Guest Editorial

Context, Experience, and the Socioecological: Inquiries into Practice

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> For even as we celebrate…we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime—two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century…This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. (Obama, 2008)

Marcia: As I sit down to write a beginning to an issue on "Inquiries into Practice" on the day of U.S. President Barack Obama's inauguration, these words of his seem a fitting starting point. They, and he, and this time, are striking in part both because the "planet in peril" has now become a central political concern in national and international contexts, and because a wide-ranging public has to some extent engaged with this idea that changes are needed. While the contours of changes envisioned or required are perhaps unclear, there seems to be a doorway open in the broader acknowledgement that "we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect" (Obama, 2009).

I start here because David, myself, and the contributors to this volume of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* are all practicing under this context of change needed, and in the hope that cumulatively this and other related work provides directions and supports possible ways forward. As I've talked to David regularly by phone over a year of working on this issue, I've developed sketched out images of parts of his life: The way he walks through the snow or the grass to his home studio on working mornings, his efforts with his family to consume less, his attention to power and oppression, his times away from internet and into the places of northern Idaho and eastern Washington, his commitment to family and community, and to scholarship and a life led that is critical, sensory, active, alive. Similarly, the contributors to this volume show us how their lives and practices of education endeavour to "make change" that is rooted in particular historical, social, cultural, geographical, and ecological contexts. Through discussions and examples of pedagogical practices of embodiment, storytelling, place, excavation, relationality, dust blowing, gnome tracking!, they help us better see how we and our students can engage in critical and sensory processes of decolonization and inhabitation—of working through intersubjective experience and thought to make change where it's needed, and resisting it where unexamined change is itself at the centre of our concerns.

David: Thank you, Marcia, for inviting my collaboration with you on this issue. Working across the border with my Canadian colleague has shown me differences and convergences in context and perspective; as we have discussed recently, it seems that working the terrain between difference and convergence—without naiveté or paralyzing cynicism—is exactly where we need to be. Marcia's invocation of now President Obama's election victory speech is a perfect backdrop to the macro context—it signifies both the doorways of opportunity that we see present in this moment of change, and also the structural barriers to change in both institutions and in people's minds.

No doubt Obama's presidency is a cause for hope: first, it ends eight years of Bush-rule, what many columnists are openly calling the worst American presidency ever; second, it represents a climax turning point in the long struggle for civil rights; and third, it begins the first administration to actually acknowledge as part of its platform a strong commitment to a wide range of "green" issues. However, just as I am inspired by the possibilities for change that Obama embodies, I am also afraid that little will actually change. It is hopeful, for example, that in his inspiring inaugural address Obama committed to ending the war in Iraq. But it is problematic that in this same address the new leader did not even mention the US-backed destruction of Gaza—just days before the inauguration—where American-made Israeli bombs rained down on what may be the most densely populated region on earth, brutally killing over 1,300 Palestinians, half of them civilians, one-third children. As president, Obama has also since begun to escalate the war in Afghanistan, and he has continued the Bush policy of authorizing secret bombings in Pakistan by CIA "predator" and "reaper" drones. It is also hopeful that in his inaugural address Obama recognized a planet in peril and acknowledged a deep economic crisis. But it is problematic that in this address, in the sentence immediately following a call to "roll back" global warming, the new leader, in an uncomfortable echo of George W. Bush, insisted that "we will never apologize for our way of life." Indeed, the *New York Times* recently labeled the politics of the Obama administration, which includes Bush's defense secretary and Clinton's treasury secretary, "right of center." I worry that, despite the symbolism of Barak Obama, foreign and domestic policy, including education policy and the cultural assumptions upon which it is based, will continue to work against peace and against sustainability. The responsibility for change or resistance to change, therefore, falls on those who are courageous and strategic enough to change or hold their ground despite contextual barriers of thought and policy. I continue to see environmental education in the light of this kind of activism, and the contributors in this volume represent to me the many ways that educators are practicing commitments that can change what, how, and where people learn and act.

Marcia: I was also discouraged by the sentiment of "never apologizing for our way of life" and all that suggests in terms of a continuation of things as usual,

as "they were" and are in many westernized and westernizing parts of the globe. And I also view a wide variety of educational contexts as some of the places in which the details and possibilities of a deeper level of change can continue to be explored and shared. When you talk about working the terrain between difference and convergence, I know in part you mean finding a path somewhere between a naïve optimism and an unproductive cynicism about our collective work: that education can contribute to positive changes in social and ecological conditions, and yet that part of this is being sensitized to the obstacles we face, from our own habits and thoughts, to the broader pressures of institutionalized policies and practices. We see that sort of hopeful realism across this volume, with many of the authors addressing the barriers they or others have identified or faced as they undertake educational practices that run against the usual. For example, Phillip Payne and Brian Wattchow describe the skepticism and resistance encountered when asking their students to step outside of their familiar ways of engaging in an experiential "slow" pedagogy on the coastal edge of Australia. And Greg Lowan articulates some of the unintentional colonizing effects of outdoor education programs aimed at Canadian Aboriginal youth that haven't been carefully developed with consideration of diverse Aboriginal orientations to place and relationship.

