An Argument for Ecosophy: An Attention to Things and Place in Online Educational Spaces

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This essay argues for an ecosophic lens as a way of creating a change of vision within our educational spaces: a closer attention to the complex interaction of social institutions, ideologies, things and places that are part of educational life. While this essay targets the use of ecosophy — as a philosophical intervention — in online educational spaces, this philosophical tool could be used in any educational space. I focus on online spaces because of the unique intersection of different people inhabiting different spaces, while also coming together as part of an online classroom. The multiple locations of the students allow for a rich experience of mapping out the connections of social fields, ideological fields, and the material fields — the hallmark of an ecosophic lens.

Ecosophy, as theorized by Felix Guattari, focuses on the broad and deep connections we all share; the relationships within, among, and between social processes, economies, ideologies, materialities, and living systems. It provokes an awareness of the dynamic assemblages of these systems; these systems can be connected and reimagined in transformative ways. I explore the ways that ecosophy can lead to a new awareness and change of vision within the classroom by providing two scenarios of an online classroom space, and what it might mean to bring an ecosophic lens to that space. These scenarios come from my own teaching experience where I have attempted to use an ecosophic lens as a philosophical intervention, as part of my pedagogical practice. I highlight the ways that ecosophy involves a process of queering our habitus in productive ways that lead to broadened awareness of connections, relationships of production, and social justice issues.

In many ways this essay is an extension of arguments made by other philosophers of education. Dini Metro-Roland and Paul Farber have argued that education happens in spaces where there is a sense of presence and awareness of one's surroundings.[1] Education requires an awareness of one's habitus; a practice of learning *in situ*. While I disagree with Metro-Roland and Farber that these experiences cannot happen in online spaces, I wish to further the argument that location, things, and a sense of being grounded in materiality, are important for the work of education. I also further the argument of Nicholas Burbules who has argued that it is important to do the job of mapping out our relationships within an understanding of place;[2] mapping out places and how we move through places can bring greater awareness of our connections, as well as a greater awareness of the places that are familiar, the places that are off limits, and the places that exist as unknowns. Burbules's work highlights the ways that online spaces can be mapped in similar ways to material spaces, and this has meaning for my project, which focuses on online classrooms. While my work argues for a mapping that creates overlapping of online and material

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spaces (a different argument than Burbules), I still find harmony with the desire to use mapping and attention to place as a mode of understanding. I also extend some of the arguments made by John Dewey.[3] In *The School and Society*, Dewey reflects on his dissatisfaction with being unable to find adequate desks and chairs for his educative purposes. The objects — the desks and chairs — were not really structured for the act of learning. I follow Dewey's attention to objects and the world of things in my own focus on materialities. Dewey — in *The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education* — calls for an attention to time and space.[4] When we are trying to apply philosophical notions of good learning, we need to be aware of how the time and space of the school shapes theory into practice in unique ways. Dewey's insights have resonance with my project in this essay as I mark out the ways that the nonhuman and tangibilities are important, the ways that things and our relationships with things are important.

I contend that an ecosophic lens can bring a change of vision, an awareness of things, in ways that enhance the educative experience. I first explore the philosophy of ecology forwarded by Guattari — an ecosophy that unites a care for the sociological, the ideological, the material, and living systems. I then provide scenarios from my own classroom experience to highlight the interventions made through an ecosophic lens; a deeper awareness of and attention to our embeddedness in the local and material, and the ways these places and relationships are shaped through assemblages of material, social, and ideological fields.

