Reclaiming Embodied Agency in the Anthropocene

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Abstract. This paper presents current viewpoints on the socio-cultural factors contributing to the lack of human behaviour change necessary to combat the global environmental challenges of the climate crisis. The focus of the paper is on how we can develop embodied agency to better understand the more-than-human world and encourage taking action on climate change. The theoretical foundation of how to teach and cultivate embodied agency, which is presented in this paper, is built upon an encounters approach methodology (Fairer & Rofel, 2014), incorporating eco-feminist, decolonial, and relational theories to envision collaborative social transformation for ecological survival. The paper introduces a framework that incorporates deep listening, collaborative learning, and transformative leadership to encourage and sustain embodied agency. It highlights the relevance of each strategy in fostering embodied agency, which is vital for societal transformation. The significance of the findings related to this paper lies in their contribution to decolonizing disciplinary perspectives in anthropology and beyond, enabling action on sustainable solutions to environmental issues.

Keywords: Embodied agency, Listening, Relationality, Feminism, Climate change

1   Introduction

Climate change is a term that refers to the changes in temperatures and weather that result from both natural changes in the earth and human activities (UN, n.d.). Human activities have been the principal drivers of climate change, resulting in devastating and potentially irreversible consequences for countries and communities globally, which are sending the world into what more and more researchers and environmentalists are calling a climate emergency (IPCC, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2023). For instance, coastal areas, which are often densely populated, are increasingly vulnerable to rising sea levels, intense storms, and acidifying oceans which have been related to human activities (He & Siliman, 2019). The 28th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), also referred to as COP 28, held in Dubai, UAE highlighted the need for action is more urgent than ever as the goals for reducing CO_2 emissions to curb the climate crisis are

not on track, and increasing social and environmental risks due to extreme climactic events cannot be ignored (Jiang et al., 2024).

Despite the growing prerogatives for change, human behaviour and responses remain inadequate, which may not be merely due to a lack of knowledge about climate change. In light of the environmental challenges experienced globally, eco-anxiety is increasing and dramatically impacting human well-being and flourishing with fears that there is no hope for environmental sustainability (Wang et al., 2023). Our survival is at stake if we do not find ways to imagine alternative futures and take action. How do we go beyond seeing ourselves as helpless individuals susceptible to the fears and threats of our inaction and climate change?

By looking at the influence of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism, this exploratory paper examines how climate change impacts communities and suggests ways to address the issue through a cultural anthropological and educational perspective. Specifically, this paper presents a theoretical understanding of ways to promote embodied agency as a means to increase our capacity to connect, collaborate and act in the face of climate change.

The paper begins with a literature review of the impacts of the key forces of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism and how these have influenced our perceptions of the world around us. By examining these forces and acknowledging the resulting inequalities and disconnection between human beings and the environment for which they are responsible, it becomes evident that socio-cultural transformation is essential. This review leads into a discussion of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that supports the author's vision of social transformation through embodied agency. The final section of this paper outlines three strategies that may enhance embodied agency.

2 Literature Review: Recognizing the Need for Socio-Cultural Transformation

The initial part of this paper provides a literature review on particular perspectives on the complex factors causing separation and disconnection inhibiting our ability to think and act collectively. The roots of the planetary crisis, as identified by Clammer (2016), lie in the consumerist and neoliberal cultural desires and dimensions which influence our way of being and acting. Similarly, Quinteros (2015) recognizes how of the coloniality of being is based on universal desires and their relationship with the global capitalist system. According to Ferdig (2017), capitalism and free market enterprise have led to behaviours that disregard the environment and promote unsustainable consumption. Capitalocentric views measure alternative solutions to capitalism, categorizing them as complementary, critical, within, or less than the capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, et al., 2016). Gumbs (2021) points out the potential dangers of societies becoming reliant on capitalist systems and the extraction of resources, like oil drilling. Hence, the great challenge in re-imagining our culture and rejecting our complicity is the taken-for-granted assumption that we have no

choice for any other ways of living beyond and being subjective to capitalism (Clammer, 2016).

The environmental consequences of transnational mining corporations and industrial processes, rooted in colonialism and driven by capitalism, have been severe for humans and the more-than-human worlds, particularly for marine life (Chambers, 2020; Gumbs, 2021). In many countries, particularly in Latin America, colonial encounters have caused immense harm to the environment and lives of Indigenous peoples through extractive activities and gender-based violence (Crosby & Lykes, 2019; Zaragocin & Carretta, 2020). Colonial-capitalist accumulation and exploitation pose a threat to the lives and rights of Indigenous women, perpetuating gendered, racialized, and hetero-normative systems to maintain the status quo (Williams et al., 2018).

