Editorial

Bridging Social and Ecological Justice in Canadian Education

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In the relatively brief time between the conceptualization of this special issue and the writing of this editorial, the political, cultural, social, and environmental milieu in Canada has changed dramatically. The second Trump administration installed in January 2025 shifted foundational progressive social and environmental policies and upended geopolitical alliances among democratic nations that have been in place since the end of World War II. At the time of writing, in the United States (US), universities and education systems are under attack. Criminalization of pro-Palestine protests as part of a broader "war on higher education" (Poisson, 2025) has resulted in the revocation of student visas, reductions in university funding, and elimination of Middle Eastern Studies programs at universities such as Columbia and Harvard. Justice-oriented policies are being eliminated even as climate research and education are being defunded to boost extraction – to "drill, baby, drill." Federally administered research granting bodies like the National Science Foundation are flagging grants that address gender, DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion; known as EDI in Canada), social justice, and climate change, to determine whether these violate executive orders issued by President Trump (Johnson et al., 2025). References to

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these same topics are being scrubbed from government websites (Yoder, 2025), removing decades of crucial data from public view as researchers scramble to archive it (Gaffney, 2025). At the school level, curriculum shifts are favoring the new administration (Walker, 2025), and teacher capacities to educate for justice are curtailed under threat of penalty of law or dismissal (Bigelow, 2025).

At this time, the educational bridge we had envisioned exploring in this issue between social and ecological justice in Canadian education is actively being undermined. While the US President makes overt threats to Canada's sovereignty, right-wing politicians, from Alberta's Danielle Smith to federal conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, are transparent about their support for US policies (Anderson, 2025), leaving the future of justice-oriented education an open question. Meanwhile, Canadian right wing and populist influence has grown as some institutions, like the University of Alberta, move away from EDI initiatives (Adkin, 2025; Zargarian & Wilber, 2025). The backlash against social, environmental, and climate justice policies in governments, universities, and the educational system writ large poses risks for Canadian researchers, whose cross-border collaborations are under scrutiny (Berman, 2025). The current context threatens to result in increased manipulation of curriculum and teaching materials that address climate change (Lowan-Trudeau, 2022), including bypass of the racial dimensions of environmental and climate justice. The whitewashing of history and attacks on progressive educational policies may also significantly undermine efforts to decolonize education. Restricting anti-racist and social justice education prevents the critical examination of colonial legacies and the centering of Indigenous knowledge systems in favour of colonial worldviews that perpetuate white supremacy and deny the relationality between humans and the more-than human world, thereby contributing to and accelerating both racism and ecological destruction.

Canadian education is thus currently situated in relation to global "deathworlds" (Khoo, 2024, p. 1). Drawing on the anti-colonial scholarship of Mbembe (2019), Khoo describes deathworlds at the intersection of social and ecological justice as being both necropolitical and biocidal, where unjust forms of power determine which persons and more-than-human beings live and which die. Following Mbembe (2019) in understanding colonialism as central in the creation of deathworlds, Khoo points to how the "ecological nature line retraces the racial colour line, and intersects with class and patriarchal lines" (p. 1) – lines which determine which humans and which beings are reinforced as inno-

cent or superior and which are marked for "instrumentalization, harm, or extermination" in accompaniment to colonial extraction, pollution, and monocropping. Deathworlds are therefore not only ideological and structural but also material, where the "impacts of dispossession, exploitation, intoxication and erasure are local, suffered by particular, enfleshed bodies and lives" (Weheliye, 2014; qtd. in Khoo, 2024, p. 2) through sickness, deprivations, and death of beings both human and more-than-human.

