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Laurel Krapivkin
*Illinois State University*, laurelkrapivkin@gmail.com

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ECOFEMINISM REIMAGINED: DISCOURSE & EMBODIMENT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

LAUREL KRAPIVKIN

125 Pages

In this project, I will develop a reimagined ecofeminist lens that is informed by a careful attention to the relationship between discourse and embodiment. The field of children's literature would benefit from additional guidance on how to think complexly about ecofeminist tenants in young adult literature. In this project, I intend to provide a way of looking at YA literature with an attention to the ways that discourse and embodiment work collectively and individually. In doing so, I hope to prove first that children's literature is in need of defining tenets of a reimagined ecofeminist critical lens; second, that a reimagined ecofeminist way of analyzing texts gives us a more nuanced understanding of the intersectional nature of oppression; and third, that such a lens is a valuable tool to analyze and rethink the radical nature of care and its complex relationship with embodiment and discourse. When applied to literature, such a reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to connect a protagonist's growing awareness of their body to a recognition of their place-situatedness, which allows them to develop a growing care for those around them that have been othered. My hope is that such an exploration of the relationship between discourse and embodiment will reveal how each work collectively and individually against neoliberal notions of the self, against patriarchal structures, and against all structures of oppression and systems that other in young adult literature (including racism, classism, ableism, and sizeism, environmental degradation, etc.).

KEYWORDS: adolescent literature; ecofeminism; embodiment; agency; care; empathy

# ECOFEMINISM REIMAGINED: DISCOURSE & EMBODIMENT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

LAUREL KRAPIVKIN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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# ECOFEMINISM REIMAGINED: DISCOURSE & EMBODIMENT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

LAUREL KRAPIVKIN

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Roberta Seelinger Trites, Chair

Mary Jeanette Moran, Co-Chair

Rachel Gramer

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: ECOFEMINISM REIMAGINED: DISCOURSE & EMBODIMENT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

It all started with the lowly kangaroo Rat.

Kangaroo rats can go their whole lives without drinking any water; they are the world's best hydro-conservationists. Kangaroo rats escape the freezing desert nights by sleeping in burrows, in which they also store their seeds and beans. During sleep, their warm breath meets the cool night air and condensation forms, which is absorbed by the nearby seeds. Because of this, kangaroo rats rarely lose any water; they just re-consume the moisture they lose by ingesting their seeds. They can jump nine feet into the air to avoid predators like rattlesnakes and owls. Kangaroo rats are perfectly adapted to their seemingly harsh and desolate desert environment.

My father, Randy, taught me to care about the small creatures of the world—the kangaroo rats, the western fence lizards that sunned themselves in our southern California backyard, the orange and black monarchs that visited our milkweed plants each spring, the light-footed clapper rails being rehabilitated in our local San Diego marshland. He was an amateur botanist, astronomer, and entomologist; once at a local museum I watched him correctly name over 100 species of local butterflies from their pictures alone. Following in my father's footsteps, I developed a fascination with kangaroo rats in a general education biology class in my undergraduate studies. I was so taken with these highly adapted beings that I almost switched my major from literature to biology, a decision that was quickly intercepted by my supportive advisors who wanted me to graduate on time. Instead, I added a biology minor. I studied shark skeletal systems, dissected a pig, and I even took an entomology class, which proved just as interesting to me as reading *Madame Bovary*; when Emma throws the torn pieces of white paper

out of her carriage, “like white butterflies, on a field of flowering red clover,” I not only wondered about Flaubert’s use of symbolism but also about what species of butterfly those scraps could represent—the common cabbage white! Or, perhaps a white admiral?

As I progressed in my undergraduate studies, I searched for a way to synthesize my seemingly opposite interests: literature and the natural sciences. I was introduced to the study of ecocriticism, and I began to study literature through the lens of humanities’ relationship with the land as reflected through literature. I focused my scholarship on writers of the American southwest such as Willa Cather and the twenty-first century novelist Barbara Kingsolver, using feminist and ecocritical lenses to analyze their works. In graduate school at San Diego State University, I took my first children’s literature class from June Cummins, and I turned my ecological focus to analyzing children’s and adolescent literature.

I was introduced to ecofeminism when I attended a lecture by Rosemary Radford Reuther—an early pioneer of the ecofeminist movement. Eager to pursue the integration of social justice and the environment, I studied the works of ecofeminist teachers like Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, and Greta Gaard, among others.

As I completed my doctoral work at Illinois State University and dove deeper into the guiding tenets and principles of ecofeminism, I also learned the history of the movement and the backlash that still tarnishes its name. I was reluctant at first to identify as an ecofeminist scholar because of the lingering accusations about essentialism and exclusion hovering over much ecofeminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. As I became more aware of my positionality as a white, cis, hetero woman, I wondered if my interest in ecofeminism was rooted in the fact that I found it relatively easy to be objective and unattached to many of the issues I was writing about because they often didn’t affect *me*. In *Hood Feminism*, Mikki Kendall writes that “too often

mainstream feminism ignores that Black women and other women of color are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine of hate" (11). Kendall argues that "everything that affects women is a feminist issue," including issues like poverty, food insecurity, gun control, police brutality, sizeism, and more. The problem is that many mainstream feminists have no idea what it is like to experience the particular violence of these issues in their lives. And while I have certainly experienced misogyny, I have not come in contact with the particularly complex and violent oppressiveness that women with multiple intersecting identities do. Was this interest in ecofeminism some sort of Anglo savior complex? Hasn't ecofeminism too often been used by white women wringing their hands as they analyze literature? Why not just abandon ecofeminism and use another literary theory?

As I sought answers to these questions, with the support of my peers and advisors, I kept coming back to Professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's writings on intersectionality and the way that intersecting and overlapping identities impact Black women's experiences in the justice system. Crenshaw writes, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sex-ism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). Crenshaw's pivotal theory warns us not to forget that white feminism in the United States has historically insisted that all women are equal while actively ignoring the lived experiences of women of color, let alone the nuanced, varied ways in which women experience misogyny. I began to ask, what might it look like to reimagine ecofeminism as truly intersectional? Is it even possible within the sociocultural context of the United States and the myriad ways we have devalued Indigenous bodies, knowledges, and ways of being? Literary theory of children's and adolescent literature cannot continue to ignore the intersection between environmental and social

justice. No group of people can be free while the environment continues to be degraded and abused. So how do we restore this critical lens to honor and invite the lived experiences and voices of all women? Of all people?

With this as my guiding tenet, I decided I wasn't ready to abandon ecofeminism—at least, not yet. I searched for scholars who were already doing work identifying the nuanced intersections and deviations between environmental and social justice issues. I sought out ecofeminist voices such as Vandana Shiva, Dorcetta Taylor, and other writers who acknowledge and critique the ways mainstream western ecofeminists have failed to listen to voices of color and the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Eli Clare's writings guided me in thinking about the ways that gender, sexuality, and disability are connected to environmental access and safety. Michelle H. Martin guided me back to children's literature; in particular, the ways that children's access to and safety in nature are complicated by race and class. With these critics' guidance, along with the writings of many others, I began to reimagine an inclusive, trauma-informed, care-guided ecofeminism that would allow scholars to analyze young adult texts through a richer, more nuanced lens. This lens has also been reimagined through my lived experiences of writing these chapters during a global pandemic, which highlighted systems of oppression at work in the U.S. at the intersections of race and the environment (race being a clear indicator of access to clean water and health care resources). This project was written during the murder of George Floyd and countless other Black people at the hands of the police, and the ensuing Black Lives Matter momentum. On a more personal level, my lived experiences also include the tragic suicide of my father, Randy, and the birth of my two daughters, Rosalie Joy and Alina Sage. At the heart of this reimagined lens is the interplay of joy and grief, loss and gain. This project offers that reimagined lens to the world.

**Ecofeminism: Discursivity and Embodiment**

While attention to environmental themes has been trending in children's and adolescent literature for the last 50 years, ecofeminism has been largely overlooked as a viable critical lens through which to analyze young adult literature. Carolyn Sigler writes, "Beginning in 1971 when Dr. Seuss's irascible Lorax first spoke 'for the trees,' publishers have been 'greening' children's literature at an extraordinary rate" (148). She argues that "environmental awareness, or biocentrism, exemplifies children's literature's long tradition of nurturing ideologies and issues that the prevailing literary culture regards as subversive or insignificant—terms that, in an often trivialized genre, can ironically come to mean much the same thing" (148). Indeed, the genre of environmental literature for children has continued to "green," and the vast collection of these works reveals the genre's "relevance in addressing political issues of environmental and cultural imperialism, as well as questions of racism and sexism" (151). Because of this potential to address issues of intersectional oppressions, many children's literature scholars have turned their focus to exploring the relationship of humans and the environment in literature.

As scholars in children's literature have become attuned to the "green" movement, directing their research towards exploring relationships and intersubjectivities between the environment and young folks, there are a few scholars who have used ecofeminism as a lens through which to analyze false binaries such as child/adult, woman/man, and nature/culture. In *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth*, Alice Curry suggests that "the flexibility and integrative nature of ecofeminist discourse leaves it scope to . . . foreground the relevance and appropriateness of ecofeminism as a conceptual tool with which to interrogate the positioning of young adults in contemporary literature" (6). Ecofeminism is indeed an important tool with which to interrogate aetonormative representations of children and identify the

intersectionality of oppression in literature for young people. *Environmental Crisis* situates young adult literature within a feminist and environmental framework, drawing on ecofeminist theories of ethics, language, and philosophy. Curry's project is, surprisingly, the first comprehensive full-length work on ecofeminism in literature for young people, despite the movement towards the "greening" of children's literature identified by Sigler and others (Greenway 1994; Dobrin & Kidd 2004; Stephens 2010).