Exploring Ecosophy as a Lens onto the World

There are many different versions of ecosophy, variably defined as a philosophy of ecology, a turning toward ecology as a metaphor, and a turning toward a deeper commitment to ecological and environmental concerns. Ecosophy emerges within the matrix of other philosophical traditions dedicated to exploring our relationships with things, the natural world, and our overall enculturated environment. The deep ecology of Arne Naess draws on an ecosophy that directs our attention to how individual and institutional actions can degrade our natural environment.[5] Scholarship by Walter Benjamin[6] and Martin Heidegger[7] also shape this tradition with a focus on our relationships with technologies, tools, machines, and cultural artifacts. Ecosophy has resonance with the work of Henri Lefebvre[8] who focuses on the ways that places — physical spaces — are produced through an interaction of the physical, the discursive, and social practice. In many ways, ecosophy can be situated within a posthuman trajectory that advocates for an analysis of the blurred lines between humans and machines, people and their environments. Scholars like Donna Haraway,[9] N. Katherine Hayles,[10] and Allucquere Roseanne (Sandy) Stone[11] each make explicit that we — as humans — are not so separate from our machines; and that the relationships of human and machine also have bearing on the wider natural and institutional environments in which we live. Ecosophy can be seen as part of the new scholarly turn toward materiality (Materialist Feminism, presence studies; Material Phenomenology). Ecosophy is many things.

For my purposes in developing a thick and nuanced understanding of our relationships to people, processes, things, and living systems — an understanding

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that changes the way we see our educational spaces — I spotlight the later works of Guattari, and *his* development of ecosophy and an ecosophic lens. His work is unique in its explicit vision of ecology as the intersection of the natural/physical/tangible world, with both social institutions and ideologies/discourses. Guattari is unique in his insistence on the equal importance of both anthropocentric and ecocentric interventions and assemblages of meaning. Guattari parses out how these different spheres overlap and shape each other; it is a call toward a new vision or understanding of our relationships and connectivity among, in-between, and within all of these different spheres. Guattari argues that an ecosophic lens changes our understanding of our relationship to things and people, and this in turn has the power to change actions and policies.[12] For Guattari, seeing the *full* ecology of our relationships outward creates a new sense of wonder and care for the world around us; we more fully see the ways that society intersects with the world of things.

Guattari's ecosophy focuses on dynamic connections — assemblages of rhizomatic transversalizing connections — always on a trajectory both away and into. In his works *The Three Ecologies*, and "Remaking Social Practices," Guattari disassociated the notion of ecosophy with merely a love of nature or a desire to associate one's own identity or feelings of empathy with other biological creatures and natural spheres.[13] Instead, Guattari specifically argues for a transversalizing approach to ecology where the singularity of personal identity becomes reframed in reference to relationships with broader processes, machines, people, nature — the biological, the sociological, and the ideological.[14] Rather than centering the human or human institutions, Guattari highlights the dynamic assemblages of connections we share with fields of desire, practice, and material objects. Our world is shaped through these variable assemblages and by coming to a vision of these dynamic and forceful connections, we can seek to change the world in different ways.

Guattari highlights the connections between people, economics, social processes, ideological desire, things, and the natural world, that have emerged at this moment of economic and environmental hardship. Guattari argues that any crisis in the natural world (environmental degradation) is intimately connected to other crises in our economic, ideological, and social spheres.[15] In order to create some sort of transformation, it is imperative to understand the connections with all parts of the ecology. "The ecological crisis can be traced to a more general crisis of the social, political and existential," which "involve[s] changes in production, ways of living and axes of value."[16] Guattari continues:

> Ecological disasters, famine, unemployment, the escalation of racism and xenophobia, hunt, like so many threats, the end of this millennium. At the same time, science and technology have evolved with extreme rapidity, supplying man with virtually all the necessary means to solve his material problems. But humanity has not seized upon these; it remains stupefied, powerless before the challenges that confront it. It passively contributes to the pollution of water and the air, to the destruction of forests, to the disturbance of climates, to the disappearance of a multitude of living species, to the impoverishment of the genetic capital of the biosphere, to the destruction of natural landscapes, to the suffocation of its cities, and to the progressive abandonment of cultural values and moral references in the areas of human solidarity and fraternity.… How can it find a compass by which to reorient itself within a modernity whose complexity overwhelms it? (*RSP*, paragraph 1)

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Guattari spotlights the connections between environmental exploitation and the broader sociological, ideological, and economic trajectories (*RSP*). There is a sense of both possibility and crises as Guattari compels us to see the integration and relationality of environmental concerns and tragedies with broader social and ideological trajectories. Thus, Guattari argues for an ecosophy that contends with and acts upon the interaction of all of these elements (*RSP*). Guattari's ecosophy is not an environmentalism, nor is it a philosophy of ecology as it is traditionally understood. Rather, Guattari's ecosophy rethinks relationships — and a broader notion of environment or the ecological — as mobile, active, and dynamic "assemblages."[17]