To resist the furthering of deathworlds, a concerted effort is necessary in bridging social and ecological justice in education – and it is around this effort that we present this special issue. Here, we draw on Khoo's (2024) "vital sociology" to imagine a "vital education," which works counter to colonialism by centering a biocentric, materialist, and relational approach to injustice towards alternative futures and the life of all beings. Here, education may become "vital" by critically mapping the functioning of processes such as capitalism, imperialism, and multiple colonialisms (neo, settler) that uphold deathworlds within education, including through both the overt hostilities described above and through the current growth of a Canadian nationalism that threatens to undermine decolonial movements. Through such critique, a vital education may unpack the ways education is "fundamentally implicated in unjust environmental relations of damage and biophysical harm" (Khoo, 2024, p. 2), at times inadvertently reinforcing existing injustices even when working for restoration.

Education may also become vital by applying an ecological lens, refusing to treat more-than-human beings as resources for capital accumulation but instead "grounding the social in the material existence of living beings" (Khoo, p. 3). With relationality as fundamental (Escobar et al., 2024), education may find ways to heal the social and ecological metabolic rift by "composting" extractivism, exploitation, and plunder into new potentialities for life-giving ways of being (Lange, 2024). Finally, education may become more vital by invigorating and enacting ways of knowing and being alternative to those undergirding structural violence, and by working against appropriation of Indigenous knowledges. Even as hostilities intensify from without, we see potential for education to consider our collective responsibilities and foster solidarities not only within but also beyond our borders, towards care for a shared planet.

This special issue presents scholarship that collectively enacts various aspects of a vital education. In *Unlearning colonialism by attending to the wisdom of relational renewal*, authors Donald, Tait, and Moostoos-Lafferty describe the enactment of wisdom

teachings in a graduate course at the University of Alberta that followed the patterns of life and living reflected in the nêhiyaw (Cree) thirteen-moon calendar. Offering a critique of the colonial worldview that has long dominated education, the authors articulate a trans-temporal process of unlearning colonialism that involves working both backwards and laterally to inquire into the often-hidden legacies of colonial relationship denial within education. At the same time, the graduate course presents alternative pedagogies for practicing relational renewal towards a vital education. In these ways, the article bridges social and ecological justice by facilitating transformations in how learners understand knowledge and knowing. Here, the goal is ethically relational behavior to one another, as learners come to understand themselves as enmeshed in relational networks of human and more-than-human beings. Understanding social and ecological injustice as an onto-epistemological rather than an informational or technical issue, this article presents education with a responsibility to reconfigure around ethical relationality and responsibility towards all life.

Relational solidarity and ethical relationality are key frameworks for understanding activism and the need for integrating robust climate justice pedagogies in Canadian education systems. In *Nurturing identity, shaping communities, and forging new pathways: Racially minoritized youth climate justice activists' perspectives*, Grewal and Berger explore the experiences of racially minoritized youth climate justice activists in Ontario focusing on how youth identities are nurtured, how they shape communities and schools, and how they forge new pathways for leadership. Grewal and Berger highlight how racial injustices intersect with climate injustices, including through representational injustice, whereby the underrepresentation of racially minoritized activists' voices in mainstream climate movements mirrors colonial "monocultures of thought" (Khoo, 2024). The study's focus on relational solidarity and ethical relationality offers a direct counter to the relationship denial inherent in colonial worldviews inherent in deathworlds, challenging dominant, often white-centered, environmental narratives. The article bridges the social and ecological by centering the experiences of marginalized youth within the climate justice movement. It argues for educational reforms that explicitly link social justice concerns (racism, marginalization, identity) with ecological issues (climate change), demonstrating the interrelatedness of these domains in the lives and activism of racially minoritized youth.

Beginning with the concerns and desires of adult learners at the intersection of social justice and climate change, Houlden and Lange also counter coloniality through a critical approach in *Bridging local concerns and systemic change: A design-based*

approach to transformative climate education. Understanding climate change as part of a broader polycrisis shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and modernity, the authors take a socio-cultural and epistemic approach to climate change education grounded in de Oliveira's (2022) notion of "hospicing modernity." Within a rural, British Columbia (BC) community, they centre adult learners' perspectives and experiences, while simultaneously working to destabilize dominant worldviews, particularly when these are complicit in maintaining social and ecological injustices. For example, by connecting climate change with local social concerns about housing, community development, and active transportation, their climate justice course "connects and counters the representation of environmental problems as separate, fragmented environmental, social or economic problems" (Khoo, 2024, p. 3), instead revealing the "embodied, localized dimensions of violence and suffering as public and political forms of injustice" (p. 3). Through integrative and transformative design principles for adult climate education, they offer to vital education a "life-first" approach to learning.