Neoliberalism, which is frequently connected with globalization and capitalism, is the theoretical supposition "which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey, 2006, p. 145), and has become the dominant paradigm of the current era. There have been few advancements in proposing alternative economic and organizational systems that deviate from capitalism (Clammer, 2016). This observation emphasizes the importance of agency in reclaiming and advancing alternative action against the current system. As Sumner (2007) contends, "leaving sustainability to those who hold money values will result only in more of the degradation so often associated with globalization" (p. 5).

Lange et al. (2021) see the Separation Paradigm as the dominant paradigm of Western culture which perceives the universe as largely space consisting of separate entities and characterized by unrelated daily experiences. One of the driving forces for this is the industrial processes and practices, including free-market capitalism, which have created shifts in education to separate learners from their homes and communities (Lange et al., 2021). In response to the perils of disconnection, Lange et al. (2021) advise a shift toward practices and processes driven by a relational understanding of life and through a Relationality Paradigm.

Although the situation seems dire, some hope can be gleaned. As Anderson et al. (2016) note, culture is constantly being shaped and is important to generating sustainability solutions because "sustainability efforts will not be successful if environmental crises are reduced to technical problems" (p. 3). The role of culture in driving behaviour change, particularly in climate change and sustainability initiatives, has been neglected but is growing in significance with research and scholarship (Anderson et al., 2016; Clammer, 2016). According to Lange (2018), a "civilization leap" is the critical cultural issue of our time. For this social transformation, we need agency and the realization that we can "become more than a market" (Gumbs, 2021, p. 104) and our "impact is always beyond one species. We are not competing for space on this Earth. We are, at our best, learning to connect towards the possibility of

remaining" (Gumbs, 2021, p. 104). The desire to find new ways of connecting for survival underscores the importance of fostering relationships and embracing a relational shift.

Our ability to feel and build relationships hinges upon emotional intelligence, however, emotions have historically been underestimated and not given enough credit in learning (Dirkx, 1997). More recently, emotional responses to witnessing and experiencing the destruction of the planet as a result of the climate crisis have received renewed attention from various sources (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022; Lange et al., 2021). Such emotional responses may include "feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability" (Pinkala, 2020, p. 2). One popular term is "eco-anxiety" which refers to a complex emotional response, often negative, and concern from recognition of the impacts and devastation resulting from the climate crisis (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Experiencing emotions like worry or guilt for the suffering of the environment can serve as motivation to act (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). Yet, when the emotional burden becomes overwhelming, individuals may be rendered inactive by feelings of frustration, grief, and hopelessness (Pinkala, 2020). Researchers and scientists have become interested in studying eco-anxiety and emotional responses to climate change for this reason.

What options then does humanity have? Ending capitalism, as Gumbs (2021) suggests, may not be the most viable option we have to save the world from absolute destruction. A more actionable potential solution in the present moment could be to learn how to lessen our dependency and reevaluate our ability to prevent contributing to the devastation. The approach proposed in this paper centres around embodied agency, highlighting a subtle yet impactful shift in behaviour and resistance that can be practised and measured in everyday life. In the next section, a discussion of the literature and some perspectives on the connection between embodiment and agency are discussed.

Embodied Agency

The separation of mind and body has been a common result of colonial educational systems, discrediting embodied knowledge (Wong & Batacharya, 2018). Similarly, discourses on agency have lacked a consideration for the role of the body, via "the demarcation between mind and body" (Meynell, 2009, p. 2). Embodied agency, which has benefited from feminist theories, therefore, means understanding how agency and embodiment are intricately related and "engaging the body, in its physical and political context, not merely as the tool of the agent, but the site of agency" (Meynell, 2009, p. 18). The idea has the potential to enhance action and attention towards climate change and environmental support initiatives.

3   Theoretical Perspectives and Frameworks

The theoretical perspectives and frameworks that inform this paper's alternative vision and strategies for education and action, aiming to reclaim embodied agency in the Anthropocene, combine an encounters methodology, eco-feminist perspective, and decolonial and relational paradigmatic viewpoint. The following section will explain each of these theoretical constructs in more detail.

Encounters Approach Methodology

In their article for The Annual Review of Anthropology, Fairer and Rofel (2014) discuss an encounters approach methodology as an important step towards decolonizing the discipline of anthropology and recognizing inequality. An ethnographies of encounters approach examines cultural dynamics and is a method that helps to recognize unequal distribution of power and "dynamic production of inequality across space" (p. 368). Fairer and Rofel (2014) demonstrate through their discussion of ethnographies of encounter how histories of colonialism have produced different kinds of relationships and dependencies and how "transnational capitalist cultural economy becomes contingent on unequal negotiations among specific global north retailers, consumers, and regulators and global south producers, manufacturers, and a host of intermediaries" (p. 368).