Feminist scholar Roberta Seelinger Trites positions ecofeminism "as a mechanism by which to explore the intersubjective and interactionist relationships people develop by interacting with the environment as they mature" (*Twenty-First-Century Feminisms* 61). She also identifies ecofeminist young adult novels' potential to "interrogate the false duality between discourse and the material" (59). In this project, I will further explore the potential of ecofeminism that Trites articulates as a lens that will help scholars grapple with the perceived gap between discourse and embodiment. In this project, when I write about discursivity, I mean language, and I am particularly interested in language that engages structures of oppression relating to sex, race, class, gender, disability, sizeism, and the environment, and the intersections between these. When I write about material embodiment, I mean textual depictions of bodies and the ways those bodies interact with the environment.

Breaking down this false duality between discursivity and materiality has been the central focus of much of broader feminist theory for the last two decades. Susan Hekman writes that "instead of deconstructing the discourse/reality dichotomy, instead of constructing a new paradigm for feminism that integrates the discursive and the material, feminism has instead turned to the discursive pole of the discourse/reality dichotomy" (87). Calling upon Donna Haraway's and Bruno Latour's understandings of this false dichotomy, she cautions against a

feminism that abandons “the material in favor of the discursive” (88). I agree with Hekman and position discourse and the material, or more specifically, embodiment, as interactionist, rather than diametrically opposed to each other. In this way, as Hekman writes, “what we need is a conception that does not presuppose a gap between language and reality that must be bridged, that does not define the two as opposites. We have learned much from the linguistic turn. Language does construct our reality. What we are discovering now, however, is that this is not the end of the story” (91-92).

My goal for this project then, is to develop a reimagined ecofeminist lens that is informed by a careful attention to the relationship between discourse and embodiment. The field of children’s literature would benefit from additional guidance on how to think complexly about ecofeminist tenets in young adult literature. While the novels I’ve chosen to analyze in this project certainly contain ecofeminist themes such as care, reciprocity, discussion of embodiment, depictions of nature, and the relationships between humans and the environment, this project’s scope is not to create a definition for what constitutes an ecofeminist young adult text. Rather, I intend to provide a way of looking at YA literature with an attention to the ways that discourse and embodiment work collectively and individually. In doing so, I hope to prove first that children’s literature is in need of defining tenets of a reimagined ecofeminist critical lens; second, that a reimagined ecofeminist way of analyzing texts gives us a more nuanced understanding of the intersectional nature of oppression; and third, that such a lens is a valuable tool to analyze and rethink the radical nature of care and its complex relationship with embodiment and discourse. When applied to literature, such a reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to connect a protagonist’s growing awareness of their body to a recognition of their place-situatedness, which allows them to develop a growing care for those around them that have

been othered. My hope is that such an exploration of the relationship between discourse and embodiment will reveal how each work collectively and individually against neoliberal notions of the self, against patriarchal structures, and against all structures of oppression and systems that other in young adult literature (including racism, classism, ableism, and sizeism, environmental degradation, etc.).

**Ecofeminism: Definition and History**

The term “ecofeminism” was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Gardner and Riley 24). Contrary to popular thought, the main aim of ecofeminist theory is not to argue the closeness of females to earth (as more close than men). Instead, ecofeminists aim to uncover how this particular connection has been used against women and the environment to justify oppression and degradation, and then, out of that, work to envision a new society.

Because of its activist roots in both social justice and environmental activism, ecofeminism has always been interdisciplinary. Greta Gaard, a prominent ecofeminist scholar and activist who has done important work in documenting the historical foundations of ecofeminist thought, traces the roots of ecofeminism back to 1962, when Rachel Carson’s revolutionary work *Silent Spring* was published (“Ecofeminism Revisited” 27). In it, Carson documents the adverse environmental effects caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides. The book was a catalyst for growing concern over the environment, and environmental activism in the 70s converged with America’s growing anti-war and anti-nuclear movements in response to the Vietnam war (28). At the same time, feminism’s second wave, with its focus on sexual and reproductive rights, also converged with growing unease about the future of the environment.

Gaard writes that ecofeminism "emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation" (28). Ecofeminism has also always been interdisciplinary, weaving together race and environmental racism (Taylor 1997; Riley et al. 2003), animal studies (Gaard 2002, 2012), queer theory (Gaard 1997; Azzarello 2012), intersectionality (Kings 2017), pedagogy (Houde and Bullis, 1999; Gaard 2001, 2008; Gardner and Riley 2007; Herles 2018), and post-colonial studies (Mohanty 1984; Shiva 2010). In Judith Plant's 1989 edited collection *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, Starhawk writes that ecofeminists are "attempting to shift the values of our culture" (174). Plant herself posits that in order to achieve this shift, "we *all* must cultivate the human characteristics of gentleness and caring, giving up patriarchy with all its deadly privileges" (3). Ynestra King (1989) offers up ecofeminism as "as a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual, and rational forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction and to envision and create a free, ecological society" (23). The hope that stems out of ecofeminism is a just and verdant society for all beings—both human and non-human.

**Ecofeminism: Tenets and Evolving Principles**

While ecofeminist theory is multifaceted and contains multiple offshoots and subtheories, it does maintain several recognizable and consistent defining logics, including analysis of how society can shift towards equality and fair treatment. Many second-wave feminists and ecofeminists argued that one of the ways this could be accomplished is by the dismantling of the nature vs. culture binary. Susan Griffin (1989) historicizes the split between nature and culture in her essay "Split Culture," arguing that "to split culture from nature equals violence and

destruction" (11). She argues that the spirit of nature is our own spirit, and that this split not only negatively affects nature, but also our own souls (16). Donna Haraway (2004) also recognizes the harmful nature/culture binary. She writes that nature "is not the Other who offers origin, replenishment, and service. Neither mother, nurse, lover, nor slave, nature is not matrix, resource, mirror, or tool for the reproduction of that odd, ethnocentric, phallogocentric, putatively universal being called Man" ("Otherworldly Conversations" 125-50). Ecofeminists believe that the nature/culture binary must be, as Colleen Mack-Canty (2004) articulates, "rewoven" before healing can start.

Another belief that ecofeminists engage with is a rejection of rationalism. Val Plumwood (1996), in her essay "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism" argues that rationalist accounts of the self, which environmental philosophy (such as ethics and deep ecology) has subscribed to, have proved to be extremely harmful to women and nature. In rationalist thought, care becomes a cognitive matter, "irrelevant to morality" (157). Care gets relegated as emotional labor and, in the emotional/rational binary, is seen as feminine and unreliable (157). Plumwood argues that a concern for nature cannot be viewed as a "completion of a process of (masculine) universalization, moral abstraction, and disconnection," and like Griffin and Haraway, Plumwood calls for an interrogation of the categories of nature/culture themselves (159, 169). Robert Session (1996) also critiques the rationalist thought prevalent in deep ecology, identifying its framework as androcentric and negative (139).

In response to the rejection of rationalism, ecofeminist and feminist scholars have put forth alternate relational theories that attempt to move away from the harmful effects of rationalist thinking and toward a more inclusive and collaborative framework. One model is that

of ethics of care, or care-focused feminism. Feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) emphasize care as a reciprocal relationship, calling attention to both who is caring and who is being cared for. Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva (2016) and others have done important work in highlighting the labor that women (for Shiva, women in India) have historically taken responsibility for in terms of caring for others, like the tasks of food production and seed storage. Globally, the work of emotional care (including food production) has been relegated to the feminized private sphere, uncompensated and undervalued.

But not all ecofeminists advocate for an ethics of care; Sherilyn MacGregor (2004) critiques the ethics of care model, arguing that there are risks to reducing women's ethico-political life to care. She asks, "Have ecofeminists explored the emotions beyond caring ones, such as anger, outrage, and perhaps even selfishness that are at play in many women's engagement with environmental disputes?" (64). Instead, MacGregor advocates for care as "ecological civic virtue," and suggests moving towards citizenship instead (57). Despite these divides in philosophical thought, ecofeminists and care ethicists alike agree that the present, rationalist way of thinking does little to benefit humanity, and in particular enacts violence, both individually and systemically, against marginalized and oppressed people, including those with intersecting marginalized identities.

Haraway (2008) also writes about imagining new ways of relating to non-human entities in her work *When Species Meet*. She writes about "response-ability" as "a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being" (71). She warns that "if this structure of material–semiotic relating breaks down or is not permitted to be born, then nothing but objectification and oppression remains" (71). Instead, she proposes interactions that are coconstituted and responsive on both sides. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai (1997) describes a similar

ecofeminist model of relating, where "weblike networks of care and responsibility help the individual to establish a strong sense of self while maintaining connection with others through mutually beneficial patterns of exchange" (201). Responsibility, care, and interdependence are all important to establishing new symbiotic patterns of exchange between all beings.