David: The theme of working against institutional and related epistemological barriers is very clear in several other papers in this issue and is sometimes expressed with a great sense of urgency and outrage. Natalie Swayze, Julie Johnston, and Alison Neilson each describe the challenges of practicing socioecological approaches to environmental education within the larger colonizing contexts of Canadian schooling. In a world in need of social and ecological transformation and renewal, these authors show us that schools, teachers, learners, and even some environmental education programs continue to focus on "covering the curriculum." They also show us how they have worked as activists and researchers to create experiences that are "outside the box" (see Johnston) of what is expected and supported in each of their particular contexts.

Marcia: The paper by Janice Astbury, Stephen Huddart, and Pauline Théoret on the national Canadian environmental education program, Green Street, offers an inspiring tale of educators *and* administrators working hard to enable out-of-the-box thinking and practices. A deep commitment to the socioecological and a critical openness to experimentation are evident in their articulations about how the Green Street program continues to question and further its contributions to social change through the students, educators, and programs it engages.

In talking about working the terrain between difference and convergence, I think we also agree that it is potentially productive to look at the commonalities, and yet diversities, in current articulations of environmental

education practice. We've signaled that in our choice of title for this issue in the sense that we find across the papers in this volume a demonstration of the importance of "context"—in relation to the diversities of appropriate educational practices as well as the kinds of barriers that might be faced in different contexts, but also great convergence in terms of a collective emphasis on the "socioecological" and on "experience." In other words, these authors are concerned with both ecological *and* social justice issues and their interconnectedness, and in various ways help to flesh out some of the types of critical and sensory *experiences* that can enable processes of decolonization and inhabitation linked with more systemic change. Can we expand further on both of these areas of convergence?

David: Yes, a socioecological approach to environmental education is evident throughout the volume, and the approaches vary greatly, which helps me to push on and extend the meaning of the socioecological and the wide range of so-called socioecological experiences that, for me, constitute environmental education. In a sense all environmental education is inherently socioecological because it all takes place in related social and ecological contexts. The term is important, as you point out, because of the consciousness it implies both to issues of social justice and social experience, and to the interconnection of social and ecological contexts and issues. Conventional environmental education marginalized the social, and too often privileged learning about nature as if it were unconnected to the social contexts that construct human relationships to the natural world. As environmental education has matured as a field, we now see a complex embrace of social contexts, and we see that in every article included here. For example, in the two articles discussing school gardening (see Cutter-Mackenzie; Mayer-Smith, Bartosh, & Peterat), the authors describe an emphasis not on ecological knowledge, but on opportunities for intercultural and intergenerational social learning among very diverse learners within an ecological setting. In these articles, gardens become a meeting ground for refugees, immigrants, grandparents, and community members who share cultural knowledge around growing, preparing, and eating food. It strikes me that educators concerned with the "natural environment" are increasingly gravitating toward "culture" in diverse incarnations of environmental education, such as ecojustice, place-based, Indigenous, or sustainability education (McKenzie, Hart, Bai, & Jickling, 2009). One way to read the morphing of environmental education into these diverse yet related movements is that educators recognize that cultural and institutional contexts shape how learners experience "the environment," and that cultural and institutional contexts are often experienced *as* "the environment."

In fact, many of the articles demonstrate that doing socioecological environmental education means engaging in some kind of creative deinstitutionalization or decolonization. What decolonization means to me here is

first *educational decolonization*: that is, unlearning patterned and familiar ways of experiencing and knowing to make room for practices that are unfamiliar. Such unlearning is frequently met with resistance, as the new learning requires time for new experiences, relationships, and concepts to develop. Related to educational decolonization is the larger socioecolgical aim of *cultural decolonization*: that is, unlearning, healing, or resisting ways of being that are socially and ecologically unjust or damaging to self and others, human and more-than-human, near and far, now and in the future. The authors in this volume show us many different contexts in which different kinds of educational and cultural decolonization is needed or taking place. The wide spectrum includes, for example, Richard Kahn and Brandy Humes' illustration of how environmental education continues to exclude animal liberation from its agenda and the appropriateness of its inclusion, and Neilson's refusal to be caged in (see Rilke's poem "The Panther" in her article), as she breaks outside into the open air to problematize the most taken-for-granted context of conventional education—the classroom.