The idea of an "assemblage" highlights both the mobility and dynamism of our connections, and also the necessary connectivity of the autopoietic whole. On this basis, Guattari argues that we need to create a relational vision that addresses environmental, sociological, and ideological fields in order to create more equitable and sustainable relationships and productive functioning within and between all the different fields at play. Writes Guattari:

> By what means, in the current climate of passivity, could we unleash a mass awakening, a new renaissance? Will fear of catastrophe be sufficient provocation? … Emphasis must be placed, above all, on the reconstruction of a collective dialogue capable of producing innovative practices. Without a change in mentalities … there can be no enduring hold over the environment. Yet, without modifications to the social and material environment, there can be no change in mentalities. Here, we are in the presence of a circle that leads me to postulate the necessity of founding an "ecosophy" that would link environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology. (*RSP*, paragraph 8)

Guattari contends that we need a philosophy — an ecosophy — that always articulates things as relational and interconnected. It is impossible to transform one field of play in any meaningful way without transforming the other fields of play. Ecosophy requires interventions that anticipate the convergence of nature, culture, globalization, technology, machines, new ideologies, new forms and practices of medicine and health, and new media. Intervention must be made at the civic, political, environmental, institutional, and even semiotic levels. An ecosophic lens creates an awareness of relationships between these various fields of play, and also promotes a new vision of our embeddedness within the world of things, geographies of materiality. Guattari argues that an ecosophic lens creates a change in vision or a *haunting* that makes us uncomfortable with living in a disposable world and further provokes awareness of the tangible objects and living systems around us (*RSP*). An ecosophic lens initiates a change in ontology, where humans no longer exist in a subject-object relationship with the nonhuman. Rather, human, nonhuman, and whatever exists in between, become equally agentic and forceful, prompting a different kind of relationship with materialities and living systems.[18] We are haunted by our rhizomatic connections to systems, geographies, and things, and this in turn can change how we move and interact in the world.

So where does this ecosophic lens leave us, and how does it change the way we do education? I now turn to further exploration of what an ecosophic lens has meant in my own teaching, as a way of thinking through some of the benefits of an

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ecosophic lens as part of the educative process. I spotlight two scenarios of the online classroom and foreground the ways an ecosophic lens worked within that space.

Again, while ecosophy — as a philosophical intervention — might be productive in both brick-and-mortar classroom spaces, as well as online spaces, I spotlight online classrooms as spaces that are shaped by the fact that students connect to the classroom from places all over the world. Online students are unique in that they simultaneously inhabit real material geographical places, as well as negotiated and collectively-produced virtual places. Ecosophy's insistence on connecting the social and ideological to real material objects and spaces creates opportunities for students to further engage with each other as they mark out their own individual geographical locations — their embeddedness in the present material moment — as well as the ideologies and global forces that connect their multiple experiences. The online classroom — in particular — benefits from an ecosophic lens because students are living in varied locations; there is more fodder for the mapping of the local and the localness of things that are shaped by ideologies and social systems which, increasingly, transverse the globe. The online class can be a literal representation of ecosophy in action when there is attention to enmeshment in the local while also being aware of broader connecting practices and discourses.

Mapping Out Our Home Spaces

I teach online courses in Global Studies in Education. We read and have discussion and activities that aim to promote a complex understanding of the ways that global forces, global connections, and global imaginaries are articulated in the site of the school. We explore globalized policies, mobilities, organizations, and the ways these fields shape local schooling places and practices. Drawing on an affinity for ecosophy, I ask my students to map out their home spaces as a way of deepening our understandings of the interactions of the global and the local (glocal).[19] This means that we take time during our synchronous sessions to walk through our schools, offices, homes, or whatever place we are in, and map out how the materialities around us mark these glocal connections. I have had students take videos and pictures of their neighborhood streets, their schoolrooms, their refrigerators, and their cityscapes, to document these connections, and to share experiences with the rest of the online class.