We see these themes of responsibility and care perpetuated in ecofeminist literature, where "critical social elements...are the characteristics of connectedness and interdependence (Riley, Torrens, and Krumholz 92). Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy's 1998 *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* does important work in connecting ecofeminist thought and literary criticism, and Gretchen Legler's 1997 work positions ecofeminism as a helpful lens to use in literary analysis. She argues that an ecofeminist reading of texts "gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature and the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (227). She calls for literary critics to do the same revisioning work that King, Griffin, Starhawk, Plant, and other foundational ecofeminists advocate for—a reimagining of "human relationships with the natural world by raising awareness about a whole range of alternative stories about landscape and the natural world that have heretofore been ignored as 'nature writing'" (229). One way that literary critics can do this work of reimaging is by the process of "embodying nature," which "involves writing nature out of a position as a passive mirror of culture into a position as actor or agent" (229). By giving nature the same agency as human characters, literary scholars can do restorative work in shifting culture towards more reciprocal relationships between human and nature.

**Race and Ecofeminism: Recentering Voices of Color**

Despite ecofeminism's widespread popularity in the 1980s, ecofeminism came under attack in the early 90s. Gaard historicizes ecofeminism's fall from grace in "Ecofeminism Revisited." As ecofeminists began to attract criticism that they were "essentialist, ethnocentric, anti-intellectual goddess-worshippers who mistakenly portray the Earth as female or issue totalizing and ahistorical mandates for worldwide veganism," journals and magazines became reticent to associate themselves with ecofeminism (32). Indeed, much of the backlash against ecofeminism came from the feminist community. Gaard writes:

> Focusing on the celebration of goddess spirituality and the critique of patriarchy advanced in cultural ecofeminism, poststructuralist and other third-wave feminisms portrayed all ecofeminisms as an exclusively essentialist equation of women with nature, discrediting ecofeminism's diversity of arguments and standpoints to such an extent that, by 2010, it was nearly impossible to find a single essay, much less a section, devoted to issues of feminism and ecology (and certainly not ecofeminism), species, or nature in most introductory anthologies used in women's studies, gender studies, or queer studies. ("New Directions" 511)

Those who aim to discredit ecofeminism as essentialist and anti-intellectual, as just a "white woman's thing," have been harsh in their criticism ("Ecofeminism Revisited" 41). For example, Janet Biehl (1991) offers a more methodical critique of ecofeminism and offers an alternative framework—that of social ecology. Lucy Sargisson (2001) argues, "Ecofeminism is inconsistent, intellectually regressive and it lacks rigour. Ecofeminism is the fluffy face of feminism" (52). Gaard posits that scholars, such as Sargisson and Biehl, who charge ecofeminism with

essentialism have overlooked social feminists (such as Ynestra King) who are doing important work to rescript our culture's compulsory definition of women ("Ecofeminism Revisited" 40).

Despite Gaard's insistence that ecofeminism isn't just a "white woman's thing," the truth is that ecofeminist writing and theorizing has largely been dominated by white, middle-class women. Ecofeminist theory has not reflected the extent and importance of the involvement of women of color in the U.S. environmental movement. Dorcetta Taylor writes:

> Despite the ecofeminists' success in getting gender issues and alternative critiques of the capitalist, patriarchal system into the environmental dialogue, they, like other environmentalists, have done little to bring the issues of central concern to women of color (and men of color) to the forefront of the environmental dialogue in a consistent and earnest way or to make such issues a central part of their agenda. (58)

Not only have ecofeminists omitted issues central to communities of color, they have also failed to understand the lived experiences of women of color and how these experiences differ from those of white women. Taylor writes that "the typology laid out by ecofeminists is not very helpful in trying to understand the lives, experiences, and activism of women of color; it doesn't even recognize womanism or any of the other kinds of feminism with which women of color strongly identify" (62). Indeed, women of color face domination not only by white men, but also by white women.

Ecofeminism has succeeded in important ways in bringing together conversations and theorizing surrounding gender and environmental justice, but it has also failed to listen to and center the experiences of communities of color. Ecofeminism isn't worth abandoning, but moving forward, it must be seriously reconstructed to recognize and center the work that BIPOC ecofeminists are doing and have done to progress justice for communities of color. Only in this

way will we be able to reclaim ecofeminism as a viable theory to address the intersectionality of oppression. Taylor provides direction for what this looks like when she writes, "The challenge, therefore, for ecofeminists is to increase their awareness of issues devastating communities of color, explore ways of developing understanding and mutually respectful working relationships, and be open to changes that will come from such alliances. Most important, they have to resist the urge to take over" (69). Ecofeminism, done this way, has incredible potential as a literary lens to uncover systems of oppression and center the experiences of marginalized characters.

A note moving forward. The characters in the texts that I am analyzing all present as femme, signaled by the authors' use of she/her/hers pronouns. Several of the characters also experience physical changes during puberty that signal they are assigned female at birth. Because of this, in this project, when I use the term woman, I mean people who are assigned female at birth and who identify as femme. I will use the pronouns she/her/hers in referring to these protagonists. There are many young adult texts that feature trans-protagonists who identify as women. Due to the limited size and scope of this particular project, I am unable to address these texts with the attention and expertise they deserve. Any viable ecofeminist lens must be trans-inclusive, and my hope is that future projects will allow me the time and space to include analysis of these important texts. Part of that viability is not making assumptions about sex, and distinguishing sex from gender expression, as I have done here.

**Ecofeminism and Children's and Young Adult Literature**

One discipline that has a growing body of ecofeminist work is that of children's literature. Scholars have attributed this renewed interest in ecofeminism to the growing body of writing for young folks that contains environmental themes. However, in a parallel fashion to broader ecofeminist theory, ecofeminist literary criticism in children's literature has also failed to

focus on the lived experiences of children and young adults of color in relation to their particular environments.

Many scholars using ecofeminist lenses in children's literature have centered their work on the ecofeminist logic of domination, emphasizing intersectionality and the connectedness of oppression. In her essay "Toward an Ecopedagogy of Children's Environmental Literature," Gaard introduces the logic of domination, which she traces back to ecofeminists such as Chaia Heller, Ynestra King, and Karen Warren. Identifying a logic of domination in a work allows ecofeminist scholars to "make connections among not just sexism, speciesism, and the oppression of nature but also other forms of social injustice—racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and colonialism—as part of western culture's assault on nature" (12). This emphasis on intersectionality allows a breakdown of harmful dichotomies such as adult/child, man/woman, and nature/culture. In Dobrin and Sidd's *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism,* Marion W. Copeland calls upon Val Plumwood's theories in her ecofeminist reading of works by Beatrix Potter and Gene Stratton-Porter, arguing that "ecofeminism's concern with the domination of nature and of all animals, wild and domestic, human and nonhuman, lies at the heart of the work of both women" (71). In his essay "Winnie-the-Conservationist: *Tuck Everlasting*, Ecofeminism, and Children's Literature," Peter Kunze completes an ecofeminist reading of *Tuck Everlasting.* Kunze acknowledges ecofeminism's potential to work against oppression, and he posits that a truly inclusive ecofeminism "must approach children as active subjects worthy of attention, respect, and agency" (41). Aetonormativity is indeed an oppressive structure that must be acknowledged and challenged in any ecofeminist reading of literature for young people.

In “Traitorousness, Invisibility and Animism: An Ecocritical Reading of Nnedi Okorafor's West African Novels for Children,” Curry also explores ecofeminism’s potential to reject yet another oppressive dichotomy that causes harm. In the essay she explores Plumwood’s idea of “traitorousness,” or an environmental activism that rejects anthropocentrism. Through a literary analysis of Nnedi Okorafor’s novels, Curry argues that the texts “model an animistic mode of being-in-the-world that successfully deconstructs the human-environment or culture-nature dichotomy” (38). Curry concludes that Okorafor’s characters, through their traitorousness, are able to “adopt an empathetic and transgressive stance towards oppression” (45). Empathy for oneself and others fosters responsibility, which becomes a tool powerful against oppression. Clementine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva’s *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature* contains Curry’s ecofeminist analysis of Julia Bertagna’s *Zenith*, in which Curry proposes that post-human feminist ecocritical scholars might consider a reading that “acknowledges shared responsibility—towards the earth and towards each other—and deems such acknowledgement a viable foundation for political radicalism” (“A Question of Scale” 77).

Closely linked to ecofeminism’s emphasis on the intersection of oppression is the interrelatedness of ecofeminism and material feminisms. In *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, Trites challenges the false duality between discourse and material embodiment in her ecofeminist reading of several YA texts. Trites argues that they follow a pattern in which they “invariably demonstrate a young woman gaining an increased knowledge of herself as embodied in the world” (61). Ecofeminism can aid scholars in challenging problematic depictions of young women’s embodiment, as well as problematic depictions of the environment as non-agentic.

Agency is a central topic of ecofeminist analysis, and several scholars have centered their scholarship around analyzing the subversion of the prototypical male adventure narrative. Authors can successfully subvert this narrative by creating young women characters whose agency is not linked to or dependent upon domination of the environment. Vicki Van Sickle calls attention to patterns in literature of men's relationship with the land as hierarchical in "Daughters of the Land: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Relationships between Female Adolescent Protagonists and Landscape in Three Verse Novels for Children." She argues that a symbiotic experience with the land isn't gendered, as in only belonging to women; an ecofeminist relationship with nature is available to all (48).