McLarnon's article, *Expanding the just transition to include Teachers: Composting, zero waste and climate action in Montreal schools* is an institutional ethnography of a zero-waste policy implementation in Montreal schools. McLarnon reveals how well-intentioned environmental initiatives can create unequal social burdens and labour contradictions. McLarnon's findings respond to capitalist logics that drive environmental destruction and social inequality through processes like extractivism and then, as deeply entrenched cultural frames, can produce social inequity for those tasked with implementing environmental responses. The lack of consideration for teachers' labour and existing school practices in Montreal's zero-waste policy, as detailed by McLarnon, exemplifies the metabolic rift described by Khoo (2024), where the social and ecological are separated and vital human labour and social equity are devalued in the pursuit of environmental goals. McLarnon's research speaks to the need to move beyond abstract environmentalism to consider the embodied experiences and power dynamics that shape socio-ecological realities. His call for a more nuanced understanding of a just transition in education echoes an ethical demand for reparative action when addressing environmental and social injustices.

Reparation, redistribution, restitution, and regenerative responses to social and ecological injustice are at the heart of Stein and Andreotti's *Repurposing the university in times of social and ecological breakdown: From the ivory tower to the nurse log*. Higher education, in this article, is shown to be both complicit in the creation of deathworlds

and inadequate to address the "rapid change, volatility, and uncertainty" of our current moment, as well as the inescapable pollution that exemplifies our current bad relations (Liboiron, 2021; Khoo, 2024). Rejecting separating and simplifying colonial logics that have traditionally infused education, Stein and Andreotti embrace complexity in a vital education that reorients the university around "vital, life-giving capacities for inter-person and inter-species interdependence and care" (Khoo, 2024, p. 11). To repurpose the university, the authors propose abandoning the colonial conception of the university as an ivory tower and reconceiving it as a nurse log that can compost the modern/colonial system, providing examples of experiments with the Climate and Nature Emergency Catalyst Program at the University of British Columbia and the University of the Forest, which spans BC and Brazil. Rather than providing models, these examples invite readers into self-reflexive consideration of multigenerational and multispecies responsibilities, along with self-assessment of individual and collective roles in repurposing the university.

Detailing the creation and study of a national online e-course on environmental and sustainability education (ESE) for Canadian preservice teachers, the article by Sperling, Inwood, Sims, and Elliot, *Exploring ecojustice and environmental learning through online preservice teacher education*, also considers alternative models for higher education. The study, adopting a socio-critical and ecojustice lens**,** examines the expectations, experiences, and impacts of the e-course. The course was designed to intentionally center ecojustice and community building using participatory, inquiry-based, and locally relevant learning approaches, aiming to provide equitable access to ESE across Canada in response to the increasing "digital turn" in education. Sperling and colleagues emphasize the intersectionality of socio-ecological issues in education, including the ecological consequences of social injustices, while focusing on decolonization. The course places emphasis on Indigenous knowledges and reconciliation, linking social and ecological justice to education's decolonial impetus and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

At this momentous time, we recognize a critical need to connect social and ecological justice in Canadian education amidst a changing political landscape that threatens progressive policies. The dangers posed by rising regressive right-wing influence and the aggressive suppression of justice-oriented education and research are a reality. This special issue brings together the voices of researchers committed to realizing a "vital education," one that actively counters colonial legacies and deathworlds by embracing biocentric and relational approaches to education. This involves critically examining systems of

oppression, valuing the interconnectedness of all beings, and fostering solidarity to envision just and sustainable futures. The urgency to resist political and cultural deathworlds is undeniable. We are called to fight for a vision of education that encompasses a deep understanding of intertwined social and environmental crises and that works towards transformative change.

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