In their work, Fairer and Rofel (2014) advocate for an approach that considers encounters not only between humans but also between multiple species. Through their interpretation, Fairer and Rofel (2014) argue that multispecies encounters "illuminate how human and nonhuman lives and worlds mutually emerge through multispecies relationships" (p. 372) wherein the experience of the humans do not receive primacy over other species. Consequently, this method questions the dominance of humans in an Anthropocentric perspective. Ultimately, Fairer and Rofel (2014) are challenging how cultural categories and relationships are constructed across differences and in doing so are providing a new way forward for understanding and making meaning of the world. Fairer and Rofel's (2014) discussion closely relates to the most potent issues and challenges of the environmental crisis using an encounters approach which is why using an encounters approach methodology merits consideration in championing solutions for environmental and climate action.

Ecofeminisms

Eco-feminist perspectives pertain to a diverse range of theories that connect feminism and ecology by associating the oppression and marginalization of women and the domination of nature with a patriarchal society (Hamad, 2013; Mies & Vanda, 2021). These theories come from activist and social movement origins (Philips & Rumens, 2015). Ecological failings can be attributed to the issue of human/nature dualism or separation (Plumwood, 2004). Furthermore, transformation is required according to an ecofeminist perspective for ecological survival (Howell, 1997). The eco-feminist approach aligns with the encounters methodology (Fairer & Rofel, 2014)

and its commitment to challenging inequity and acknowledging humanity's domination over nature.

Relationality

Many although not necessarily all Indigenous worldviews are founded on relationality or a relational paradigmatic viewpoint (Little Bear, 2000; Wildcat & Voh, 2023). Remembering and reclaiming Indigenous systems of knowledge, pedagogies, cultural values, and paradigms is a part of the process toward decolonization and Indigenous resurgence (Smith, 2021; Simpson, 2017). Relational worldviews understand that there are multiple levels of relationships, extending beyond individuals to include humans, animals, plants, land, and the environment (Starblanket & Stark, 2018; Wildcat & Voh, 2023). As such, the encounters methodological approach, specifically multispecies encounters, mentioned earlier by Fairer and Rofel (2014) is endorsed by a relational understanding and worldview.

Embodied Learning

All learning in some way is an embodied activity (Shonstrom, 2020). Embodied learning, a foundational aspect for developing embodied agency, is a comprehensive perspective on learning that considers the body, behaviour, emotion, psychology, and cognition (Clark, 2005; Shonstrom, 2020). An embodied approach specifically can contribute to a deeper emotionally charged learning experience and meaning-making (Gillard & VanWynsberghe, 2021; Lange et al., 2021). Although less common and not as simple a way to conceptualize learning, "learning from an embodied perspective is ultimately more influential, more meaningful, and longer lasting" (Shonstrom, 2020, p. 162) which is paramount to creating lasting change and encouraging agency in our ability to respond to social and environmental issues.

4   Strategies for Reclaiming Embodied Agency in the Anthropocene

Climate This paper presents three under-appreciated strategies to reclaim embodied agency and bridge the gap between humans and the more-than-human world. Drawing upon the previous section's theoretical and methodological foundation, these three strategies present ways to enhance embodied agency in learning and support an encounters approach. Deep listening, collaborative learning, and transformative leadership are the three strategies that will now be explained.

Deep Listening

Relearning the lost ability of listening to understand is a crucial project of our time (Gumbs, 2021). Listening is an embodied learning process that involves the entire body and requires other senses within the body to collaborate to be effective (Harada, 2019). Deep listening is a more profound concept of listening, which "digs below the surface of what is heard … unlocking layer after layer of imagination, meaning, and memory down to the cellular level of human experience" (Oliveros, 2005 cited by

Pavlicevic & Impey, 2013). The practice of deep listening has been examined as a cross-cultural activity that is intertwined with relationality (Blakemore et al., 2022). According to Koch (2020), this strategy encourages humility in the listener through critical reflexivity. Developing humility and critical reflexivity are relevant to fostering greater inter-subject and inter-species relationships. Learning from such multi-species encounters, as discussed by Fairer and Rofel (2014) requires a certain degree of humility through coming to know that humans are not at the centre of the universe.