Young adult adventure literature featuring young women protagonists often subverts the traditional male hero's journey. John Stephens argues that authors writing in this genre often employ the narrative trope of "constructing parallel narratives underpinned by a metonymic interrelationship, whereby threatened or damaged nature is matched by threatened or damaged lives" (207). These parallel narratives are indeed fodder for ecofeminist readings, as we see in Caroline Campbell's "Between the Ice Floes: Imaging Gender, Fear and Safety in Antarctic Literature for Young Adults." Campbell interrogates the masculine representation of young heroes in YA Antarctic adventure literature, examining Justin D'Ath's *Killer Whale* and Geraldine McCaughrean's *The White Darkness*. She argues that D'Arth's juxtaposition of a prototypical male hero with a "young female eco-warrior" character subverts this particular gendering of the ice adventure novel, and McCaughrean's narrative also explores and pushes back against these normative representations (154). While Campbell never explicitly names ecofeminism or environmental feminism as her theoretical standpoint, she does nod to ecofeminism by acknowledging that "the gendering of the ice in correlation with the 'gradual

arrival' of women scientists to Antarctica (Glasberg 229), and the emerging green discourses of 'ecopoiesis and ecocriticism' deriving from 'deep ecology or ecofeminism' (Bradford et al. 79, 81) are not insignificant factors in this development" (154). Ecofeminism is a useful tool for YA scholars to uncover problematic gendering of the environment.

While the field of children's literature is slowly developing a foundation of ecofeminist literary criticism and theory, a great deal more work needs to be done, especially in the field of young adult literature. In this project, I will work to reclaim ecofeminism as a viable theory to address the intersectionality of oppression in young adult and children's literature. I will recognize and center the work that Black and Indigenous ecofeminist scholars have already done and are doing, and I will explore the ways that discourse and embodiment work in young adult literature against normative practices that perpetuate violence and oppression.

**Chapter Outlines**

I have outlined the project's subsequent chapters below. Because this is a project focused on embodiment, I have woven pieces of non-fiction in with my research. My hope is that through these interstitial personal narratives, I continue to interrogate the relationship between discourse and embodiment by including my lived experiences during the years this research was completed.

In Chapter Two, "Reconstructing Ecofeminism: Race & Embodiment in Mildred D. Taylor's Cassie Logan Series," I will use a develop a reimagined ecofeminist lens and use it to interrogate Mildred D. Taylor's four-part series about Cassie Logan: *Song of the Trees*, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Let the Circle Be Unbroken,* and *The Road to Memphis*. The four texts focus on the development of Cassie as she navigates her unique positionality as an African American girl growing up in a land-owning home in rural Mississippi in the 1930s and 40s. I will

establish three defining tenets of a reconstructed ecofeminist lens, including intersubjectivity, relationality, and repair, and I will use those tenets to analyze Cassie's development and growth throughout the series. I will call particular attention to Cassie's growing awareness of her embodiment, and specifically, the threat of sexual violence against her body by white men, which aligns with her growing awareness of the incipient racism that pervades her community. As Cassie matures through the series, her growing awareness of her intersubjective embodiment affords her empathy and care for those around her in her community who have been othered. She maintains a strong and mutualistic relationality with the land that her family has worked to obtain and keep safe, and Taylor sets her up for the potential of relational repair when she returns home from her travels to Memphis in the final book.

In Chapter Three, "Blood, Sweat, & Tears: Analyzing Empathy, Care, & Agency in Young Adult Literature Through A Reimagined Ecofeminism," I will use my reconstructed ecofeminist lens to explore the intersubjective and interactionist relationships between young female protagonists' embodiment and the environment in several young adult novels, including Nnedi Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker,* Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*, and Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust.* Ecofeminist theorists who have focused their attention to literature for young adults have identified several common themes surrounding embodiment, responsibility, and the development of a sustainable ethics of care. For example, Trites writes:

> Twenty-first century ecofeminist YA novels are often very self-conscious about the relationship between the environment and the individual; moreover, along with emphasizing interactions among nature, culture, and the human body, they frequently depict the intra-activity through which human perception leads the material and discourse to shape one another. In other words, whether YA ecofeminism is classified as

speculative fiction or realism, those novels that interrogate environmentalism also tend to interrogate the false duality between discourse and the material. (*Twenty-First-Century Feminisms* 61)

In such works, young female protagonists are growing in their awareness of their materiality, and they also display a growing awareness of the earth as a material entity, and in turn, their embodied connection to it. Curry calls this "place-situatedness," and she argues that it

> gives rise to situated knowledges, rather than the abstract universal theories of normative ethics and philosophy, and underpins the ecofeminist assertion that "to know" should be subsumed beneath "to experience." This emphasis on the experience of human-nonhuman connection, moving beyond feminist standpoint theory to engage plural perspectives, collective viewpoints and localised subject positions, is important to all aspects of contemporary ecofeminist engagement. (*Environmental Crisis* 4)

In each of the novels I examine herein, the protagonists display a growing awareness of their embodiment that eventually allows them to recognize their "place-situatedness" and develop a relational care for those around them that have been "othered." In *Zahrah the Windseeker,* Zahrah eventually embraces the mystery of the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, including the gorillas, and she develops a relationship with her gorilla friends, or to use Haraway's term, a "co-constituency" for one another's differences and embodiment (*When Species Meet* 71). *Ezperanza Rising*'s protagonist Esperanza develops her own relationship with the farmland of Central California and, at the end of the novel, she lies on the ground and feels the earth's heartbeat, just as Papa taught her, her heart in sync with the land. In *Out of the Dust,* Billie Jo eventually reunites with her father and embraces the Dust Bowl in all its terrible beauty, starting a journey of healing herself and her community. All the protagonists in the texts I will analyze

grow in their awareness of their embodiment, and with that, grow in relational agency, care, and empathy for those around them.

In my fourth and final chapter, “Growing Student Agency via Ecofeminism in Children’s Literature: Developing A Critical Ecofeminist Pedagogy,” I turn my focus to pedagogy. In the chapter, I overview the internship course I taught in the fall of 2020, “Growing Agency: Ecocriticism, Intersectionality, and Ecofeminism in Children’s Literature.” Because of the surrounding socio-political situations of my course, the questions I set out to research concerning teaching ecofeminist theory have evolved to include questions about what it looks like to not only teach ecofeminism, but also to *practice* it. The project evolved from a series of research questions that guided the scaffolding of my course to a project that addressed pedagogical and personal questions about rigor, fairness, and grace for my students and for myself. This chapter will then outline and analyze the course through the syllabus, assignments, and excerpts of student writing. It will also track my own development as an instructor through the stories of the reciprocal relationships I developed with students that sustained me (and hopefully, them) in a time of collective and individual chaos and trauma.

Through my research, I found that scaffolding other concepts first (e.g., ecocriticism and intersectionality) helps students understand ecofeminist theory in children’s literature. I also found that studying theories such as ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism allowed students to talk about children’s literature in a more nuanced way as they gained language to describe problematic ideologies being represented. Last, I found that students had just as much to offer me, as their instructor, as I did to teach them about destabilizing hierarchies in the classroom.

# CHAPTER II: RECONSTRUCTING ECOFEMINISM: RACE & EMBODIMENT IN MILDRED D. TAYLOR'S CASSIE LOGAN SERIES

Every morning, I aggressively open the blinds and slide the drapes to the left. I have a need for light these days, for sunlight streaming in, windows open, high exposure. And yet, the grey of Illinois winter is setting in. Light is slipping through my fingers. I am greedy. Come back.

My instincts of late have been primal; grief is a primitive beast. I fantasize about scooping up my infant daughter, putting her on my back and running through the harvested corn fields, escaping to Michigan, or Wisconsin, or somewhere north. I want wide open spaces. I want out of our 600 square foot apartment, with its three small windows. I want expanse, gradation, openness. I want to get out.

I've been embracing these animalistic instincts. At my father's funeral, I strapped my daughter to my chest as I gave his eulogy, her dark brown eyes peeking out from the wrap. After I was through, I paced the edges of the courtyard with her on my chest, feeling suffocated under my mask. It felt good to move. I imagined myself as a lioness, prowling at dusk, the courtyard too small to contain my agitation. Too small to contain my trauma.

Fight or flight – how primal. Intellectualizing my grief has helped me make some sense of it. Polyvagal Theory, developed by Stephen Porges, teaches us about the nervous system's response to trauma. When we experience a perceived threat, our body's parasympathetic nervous system kicks in and our body goes towards a fight, flight, fawn, or freeze response. With these dysregulated states comes a whole deluge of somatic symptoms as our body prepares to do whatever it must for survival, including increased heart rate, increased breath, and constriction in

our vagus nerve (which runs from our throats to our pelvic floor). Our whole body is activated when we are in the darkness of the trauma vortex.

I crave expanse against the restriction of my system. Grief has made me keenly aware of the *felt sense* of things in my body. I'm growing in awareness of the undulation of my nervous system, speeding forward, slam on the breaks, gas revving, can't go anywhere so, collapse, freeze, breath myself back. Up to parasympathetic, back down to sympathetic. I like it best there, in the land of rest-and-digest. But for now, I ride the waves.

Trauma is at the core of Mildred Taylor's Cassie Logan series, which focuses on racial inequity and violence in racially-divided rural Mississippi in the 1930s. Taylor actually writes her characters' *nervous systems* as they navigate the traumatic events of the series: white people taking what is not theirs, including land, safety, access to and safety in nature. The protagonist Cassie is no stranger to constriction. Trauma is the opposite of expanse, gradation, openness. The opposite of life.