Marcia: That's a helpful way of putting it: we cannot deconstruct and restory oppressive relationships without considering how the dominant structures and norms of schooling and education often perpetuate and support the very problems we hope to address. Even something as basic as students being unprepared for and resistant to inquiry and collaboration, becomes a central challenge in undertaking cultural decolonization. As further examples of this dual focus on educational and cultural decolonization, Chet Bowers' paper is concerned with the habits and assumptions that are implicitly taught in many educational contexts—such as unexamined dependencies on technology and consumerism. He focuses on the role of the educator as mediator in helping students see and experience alternative cultural patterns and non-commodified relationships. Heesoon Bai and Greg Scutt also explore how educators can facilitate experiences that enable a more sensuous and less dualistic (mind over matter) relationship with the natural world. They provide historical context for ongoing efforts to "manage" the planet, and offer a compelling pathway towards greater feeling and connection with each other and the world.

So far we've talked about the importance of context, the interconnectedness of the social and ecological, and about educational and cultural decolonization. You've written previously about *decolonization* and *reinhabitation* as two dimensions of the same task (Gruenewald, 2003), and I'm thinking now about how the papers in this issue also help us to conceptualize and practice inhabitation in tandem with decolonization. Dictionary definitions of inhabitation center on "living or residing in," "dwelling," and "being present in." And when I read Bai and Scutt's paper as well as others in the issue, I see that sensory experiences of residing and being present can themselves function to "decolonize." It is not as though there are experiences

of inhabitation and then there is the critique of decolonization, but rather, in many instances the unpacking and the living/being differently are all ravelled together in a way that seems impossible to untangle. When we look at critical pedagogy and anti-racist education where critical practices of decolonization have most extensively been explored in education, inhabiting experiences can be considered to be at the root of those pedagogical processes too—for example reading novels, watching films, and writing autobiographies can elicit the dissonance required for looking at our lives and socioecological contexts in different ways. Likewise, when we have experiences that enable us to feel what it is or would be like to live in more connected and sustaining ways, those experiences can shift our thinking. We see this in Payne and Wattchow's paper in the doubting student who finally, through the act of sitting with toes dipped in a rock pool, begins to understand the possibilities afforded by slowing down one's engagement with the world. I think the categories of decolonization and inhabitation are really helpful, and I see them both as consisting of "experiences" that can help us think and live differently in relation to the socioecological, with the sensory and cognitive ravelled up together in both. A teacher candidate I've been working with just sent this to our research group today, and it gets perfectly at this issue:

> We are concerned with the journey, the small slice of time in which students become socially aware and can now negotiate in and out of discourse. Is this "aha" or awakening experience one of the mind or the heart? Why? (J. Stone, personal communication, January 27, 2009)

We can consider the cognitive and embodied/sensory to be woven together in experiences, and I've been finding it helpful to think of these experiences as rooted in intersubjectivity (McKenzie, 2008). That is to say, whether engaging with poignant art, such as the Chris Jordan image on the cover of this issue, or in connecting conversation with colleagues and students, or in the awe and solace of less human-made places, all of this range of experience and more, places us in relationship. It is relationship with others that moves or strengthens our ways of thinking and being; that enables decolonization/inhabitation. What do you think?

David: This is helpful for me and brings to mind an example of how decolonization/inhabitation work together as two parts of a whole in many examples of environmental education. The authors in this volume are all creating space for relationship outside/inside of conventional school structures—in order to decolonize and reinhabit the experience of formal learning. Swayze, for example, intentionally deemphasizes the formal curriculum in order to create space for the inclusion of Indigenous Elders as teachers and community leaders. In her environmental program, Bridging the Gap, students rehearse and practice appropriate protocols for meeting, listening to, and working with Elders that rekindle traditional forms of

intergenerational sharing. These experiences are richly sensory and relational, and they provide a context for rethinking what constitutes both learning and environmental knowledge. As a practitioner, Swayze makes a decision that at once deconstructs the conventional curriculum and makes space for reclaiming and creating relationships and experiences in culture and environment. Gardening projects (see Cutter-Mackenzie; Mayer-Smith, Bartosh, & Peterat) that intentionally focus not so much on environmental learning goals, but on garden-as-meeting-ground for cultural exchange provide other examples of creating space for relationship that enable inhabitation/decolonization.

