks that seem impossible to incorporate when teachers are already pushed to the max. However, if you or your students, like the many folks who flocked to our parks last summer, are desiring the chance to get out, then now is as timely as ever to employ an ecofeminist education. These eight suggestions are modest but intentional ecofeminist additions that teachers could make to their curricula during remote education. A simple activity, thoughtfully assigned, has the potential to do wonders for our students’ social

ethic toward nature and will bring new perspectives to teachers and students alike as we go remote.