In the series, Taylor doesn't leave the Logan family without hope for healing. Something that trauma experts prescribe as one anecdote to trauma and the disconnection from oneself and others that ensues when one is caught in nervous system dysregulation is coregulation. Coregulation is possible when responsive and regulated caregivers tend to the emotional and physical needs to create a safe environment for the dysregulated individual to come back down to a sympathetic state, or a state of regulation. Coregulation starts in infancy, when our nervous systems are not developed enough to self-regulate. We rely completely on our caregiver(s) to meet our emotional and physical needs. It is only through attuned, consistent care that we learn to self-regulate.

Coregulation is only possible through care. Care is trauma-healing. Care, played out through relationality with and for historically oppressed material entities (including the environment), is healing. How radical. In the Cassie Logan series, we see radical care played out. The entire series shows the reciprocity of radical care (for self, for others, and for nature) as the anecdote to systemic oppression and trauma.

Such radical notions of care are at the heart of a reimagined ecofeminist lens. In this chapter, I will define this reconstructed ecofeminist lens and use it to interrogate Mildred D. Taylor's four-part series about Cassie Logan: *Song of the Trees*; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, and *The Road to* Memphis.[1] The four texts focus on the development of Cassie as she navigates her unique positionality as a Black girl growing up in a land-owning home in rural Mississippi in the 1930s and 40s. I will define three tenets of a reconstructed ecofeminist lens, including intersubjectivity, relationality, and repair, and I will use those tenets to analyze Cassie's development and growth throughout the series. I will call particular attention to Cassie's growing awareness of her embodiment, specifically, the threat of sexual violence against her body by white men, which aligns with her growing awareness of the structural racism that pervades her community. As Cassie matures through the series, her growing awareness of her intersubjective embodiment affords her empathy and care for those around her in her community who have been othered. She maintains a strong and mutualistic relationality with the land that her family has worked to obtain and keep safe, and Taylor positions her for the potential of relational repair when she returns home from her travels to Memphis in the final book.

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[1] I have chosen not to include Taylor's most recent finale to the ten-part Logan family series, All the Days Past, All the Days to Come, as I am focusing on Cassie's adolescent experience and the novel begins when Cassie is nineteen years old.

**Situating Intersubjectivity**

The first of my defining tenets of a reimagined ecofeminist lens is a focus on intersubjectivity. I am using the term *intersubjectivity* here to mean a protagonist's embodiment, directly related and connected to living entities around her. An attention to intersubjectivity allows us to track how a young protagonist's developing awareness of her embodiment parallels their developing tolerance and care for others, including both human and non-human entities.

Children's and adolescent literature scholars who use ecofeminism to analyze literature for young people have already begun to identify connections surrounding material embodiment, responsibility, and the development of a sustainable ethics of care. In *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth*, Alice Curry connects subjectivity to embodiment in this way, arguing: "It is the overwhelming adherence to embodiment as a vital element of ecofeminist reappraisal that obligates an ecofeminist reading of place, place-situatedness and grounding within the natural world as indicative of the need for alternative embodied epistemologies" (3-4). Curry is saying here that when scholars analyze a text through an ecofeminist lens, they must always consider intersubjectivity in order to develop new ways of knowing. This includes new ways of interacting with both human populations and nature. Curry defines a young protagonist's growing awareness that the earth is a material entity "place-situatedness" (4). She argues that this growing awareness "gives rise to situated knowledges, rather than the abstract universal theories of normative ethics and philosophy, and underpins the ecofeminist assertion that 'to know' should be subsumed beneath 'to experience'" (4). Curry acknowledges the importance of the material experience of young ecofeminist protagonists, in the same way that a reimagined ecofeminist lens emphasizes the material, embodied experience of adolescent development.

In *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms,* Roberta Seelinger Trites also discusses intersubjectivity, writing that those twenty-first century YA novels which lend themselves to an ecofeminist analysis:

> are often very self-conscious about the relationship between the environment and the individual; moreover, along with emphasizing interactions among nature, culture, and the human body, they frequently depict the intra-activity through which human perception leads the material and discourse to shape one another. In other words, whether YA ecofeminism is classified as speculative fiction or realism, those novels that interrogate environmentalism also tend to interrogate the false duality between discourse and the material. They also invariably demonstrate a young woman gaining an increased knowledge of herself as embodied in the world. (61)

Building upon Trites' and Curry's work surrounding the need to dismantle the false duality between discourse and material, I posit that when a young protagonist grows in awareness of her developing embodiment, she begins to display an awareness of her embodied connection to other material entities that have been oppressed by systems that cause damage in need of humanist repair.

Specifically, the particular materiality of the liminal space of adolescence, or puberty, leads to a young woman's growing awareness of her body as other. These changes are compounded by a young woman's intersecting identities and the systems of oppression that marginalize her (racism, classism, ableism, etc.). This particular awareness of one's intersubjectivity often starts with the physical changes to the body that come as a result of puberty, such as the onset of menstruation, size/weight fluctuations, and the development of breasts. Along with these changes comes the critical eye of the dominant society upon a young

woman's body. If her changing body does not adhere to societal standards of feminine beauty, it is criticized and othered. Additionally, society treats race and young women's bodies as rendered simultaneously invisible, and yet race and women's bodies also judged in particularly visible ways (i.e. unreasonable standards that put pressure on young women of color to comply with white feminine beauty standards). In "Disparate But Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies," April Herndon argues that "physically discernible 'imperfections'…manifest as further evidence of women's pathologies" (246). Herndon writes that in present-day American society, to be anything other than conventionally beautiful is seen as "an affront to dominant aesthetic values of female embodiment, both of which constitute ripe ground for further discrimination of women" (256). As a young woman's physical changes are often pathologized by dominant society, the protagonist realizes her relationship to society's oppressive institutions, which in turn allows her to become aware of the ways in which those around her (including nature) have also been oppressed and objectified.

While I am discussing women and nature, in any discussion of women's embodiment, ecofeminist theorists warn against leaning on "affinity" ecofeminism, or the perpetuation of essentialist connections between the embodiment of women and nature. Instead, Alice Curry writes, "What is of most relevance is not the validity of a historical connection between women and nature, but the ways in which such a connection has been perceived, abused and exploited under the auspices of gender difference" (4). Examining this connection between the abuse of both earth and women's embodiment provides what ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard terms as "an antidote to the logic of domination. That is, if the logic of domination is rooted in alienation and the myth of a separate self, then undoing this logic would require narratives of connection, community, and interdependence among humans, animals, and the natural world" (15). In this

discussion, I will use this connection to expose and heal the problematic ways in which both women and nature have been oppressed without relying on essentializing by suggesting women are closer to nature.

**Intersubjectivity in the Cassie Logan Books**

In the Cassie Logan series, the Black women in Cassie's life (including herself) all experience the threat of sexual violence against their bodies by white men. Taylor's connection of Cassie's, Suzella's, and Deborah's developing bodies and the threat of racialized violence illustrates how racism is enacted in a particularly violent way against Black women, perpetuating what Gaard and other ecofeminists describe as a "logic of domination" ("Toward an Ecopedagogy" 12). In this way, Cassie's maturation fosters her awareness of the racist systems that oppress her and other women's bodies, allowing her to empathize with the people and places in her community who have been objectified and dominated as well.

Cassie's awareness of her own embodiment doesn't begin to develop until *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, when Cassie is ten years old and in the fifth grade. Cassie is a self-proclaimed tomboy, and Cassie says of herself, "I wasn't interested in any kind of boys" (126). Hamida Bosmajian, in her article on law and justice in Taylor's books, writes that Cassie's "tomboy self aligned itself with boys as peers and always rejected conventional socializations in femininity such as wearing a dress" (154). Cassie's ambivalence towards compulsory feminine gender expressions is foiled by her cousin Suzella, a young girl of fifteen who comes to stay with the Logan family. Suzella is the picture of beauty and femininity, evidenced in Taylor's description of her when she arrives. "She dipped the skirt which clung neatly to her womanly figure and looked up. Her face had the same square-jawed cut of Mama's people, and except for the gray eyes and creamy skin tone, her resemblance to Mama was striking" (*Let the Circle Be Unbroken*

183). Although Cassie is not intimidated by or jealous of Suzella's beauty, Suzella's attractiveness comes into play in the story when a dangerous white boy named Stuart becomes attracted to her. Suzella, who has a Black father and white mother, passes as white. In their interaction, Stuart makes his interest known, and Suzella is scolded by Cassie's Ma for not making it clear that she is related to the Logans, and therefore Black.

Although never mentioned outright, a lingering sense of sexual threat surrounds Suzella's beauty and physical body. As a young, bi-racial woman existing in rural Mississipi, Suzella's embodiment is complicated. Both her intersectional identities are weaponized against her by white men in the narrative. At a climactic point in the story, after Stuart has realized that Suzella is a Logan, and therefore Black, Stuart confronts her father, Cousin Bud, while Suzella, Cassie, and the other Logan siblings wait in the car. Stuart forces Cousin Bud to take his clothes off, and Suzella defends her father by saying, "You white trash. Leave him alone" (296). Stuart turns to her and replies, "You might look like you white, gal, but you best remember you ain't. You vex me today and I'm gonna take you outa that car too" (296). Stuart makes Cousin Bud strip in front of Suzella and the Logan siblings before Mr. Morrison comes along to save him from worse. "'Daddy, you all right?' asked Suzella, her face pale, her eyes filled with pain. 'Yeah, baby, I'm fine,' Cousin Bud replied, getting into the car, but his hands shook violently as he reached for the ignition" (299). After the incident, they all drive home, "not knowing what to say" (299). Even those words are sparse, Cassie, Suzella, her father, and the other Logan children have come face to face with the particular bodily violence enacted by racist white men on Black bodies.