Because my students are living in multiple different countries and multiple different time zones, a wealth of different places and views have been displayed and discussed in developing our glocal understandings. We have been able to map out privilege, inequity, silencing, diversity, and difference, in unique ways. When I have asked students to document objects that show transnational connections in local spaces, I have had students take and share pictures of an Iranian school in Mexico; a Japanese car made using parts built in the United States, and parked on a street in China; German beer in a refrigerator in Puerto Rico, and a textbook published by a British press, for a course taught through a U.S. University, used by a student living in Nicaragua. Mapping out our glocal transnationalisms through everyday objects was a fascinating exercise in seeing the ways that discourses, policies, and practices are manifest through tangible objects that we tend to take for granted.

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I have asked students to document the ways that physical spaces — their own neighborhoods — are shaped through both global and local norms. I had one student talk about her neighborhood, where a meth lab was right down the street. She talked about the global production and trade of meth between the United States and Mexico. She also talked about the discourses that create teacher salaries so low that the only place she can afford to live anywhere close to work is in a neighborhood where she is afraid to go out after dark; where you can occasionally hear sirens in the background when she turns on her mic to speak during class. I had one student talk about the tensions of being a Western woman living in the United Arab Emirates where expectations around what was permissible for a woman to do — and where a woman was allowed to go and be seen — fluctuated with both cosmopolitan understandings of gender norms and local understandings of gender norms. Again, drawing on an ecosophic lens, we mapped out how physical spaces are shaped by social institutions, state and international policies, and competing discourses and ideologies. We strove to interrogate the connections between social interactions, ideologies, and material, tangible places and objects.

Ecosophy — as an intervention that promotes the mapping of the assemblages of desires, practices, material objects, and living systems — allowed us to share each other's spaces, and to create a new awareness around the connections that exist, and imagine how these fields might be assembled differently. We were able to map power in our own locations and see it in the location of others. This same focus on materiality also came to the fore when we, as a group of learners, focused on digital artifacts.

Tracking the Routes of Digital Artifacts

Not long ago, while in the process of watching some of the links, pictures, and videos created by students to spotlight their home spaces, a number of my students and assistants had their computers crash. Whenever we started to watch the videos or view the pictures as a class, these same people lost access to the course. This had not happened before and it generated a long email chain as to the nature of the problem. As it turned out, the software we use to run our online synchronous classes had "upgraded" its capabilities for viewing high bit rate video. This was supposed to be a good thing. However, this "upgrade" requires a large amount of RAM — something only newer and more expensive machines have. All the students — including the assistants to the course who were using machines at a university computer lab — who did not have upgraded machines were unable to view the videos and pictures. The new software upgrade gave new machine users a higher quality of video, but it crashed the machines of anyone who had an older computer.

This experience generated a productive discussion in our class. I talked about the assumption — inherent in the requirements of the upgraded software — that everyone would have access to a newer computer, as a sign of our disposable culture and one of the digital divides. When institutions, discourses, and practices guide us into purchasing a new computer every three or four years, we are interpolated into a global dumping route where e-waste moves from the Global North to the landfills, water, soil, and community home spaces of people in the Global South.

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When we are finished with our digital devices they do not disappear into the light and ether that is so much a part of discourses around virtual and technology-enhanced spaces. Old computers go somewhere, and come from somewhere: they often start out in a manufacturing plant, and then end up in a landfill in India, China, and Bangladesh. This e-waste dumping route privileges people in the Global North, who often don't think about where their computers come from or where they go when they die. On the other hand, e-waste landfills and manufacturing plants tend to have deleterious effects on people living near them.