Active engagement and embodiment are essential for transformative listening and learning. As Shonstrom (2020) notes concerning diversity training, attempts "made to train individuals in bland institutional settings like conference rooms and seminars where they just sit and listen … ignores how embodied relationships to the environment embed learning" (p. 136). Therefore, deep listening practices, such as those that might be elicited through outdoor educational experiences, deserve more attention and examination for their ability to elicit an embodied agentic response in learners. An example is the sustainability tour pedagogy discussed by Gillard and VanWynsberghe (2021) which shows promise for encouraging embodied learning via the immersive nature of the experience. In this example, "participants repeatedly embodied the message that for change to happen" (Gillard & VanWynsberghe, 2021, p. 61). Deeper and more significant learning opportunities can arise from outdoor educational experiences, cultivating embodied agency through enhanced sensory engagement and deep listening.

Collaborative Learning

Creating cultural shifts towards embodied agency and change requires collaboration among educators and researchers who share insights and build on each other's work (Anderson et al., 2016). Collaborative learning is a theory of learning that involves developing a high level of equality and mutuality of influence in the learning process (O'Donnell & Hmelo-Silver, 2013). It is dependent upon learners working together, rather than in competition towards common goals and objectives (Bandono et al., 2023).

According to Warsah et al. (2021), collaborative learning methods promote critical thinking and improve learners' ability to make environmentally aware decisions. Prioritizing awareness as a starting point, studies have shown its ability to inspire significant behavioural changes in response to climate change (Halady & Rao, 2010). The reason collaborative learning is important lies in the relationship between awareness, action, and agency.

Fairer and Rofel (2014) emphasize mutuality and equality in multi-species encounters through collaborative learning and communicative processes. Through encounters of this nature, it may be possible to "break down boundaries between humans and nonhumans at the same time as they enable the articulation of distinctively human identities" (Fairer & Rofel, 2014, p. 372). The breaking down of

barriers can increase awareness and encourage recognizing collaboration. Furthermore, the collaborative process gives learners agency and differs from the kinds of encounters perpetuated by transnational capitalism and colonialism as described by Fairer and Rofel (2014). Ecofeminism recognizes the affinity between women and nature (Li, 2017). Ecofeminists also promote collaborative methods for socioenvironmental activism and advancing eco-justice through collaboration and relational praxis between and across different communities (Lawrence et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2017). Based on these perspectives, collaborative action and embodied agency are mutually reinforcing and can be achieved through collaborative learning.

Transformative Leadership

The principles of transformative leadership are well developed in the work of Carolyn Shields (2010; 2011; 2020). By recognizing power and privilege, a transformative leadership approach works to deconstruct hierarchical systems that perpetuate inequities (Shields, 2011). A transformative leadership approach supports the goal of social transformation and is associated with an activist orientation and origin principles (Shields, 2011). Moreover, this leadership approach is informed by key perspectives of interdependence, interconnection, and global awareness, which align with relational paradigmatic awareness (Shields, 2020).

From an embodied agentic perspective, leadership can be practised by everyone in everyday activities and life (Montour & Donnely, 2018). Fairer and Rofel (2014) stress the significance of everyday encounters, which aligns with this aspect of transformative leadership. This critical realization and responsibility that everyone can contribute and make a difference in their everyday lives is crucial for actioning sustainable solutions to address environmental issues. By seeing oneself as an agent of change, one can practice embodied agency through even the most mundane everyday activities. Furthermore, the objective of transformative leadership is mutual benefit for both individual and collective good (Montour & Donnely, 2018; Shields, 2011). This is associated with cultural shifts that call for a re-evaluation of behaviour patterns towards competition, individualism, and exclusion perpetuated by free-market capitalism and neoliberalism, as argued by Clammer (2016).

5   Conclusion

Climate Without innovative ideas for alternative patterns of behaviour to reject over consumption and combat climate change, and environmental sustainability issues, the world is on a course for even more unimaginable levels of environmental destruction. This paper supports the need for a socio-cultural transformation and encourages alternative perspectives and paradigmatic shifts for cultural change (Clammer, 2016; Lange, 2018). Fostering the conditions for embodied agency can lead to behaviour change and societal transformation, urging a deeper connection with the more-than-human world. This paper suggests three specific strategies to support learning and developing embodied agency which are: deep listening, collaborative

learning, and transformative leadership are key strategies for reclaiming agency in the Anthropocene. Embodied learning and agency have been dismissed due to the influence of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism,

which also contributes to the separation of reason and emotion and humans from nature. Thus, future scholarship is required to confront these forces and invest in research for reclaiming and reimagining strategies that promote resistance and action for survival.

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