After the incident, Cassie begins to understands Suzella's impossible position as a white-passing Black woman. When Suzella learns her parents are getting divorced and she must choose who to live with, she tells Cassie, "It will be easier for me, Cassie, if I stay with my mother"

(289). Cassie responds, “You wantin’ to be white so bad” (289). Suzella says, “Cassie … please don’t start that” (289). Instead of berating Suzella for choosing to live with her white mother, Cassie immediately drops the conversation with a shrug, and shares how she doesn’t want Suzella to leave. “You kinda grew on me,” she shares with Suzella (289). Cassie’s growing awareness of her embodiment in relation to the world allows her to develop a maturing tolerance for others from different positionalities than her own.

The theme of bodily threat by white men against adolescent Black women continues throughout her series. In *Let the Circle Be Unbroken,* Cassie, at ten years old, is also subject to this danger. When her Uncle Hammer comes across Cassie walking with Jacey, a white boy, Hammer is furious. Cassie asks her older brother Stacey why Uncle Hammer is so mad. Stacey replies, “Cause when a white boy’s ’round a colored girl, they up to no good, that’s why. You jus’ remember that” (126). Bosmajian writes, “As Cassie gets older, she becomes aware that the physical violence of whites against black men expresses itself as a sexual threat against black women” (146). In *The Road to Memphis*, when Cassie is seventeen, this awareness of her changing body and new identity as a “young woman” also comes with an increased awareness of these dangers. In a tense moment, Cassie and her friend Moe encounter Statler, a young white man who has been harassing their friend Clarence. As the situation escalates, Statler says to Moe, “‘Yeah, you must got a powerful lotta luck in you, boy, courtin’ a gal like Cassie Logan here. Put that head on down, boy, let me get a good feel at it. Who knows?’ he said, reaching for Moe’s head. ‘Maybe I get lucky with Cassie myself—’” (123). Statler’s threat makes clear that Cassie is not safe around him, or any white man. In this, Taylor Cassie’s developing body is tied to the threat of racialized sexual trauma by white men.

Even though it isn't directly a part of Cassie's development narrative, the series' prequel *The Land* also includes sexual violence against Black women, illustrating the generational trauma the Logan family has suffered at the hands of white people. *The Land* follows Paul, Cassie Logan's grandfather, on his quest to acquire land. Paul's father Edward is a land-owning white man, and his mother Deborah is a previously enslaved Black woman. Growing up, Paul wrestles with his biracial identity, and he blames Deborah for "taking up" with his white father. In a conversation with his sister Cassie (whom Cassie Logan is named after), Paul explains:

> "You know Cassie," I said when we were alone, "there are times I don't feel good about mama … I mean, for being with a white man."
>
> "You're talking as if you think she had a choice about the thing."
>
> I was silent.
>
> "Paul, she was his property, just like everything else around here."
>
> "Well … I know at first she didn't have much of a say—"
>
> "*Much* of a say? What about *no* say?" (61)

As Paul matures and develops, his awareness of his mother Deborah's positionality as a young Black woman grows while he learns about the institutional structures that have oppressed her and now oppress him.

Both Cassie and Suzella grow in awareness of their intersubjectivity, or their awareness of their embodiment and the systems of oppression at work against them and others in their environments. Paul experiences this same realization about his mother's positionality as an enslaved Black woman. This growing awareness has the potential to lead characters to greater connection and relationships as they continue to mature and develop.

**Situating Relationality**

A reimagined ecofeminist lens not only focuses on a protagonist's growing awareness of suffering at the hands of institutional oppression; it also encourages an awareness of the mutuality (or non-mutuality) of relationships between humans and nature. I call this *relationality*, which I define as the development of mutualistic, interdependent relationships with all living beings, including nature.

In order to actualize an interdependent relationship with nature, an ecofeminist protagonist must first reject the patriarchal logic of domination over the environment. As Gaard writes, the "logic of domination" is rooted in the belief of the autonomous, independent self. She writes that the logic of domination can be broken up into three steps: "First, alienation (the belief in a separate self-identity, individualism, autonomy), then hierarchy (elevating the self based on its unique characteristic), and finally, domination (justifying the subordination of others based on their inferiority and lack of the Self's unique characteristic)" ("Toward an Ecopedagogy" 12). In order to have a mutualistic relationship with nature, young protagonists must reject such neoliberal notions of the autonomous self, identify the oppressive hierarchies they are complicit in perpetuating, and finally, reject the subordination of others, including the environment. A reimagined ecofeminist lens analyzes the development of relationships of respect and mutuality between the land and the characters that inhabit it.

The Logan family's relationship with nature is complicated. On one hand, they are Black land-owners in Mississippi in the 1930s—a rarity. Through the series, they cherish and protect their land from the white folks that try to take it from them. However, much of the trauma and violence that happens to the Logan family also happens in nature. The Logan family's access to and safety in nature is complicated by the systems of oppression at work in rural Mississippi;

namely sexism and racism. Mei Mei Evans discusses the privilege of experiencing safety in nature in her article "'Nature' and Environmental Justice." She writes, "As with other ideological representations, popular U.S. American cultural constructions of 'nature' serve to empower some members of our society while simultaneously disempowering others. Ideas of 'nature,' like representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class, are never neutral…" (181). Evans argues that white, straight, cis, able-bodied men have unlimited access to wilderness and nature. However, "those that have been socially constructed as Other (i.e., not white and/or straight and/or male) are viewed as intruders or otherwise out of place when they venture into or attempt to inhabit Nature" (183). The social structures of racism, classism, and sexism work to exclude marginalized people from locating themselves in nature.

Michelle H. Martin's work exploring representations of Black and Brown children in nature is crucial in understanding the Logan's complex relationship with the forest. Martin writes about Black people's complicated access to nature in the context of picture book representations. She writes, "Of course we know that race and socioeconomic status can matter a great deal when addressing the question of what conditions need to be favorable for children and families to spend more time outdoors" (para. 3). Martin writes that "'the woods were often locales for the lynching of African Americans, and therefore places to be avoided rather than embraced" (para. 2). Despite growing up in the shelter of her family's forest, as Cassie matures, the threat of sexual and racial violence complicates Cassie's relationship with "the woods," with nature. As she matures, she must come to terms with her changing relationality with the land.

**Relationality in the Cassie Logan Books**

In the Cassie Logan series, Cassie displays a deep and growing relationship of respect and care with the land that her family owns. In the first book, a novella titled *Song of the Trees*,

eight-year-old Cassie has an intimate relationship with the trees on the Logan land. When she wakes up, she notices that the trees whisper a "song of morning greeting" to her (7). In her article "Merger and Metamorphosis in the Fiction of Mildred D. Taylor," Mary Turner Harper describes the special relationship that the Logan children have with the trees. She writes, "Taylor develops the stately beauty of the forest as a protective element for the children, a place of solace and unlimited freedom within a larger, uglier, racially restricted world" (76) But when the children's forest sanctuary is threatened by Mr. Anderson, a white landowner who begins to cut down the Logan's trees, the trees stop speaking to Cassie. When Cassie and her siblings play hide-and-go-seek in the forest, Cassie notices the trees' silence. "I glanced up into the boughs of my wintry-smelling hiding tree expecting a song of laughter. But the old pine only tapped me gently with one of its long, low branches.… Overhead, the boughs of the giant trees hovered protectively, but they did not join in my laughter" (16). Cassie's relationship with the trees is one of love and care; she calls them her "beloved trees," and later, "ancient loved ones" (16, 30). When they are threatened and stop singing to her, she is rightly concerned.

When the family finds out Mr. Anderson is cutting their trees, Cassie's mother and grandmother send for Cassie's father David, who is away working. Cassie and Ma make a trek into the forest and are confronted with the reality of how many trees have been logged. Taylor writes, "But now they would sing no more. They lay forever silent on the ground" (34). Cassie is heartbroken: "'Oh dear, dear trees.' I cried as the grey light of the rising sun fell in ghostly shadows over the land. The tears rolled hot down my cheeks. Mama held me close, and when I felt her body tremble, I knew she was crying too." (34). Cassie's tears for the land illustrate her deep care for the trees, which have fallen at the hands of both environmental degradation (the logging industry) and racism (white men coming onto the Logan land to appropriate their

resources). Cassie understands that the trees are worth saving; she is in relationship with them, and she honors their singing and their lives.

At the climax of the novella, David, Cassie's father, comes back to defend his land and the trees. In fact, he is willing to die for the trees, as he has rigged the forest with dynamite. As he confronts Mr. Anderson, David warns, "One thing you can't seem to understand, Anderson … is that a black man's always gotta be ready to die. And it don't make me any difference if I die today or tomorrow. Just as long as I die right" (43-44). Mr. Anderson backs off, but not without warning David, "You won't always have that black box, David … You know that, don't you?" (46). David responds, "That may be. But it won't matter none. Cause I'll have always have my self-respect" (46). To the Logans, self-respect is deeply tied to a respect for the land that their family has worked so hard to nurture. In the final lines of the novella, David displays a respect for the trees, just as Cassie does. "'Dear, dear old trees,' I heard him call softly, 'will you ever sing again?' I waited. But the trees gave no answer" (48). Taylor ends the novella on a note of discord, calling attention to the discomfort of the systems of oppression that have enacted violence against both Cassie's family and their land.