A report by the United Nations University (UNU) revealed that the manufacture of just one desktop computer requires a large amount of fossil fuels and creates a host of environmental problems.[20] The report notes:

> The average PC requires 10 times the weight of the product in chemicals and fossil fuels. Many of the chemicals are toxic, while the use of fossil fuels help contribute to global warming … Manufacturing a 24 kg PC with monitor needs at least 240 kg of fossil fuels to provide the energy, and 22 kg of chemicals. Add to that, 1.5 tonnes of water, and your desktop system has used up the weight of a sports utility vehicle in materials before it even leaves the factory … And the short lifetime of today's IT equipment leads to mountains of waste … That waste is then dumped in landfill sites or recycled, often in poorly managed facilities in developing countries, leading to significant health risks.[21]

1.8 metric tons of raw materials are required to manufacture the average desktop computer and monitor. Many of these materials will be emitted into the atmosphere or will end up in landfills affecting soil and water quality. It is difficult to get rid of these toxins once they are in the land and water.

The disposal of e-waste is also harmful to the environment, particularly for people who work knee-deep in the waste (collecting and selling the minerals left in the thrown-away devices), as well as those who live around the landfills, which have contaminated the soil and water. Living near an e-waste landfill, according to the UNU report,[22] correlates to an increased exposure to brominated flame retardants, as well as lead, mercury, cadmium, and chromium, which leach into both soil and water supplies.

Tracking the global routes of digital artifacts allowed us — as a class — to reflect on the connections between a culture of disposability, the power dynamics within the global community, use practices in privileged spaces, and the destructive effects on living systems and local communities. It also prompted us to brainstorm the ways that digital artifacts might be reused or recycled. This push toward reuse of digital artifacts provoked the tracing out of a different digital artifact route.

When multiple people in the class talked about reusing computers — donating computers to be used by schools and businesses — one student talked about her ability to trace out places of power by tracking the movement of old digital artifacts into new spaces. She mentioned that in her school district there was already a practice of donating computers from parents and schools to different schools and parents who were in need. So schools, where parents had donated new machines for students to use while in school, would then donate the older machines to "less fortunate" schools. This routing of old machines into new hands and spaces was made easy to track because the machines would often have the name of the more affluent school

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marked on the computer — and the name would stay there even as the computer took up residence in the new "less fortunate" school.

An ecosophic lens — with a focus on our relationship to things and spaces — allowed us to concretely track the movement, dynamism, and shaping influence of power. As we focused on the interplay and overlap of discursive norms, institutional practices, living systems, and the movement of objects, we came to a new awareness of, and care for, the intersections of technology and socioeconomic status. Our discourse and sense-of-self changed as attention to *connections* provoked a conversation about our *differences*; our attention to inter-connectivity more fully highlighted inequality.

Conclusion

An ecosophic lens prompts an exploration of histories, dependencies, connections, and possibilities of new relationships among things, institutions, and people. Rather than taking for granted or looking beyond, we come to ask key questions about common sense notions; we queer the habitus in which we are enmeshed and shaped. In the site of the school we continue and expand the educative process as we come to ask questions pointed to relationships of being: How do objects and materialities come to be, and come to be regarded in certain ways? Why do certain relationships exist among people, and between people, places, and things? Ecosophy — with its insistence on mapping the connections between the social, the ideological, and the material — may also prompt awareness and questions specific to the site of education: What relationships must be in place in order to make possible the material objects that exist within the school? How might schooling be assembled differently — connected and shaped in different ways by new assemblages of people, places, things, and ideas? Ecosophy enables a different kind of broader and deeper awareness and this awareness is both educative as a new form of consciousness, as well as a force toward change. More needs to be done to reenvision the educative process, as well as create change in our communities and world. An ecosophic lens — focused on a thick understanding of broad connectivity and relationships with things and spaces — should be part of that process.

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doi: 10.47925/2014.057

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13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

16. Ibid., 119, 134.

17. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 30.

18. Guattari believes that the line between subject and object creates a false dichotomy. All things — human and nonhuman — are at once both subjects and objects. Thus, we can all be subjects, and agents. Even things can be subjects — of inquiry and of action, but we are also all acted upon — as objects of sorts, by the world around us.

19. Glocal is a neologism used often in global studies literature used to point to the inter-connectivity of the local and the global.

20. *United Nations University Report, 2004*, in United Nations Document Index, vol. 7, no. 4 (New York: United Nations Publications, 2005).

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

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