All experience and learning exists in relationship with others, and environmental educators are questioning the nature of these relationships in variety of socioecological contexts. What kinds of socioecological relationships construct our identities and our ethics? What kinds of relationships are we inviting and do we want to invite through our practice? Which "others" do we privilege through our practices and which do we neglect? Do our practices allow for richly sensory cognitive experiences that help us make sense of our own intersubjectivity? The terrain of socioecological inquiry into the nature of our intersubjectivity is vast, and we have tried in this volume to include articles that capture a diversity of commitments and approaches to environmental learning. Most of these articles lead learners toward a heightened consciousness of land, embodiment, place, or in the case of Kahn and Humes, other species. Sometimes I worry that "the socioecological turn" in a politically mature environmental education "is headed away from, rather than toward," as Aldo Leopold said of education and economics in the 1940s, "an intense consciousness of land" (Leopold, 1949/1968, p. 223). Some of Jordan's images represent to me a climax of a consumer and educational culture that has moved away from an intense consciousness of land, especially those pieces that make up his *Intolerable Beauty* and *Running the Numbers* series (Jordan, 2009). My hope for environmental education is that, while it continues to mature and to embrace the necessary dimensions of social justice, cultural transformation and renewal, as well as non-violence and peace, an intense consciousness of land will remain and guide its development.

Marcia: Thinking about intense consciousness of land recalls the pleasure of reading Annie Dillard's (1974) *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* this past fall. She writes, "We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence…'Seems like we're just set down here,' a woman said to me recently, 'and don't nobody know why'" (p. 3) and:

> The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there…The whole show has been on fire from the word go. I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames. (p. 8-10)

This trying "to be there," being awake to the world and its sparks and flames, unfortunately doesn't necessary come just through the spending of time in places. As Dillard and so many others have described so well, it's possible to be "out" in the world and yet really to see or feel so little connection and grace. Maybe it's fasting, or crisis, or poetry, or love, or even theory, but these other experiences intersect with the spending of time in places in important ways. Morten Asfeldt, Ingrid Urberg, and Bob Henderson's paper on the wilderness and homestead experiences of students in the Canadian north gives a sense of this, and the value of engaging with historical accounts, autobiographical writing, and collective experience in conjunction with experiences of place, for example. It's not that the time in the north is "the experience," and the reading, writing, and group dynamics are merely means of processing. Though they differ, they are all embodied experiences and all connected to meaning-making—they contribute to us inhabiting the world in particular ways. In her paper on the online program *EarthShapes*, Valerie Triggs suggests the rich learning around our connections to, and visions for, places that can occur through collaborative and artistic online experiences. This is not to replace other experiences of touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing the world; but, it suggests the diversity of intersubjective experiences that can shift and strengthen our engagements with place and the socioecological. Describing her intense consciousness of land, Dillard writes, "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until that moment when I was lifted and struck" (p. 35). What experiences enable this sort of connecting to the world?

We can't experience space or place outside of our cultural lenses, nor culture outside of underlying orientations to space/place. Lowan, in his paper, provides an accounting of the weaves between Aboriginal epistemologies and connection to place. Inversely, globalizing forces of migration, media, and market flows are often linked with shifts in, or loss of, connections to particular places. "Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads," and thus is not static or finished, but rather "practiced"—coming alive in more and less culturally regulated ways (Meinig as cited in Cresswell, 2003, p. 271). If we think about culture as the day-to-day of lived experience in places, again, what types of experiences enable and support which kinds of orientations to the world? Never outside of culture or place, learning is what constitutes our understandings of both, and our sense of the possibilities of what they can or could become. This reminds me of where we began with Obama, and our chances for change.

David: Our chances for change—what are they? I don't have a lot of hope for big change from leadership at the top, especially in the field of education. A lyric from songwriter Jewell's "Life Uncommon" comes to mind: "There are plenty of people who pray for peace/ But if praying were enough it would have come to be." But we have suggested, the environmental educators represented

in this volume are change agents, each working to invite learners into socioecological experiences that schools are not providing, each with aims beyond the conventional and oftentimes colonizing aims of schooling, each in one way or another trying to help wake people up. I believe that activists such as these exist in all communities, and that there is a huge activist movement for change and resistance growing across the globe. As Paul Hawken (2007) shows in his book, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, this is a socioecological movement of individuals and communities who work for social justice, Indigenous and civil rights, environmental sustainability, and non-violence and peace. More educators need to become better connected to these groups.

I also believe that as educators, our chances for change start with each one of us becoming the change, as Gandhi put it so well. The Jordan image we chose for the front and back covers of this journal, "Paper Bags, 2007," serves as a reminder, however, of how everyday cultural practices such as bagging one's groceries can work against the very changes we envision for people, place, and environment. Resolving the dilemma of one's own complicity in the socioecological crisis is undoubtedly a learning process around which we should have more conversation, as it is possible to feel awake to the world, strong theoretically, and still continue to act in ways that reinforce a colonizing, consumer mindset. The constructs decolonization and reinhabitation, in other words, apply also to the self and one's own intersubjective learning journey. Hopefully the articles in this volume do more than provide readers with insights into diverse approaches to environmental education practices. Hopefully the ideas here also give readers a space to reflect on their own embodiment as an emplaced learner in relationship with others.

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