In the next three novels, Taylor does not personify the Logan forest in the same way as in *Song of the Trees,* but the forest continues to play an important role in Cassie's family's lives. As Cassie grows, so does her awareness of the violence that racism wreaks upon her family and community in the U.S. south. A pivotal moment of trauma happens in the Logan forest. In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Cassie's family friend T.J. is wrongly accused of murdering a white man. T.J., badly beaten, comes to Cassie and her siblings for help, and they escort him home. After T.J. returns home, several of the white men in the community come to take T.J., and Cassie and her siblings hide in the forest to watch (251).

When they realize the white men intend to hang T.J., the siblings run home to get their father, David. Ma warns David not to put himself in danger and not to use the gun (260). David leaves, and as the Logans wait, they smell smoke and realize that their cotton is burning and that the fire is headed towards the forest. Cassie's grandmother thinks that the lightning from the thunderstorm has set fire to their land. As the fire spreads, the community comes together to stop it from destroying more land, distracting the white men from harming T.J.

When Cassie and her siblings find out it was actually David who started the fire to save T.J., they vow to keep silent. In her article on child agency in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Kelly McDowell argues that by figuring out a way to save T.J. without putting his own family at risk, David teaches Cassie and Stacey the important lesson that agency can be exerted in the face of oppression. She writes, "Because of their oppressive environment… their victories may never be large or obvious, yet, with an awareness of how power works, they have the ability to exert some control over their lives. They learn this despite their racist society, which suggests that any sort of agency is impossible" (219). Indeed, the incident teaches Cassie once again about "how power works" and about the oppressive institutional structures that actively work against her and the Logan family.

As Cassie falls asleep that night, she thinks about what her father had to do to save T.J. and about how T.J. will probably be tried and killed for the crime he didn't commit. Cassie muses:

> I had never liked T.J., but he had always been there, a part of my life, like the mud and the rain, and I had thought that he always would be … What had happened to T.J. in the night I did not understand, but I knew that it would not pass. And I cried for those things

> which had happened in the night and would not pass. I cried for T.J. For T.J. and the land. (276)

Cassie's empathy and care for the loss of land in the fire aligns with her compassion and sorrow for T.J., a character with whom she has never empathized before. Environmental degradation and violence against T.J. and the Logan family are linked in Cassie's sorrow, for as she cries for T.J., she also cries for the land. In this way, Cassie rejects the notion of the autonomous self by identifying with T.J., recognizing the oppressive hierarchies of humans over the land, and finally, rejecting the subordination of others, including T.J. and the forest.

**Situating Repair**

When using a reimagined ecofeminist lens, we can see that a protagonist's growing relationality with the land is often complicated at the climax, or when there is a rupture in relationships. This rupture often causes the protagonist to consider leaving her family/community/land forever. A reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to analyze the protagonist's choice to stay or go. In ecofeminist novels, maturation generally comes with the protagonist's decision to return home to her community and the land that she is now in a mutualistic relationship with.

When the protagonist has explored her intersubjectivity and is working to develop mutualistic relationships, we often see a subversion of the home-away narrative. Instead of abandoning her community and family, the protagonist generally leaves and then decides to return, bringing back with her some new knowledge or acceptance of herself and the community she has left. In this way, both the protagonist and her community experience what I am calling repair, or a healing and renewal of relationships that have experienced a rupture. This can

include a protagonist's relationship with her family, members of her community, and the land, as well as with herself.

**Repair in the Cassie Logan Series**

The theme of repair appears in the final book of the Cassie Logan series, *The Road to Memphis*. After their friend Moe is threatened by a group of white boys, Cassie, her older brother Stacey, and their friend Clarence decide to drive Moe to Memphis so he can flee safely to Chicago. On the way, Cassie has a traumatizing experience when she considers using a "White Ladies Only" restroom. Cassie thinks, "I knew perfectly well that I would be breaking the law if I did. Still, as I stood there facing those signs I felt such an anger, such a hostility, such a need to defy them that I couldn't just walk right on past" (177). Cassie is caught opening the door and the gas station attendant orders her to leave. When Cassie's purse spills out as she runs, she stops to collect her things. Taylor writes, "The attendant squashed the purse under his foot, then he kicked at me with the other foot, like somebody with no heart would kick a dog. His shoe struck me sharply, but that's not what wounded me. It was my pride that suffered. I was stunned by the humiliation" (179). Cassie makes it back to the car, and as the Logans continue on their journey, their car breaks down in a forest. Clarence, tormented by terrible headaches, runs into a ditch and splits open his head.

When the boys go to find help, Cassie sits in the car, and she cannot stop shaking from her experience. "I tried not to dwell on the fear; I tried not to dwell on the men" (188). Instead, Cassie tries to think of good things:

> I thought of home, of Mama and Papa and Big Ma, of Christopher-John and Little Man. I saw myself sitting by a crackling red and blue fire, smelling the pine burn and listening to a soft winter's rain … I saw the forest, tall and green, shading my walk along the trail to

> the pond, and I thought of the Little Rosa Lee and saw myself with a fishing pole in my hand and my bare feet skimming the water on a hot summer's day. I only allowed myself to think of good things, and those good things comforted me. (188)

Although Cassie is not running away from home, she is far from home, and she has experienced a violent, traumatic act of racism. The first thing she does to comfort herself is to think of home, of her family, and of the positive experiences on her family's land and in the forest. This is significant. Her anger and trauma do not lead her away from home; instead, they draw her back home, to the safety of her family and land.

However, the good thoughts of home are not enough to banish the humiliation that Cassie feels from being kicked like a dog, or the fear of the looming threat of harm to both Clarence and Moe. She wakes up from a dream screaming and feels sick to her stomach. Cassie thinks, "I looked for a spot to crouch in the darkness, trying to find some shelter to take my fear … I couldn't stop retching … When the vomiting was finally over, I remained there behind the bushes for some while, feeling weak, feeling so far from home and alone in this wild, even with the boys so near" (189). As Cassie is sick to her stomach in the forest, even thoughts of home and the comfort of being in nature cannot combat the trauma of the attendant's racist, violent act. The previously safe and nurturing forest has become "wild," and home feels far away. Cassie's experience of nature is complicated by this embodied knowledge that "the woods" aren't safe for Black girls.

When Cassie does return home after sending Moe on his way to Chicago, she cannot talk about what has happened to her, even to her father when he asks if she is all right. "I couldn't lie to Papa … I wasn't all right, and there was no sense in saying I was … I couldn't blurt out all that had happened since we had started on our road to Memphis, so I just gave a nod too and kept

my silence. Papa studied us both as if he knew there was something more, but all he said was, 'We'll follow you back'" (277). Cassie later has nightmares about all that has occurred on the journey to Memphis (281). She cannot escape the trauma that has happened to her and to those around her. Even though Cassie has returned home, she is changed by her increased awareness of the unfairness of the world. She has come face to face with racism, loss, death, and immeasurable inequity.

At the end of the novel, Cassie acknowledges this maturation. "So much had changed. Clarence was dead. Moe was gone, and now Jeremy was leaving … All I knew was that the people who had always been a part of my life, people I loved—and that included Jeremy Simms—were leaving, and some were not coming back (288). Cassie returns home, changed and wiser. Taylor does not explicitly describe what happens to Cassie after the return home, except that Stacey and Jeremy must leave to join the Army. Taylor leaves open Cassie's potential for repair, encouraging readers to wonder, "Will Cassie be able to heal from the painful experiences she has been through on the road to Memphis?" The text implies a lingering hope now that Cassie is home and back within the safety of her community that she will be able to process these events with her family and be able to heal and integrate what has happened. Her lived experiences of structural racism have changed her relationship with herself. Her forest has been threatened. Her access to nature has been complicated by the systemic forces of oppression at work. All of these things significantly affect her developing embodiment and her relationship with those around her who have also been marginalized.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the four books, Cassie's development leads her on a journey toward intersubjectivity, relationality, and repair, three of the defining tenets of the reimagined

ecofeminist lens. As Cassie matures through the series, her growing awareness of her intersubjective embodiment affords her empathy and care for those around her in her community who have been othered. When she returns home from her travels to Memphis, Cassie is changed. Taylor writes, "The forest, the fields, everything was the same before we had left, and that seemed strange to me, as our lives had changed so that they would never be the same again" (266). But despite the horrible racism and violence that Cassie has experienced, she stays closely linked to her family, embracing the ecofeminist tenant of relationality. At the end of the book, the Logans gather together to pray for Stacey prior to his imminent departure for the war. "We formed a circle, and we held each other's hands. Then we bowed our heads and prayed. Each of us prayed in turn, Papa, Mama, Big Ma, the boys, and me" (283). As the maturing Cassie comes to reckon with the things that have happened to her and her family, she grows in her awareness of the racism, sexism, and other oppressive institutional structures that actively work against her, the larger Black community, and the Mississippi land.

Cassie's activism flourishes as this awareness develops and she is prompted to take action against the systems of oppression that have caused the Logans and their land such great pain. Taylor shows this in *The Road to Memphis* as the reader learns that Cassie is ready to leave for college to become a lawyer. All of Cassie's experiences with injustice have led her to decide to take action, as a lawyer, to work against oppressive systems. Bosmajian writes, "As [Cassie] matures, she begins to place her hope for empowerment in the knowledge and interpretation of the law, particularly the law of the U.S. Constitution, which potentially can supersede the unjust law and custom of Mississippi" (143). Although Taylor only offers information about Cassie's adulthood and doesn't provide information about Cassie's life beyond *The Road to Memphis*, she

offers tangible hope that Cassie will be able to integrate her experiences and translate them into activism for the benefit of her family, community, and land.

A reimagined ecofeminist lens applied to adolescent literature offers literary critics the potential to track the development of embodied awareness in young protagonists, while also highlighting systems of oppression at work in the novel and bringing awareness to themes of relational break and repair between characters. In the next chapter, I will use this reimagined ecofeminist lens to explore the intersubjective and interactionist relationships between young female protagonists' embodiment and the environment in several more young adult novels.

## INTERLUDE

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.*

*To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,*

*and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,*

*and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.*

*-Wendall Berry*

I have a video saved on my phone from the day before my dad died. I had taken footage of his beloved backyard pond and brought it inside to show to him as he lay, suffering from chronic pain, in a dark room with the blinds drawn. An offering of beauty. A plea of hope. In the video the camera pans over the pond, stopping on a spiky red gulf fritillary caterpillar lazily climbing the passion vine that grows over the pond's trellis. Next comes a vibrant purple passionflower, the kind that only blooms for one day before closing in on itself and dying. At the top of the trellis, an orange fritillary butterfly flits above the passion vine, its host plant. That day I showed my father the video and placed a passion flower in a small blue bowl of water next to his bed, the purple petals dulled by the shadows in the dark, stagnant room.

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Almost two years later, in June 2022, I pace the grass in front of my father's pond, which now belongs to me. My mother has gifted us my childhood home, and it is now my job to care for the pond – the orange jubilee bushes that my father trained up into lanky trees, his beloved lantana, the tropical milkweed that attracts the monarch butterflies looking to lay their eggs after their long flight north from wintering in Mexico. A strong contraction has me doubled over a patio table, swaying and vocalizing as the pain peaks and then begins to recede. I am almost in a

near panic, crying, trying to stay calm, fully in my head when I need to be fully in my body. My baby is coming, fast.

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The birth of my first child, Rosalie, in May 2020 was a pivotal experience for me. I gave birth to her in a hospital in central Illinois, accompanied by my spouse and doula. Despite their steadfast support, I came out of my long and intense labor and birth with significant physical and emotional trauma due to the lack of consent, compassion, and respect from the obstetrician that attended the birth. I hemorrhaged after my daughter was born, and the significant blood loss did little to help my physical and emotional state. My difficult birth was exacerbated by the collective uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, which led to daily-changing hospital policies in labor and delivery departments across the U.S. Like many other folks who became parents at the start of the pandemic, my entry into motherhood was marked with fear that I might have to give birth alone or be separated from my baby. The evening after I gave birth to Rosalie, I lay shaking in the dark, unable to rest as she slept beside me, my body remembering the trauma of not feeling that I had any agency in my birth experience.

My father died just four months after my daughter was born. As the complex shock and trauma from my birth coupled with the impact of his suicide landed in my body, I was enveloped by grief. While I was functioning on the outside, completing my doctoral exams, caring for my daughter, I was completely numb. I felt unmotivated, I struggled with lack of appetite, and I was utterly lost. I now know I was wading through complicated grief, as well as complex PTSD from both traumatic experiences.

Despite my state of nervous system "stuckness" after my father's passing, I did have access to joy in the form of delight in my daughter. Rosalie Joy. In a way, she saved our family,

just by being herself. Curious, confident, watchful, calm. Joyful and enchanted by the small things of her world – her "twinkle stars," the cat and dog, her family, specks of fluff on the floor. Her presence kept the door to life cracked open, kept the light streaming in.

In the year following, as I processed my deep trauma and grief from both experiences of my birth and losing my father, I craved a way to turn the trauma into something transformative. Throughout my life, pain has always mobilized me. I knew I needed experiences away from my doctoral work, which too easily allowed me to intellectualize my feelings and bodily sensations. I felt a call towards blood, towards life, and towards death. They had become my close companions, and I wanted to learn more from them.

In the middle of my doctoral exams, I decided to adjacently pursue training to become a birth doula. I signed up for full-spectrum doula training through an organization led by a Black, queer birth worker that I had followed and respected for some time. My full-spectrum training focused on supporting folks through all facets of the reproductive experience, including birth, postpartum, loss, surrogacy, adoption, and abortion. In the middle of my training, I found out I was expecting another baby, just two days before the one-year anniversary of my father's passing.

I knew that with the birth of my second child, I wanted to inoculate myself against birth trauma, as much as possible. I began to search, both through my doula training and my own personal research and education, for a care provider that I trusted to be committed to consent and a respect of physiologic birth, or birth that is unmanaged by medical intervention. My distrust in the medical-industrial complex's ability to respect birthing bodies was not just based off my personal experience of Rosalie's traumatic birth. A study in 2019 reported that between 25% and 34% of birthers in the United States come out of their birth experiences with birth trauma

(Simpkin para.1). Considering as of 2019, 98.4% of pregnant folks give birth in hospitals, almost a third of all birthers are traumatized by their hospital birth experiences (National Academies of Sciences 49). The parental health crisis in the United States goes beyond just birth trauma. The disparities are quite literally life or death. Black birthers are three to four times more likely to die during childbirth than white birthers (Black Mamas Matter Alliance para. 1). The U.S. medical system is severely lacking in peri-natal resources and research for LGBTQIA2+ parents. Trauma-informed care in obstetrics is a rarity. The U.S. medical system has attempted to homogenize and micromanage birth through policies that train birthing folks not to trust their intuition. These policies, many of which are not evidenced-based, immobilize birthing bodies and demand compliance throughout the labor and delivery process. Common hospital practices and policies include not allowing birthing folks to eat/drink during labor, the insistence of many obstetricians that birth givers push and birth babies out on their backs (called the lithotomy position) so that the doctors have better access to "deliver" babies, and routine practices such as performing vaginal exams without patient consent. These are just a few of the atrocities that myself and other birth workers witness happening to our clients in birth. As such, most hospital labor and delivery nurses and doctors have been trained to view birth as a medical event to be managed, rather than a physiological process to be respected. This is a nuanced conversation; while I am grateful for the expertise of obstetricians in emergent situations and for guiding the care of high-risk pregnancies, birthing people in the United States deserve consent-forward and trauma-informed care.

My research led me to the midwifery model of care, a profession that in the U.S. dates back to Black midwives in the 1600s. Birth givers then practiced social childbirth, having their babies at home attended by a midwife (Suarez 2). In the Deep South, enslaved women brought

with them historied birthing knowledge from West Africa that was centered on community care (Suarez 2). These "grand" midwives often attended births of plantation mistresses as well as other enslaved birth givers (Suarez 2). As white male obstetricians began to medicalize birth, they pushed these Black grand midwives out of the birth space and undermined their expertise[2]. The ensuing culture that was established around birth was androcentric, steeped in racist beliefs about Black people's health, and centered on controlling and micromanaging labor and birth. Luckily, there is a resurgence of professional midwives in the U.S., and legislature in many states allows professional midwives trained through a preceptorship model (outside of the hospital system) to attend home and birth center births.

My growing awareness of the racist, sexist systems of oppression at work in birthing cultures in hospital in the U.S. pushed me to explore the possibility of having my second baby outside of a hospital setting, attending by a midwife. California certifies professional midwives to attend births, and I found an independent birth center in San Diego run by four certified midwives. I was drawn to my midwives because of their evident care philosophies of consent, trauma-informed or guided care[3], and bodily autonomy, which were things I did not experience in my OB-attended hospital birth. I was privileged in multiple ways to be able to receive care at the birth center, including that I was a low-risk birth giver and my graduate school student

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[2] For a comprehensive review of the history of the medicalization of birth in the U.S. and the erasure of Black grand midwives, see Alicia Suarez's "Black Midwifery in the United States: Past, Present, and Future."

[3] I ascribe to Birthing Advocacy Doula Training's (BADT) six principles of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment and choice, and cultural, historical, and identity-based humility. I was introduced to this definition of trauma-informed care through my full-spectrum doula training. See BADT's blog post "6 Ways to Reflect On Trauma-informed Care in Birth Work."

insurance covered the full cost of my care (many insurances do not cover out-of-hospital births).

I spent the months leading up to my second daughter's birth preparing my mind and body for what I hoped would be a corrective birth experience. I knew I could not control how my labor and birth unfolded, but I could educate myself about my rights as a birth giver. I read about consent-forward care from birth workers like Britta Bushnell, Stephanie Tillman/Feminist Midwife, Sabia Wade, and others.

But my birth preparation was not just cognitive. I knew I must do work on healing my relationship with my body, too. After all, as I often say to my birth clients, birth happens in your body, not your head. With the help of my therapist, I interrogated long-standing beliefs I held about productivity and pushing my body past its limits. I interrogated my beliefs around care, and being cared for, and I began to trust my internal authority in conjunction with the expertise of my midwives.

I treated my pregnancy like an embodied research project. In a way I was interrogating the relationship between discourse and embodiment as I turned inward and started practicing making decisions out of bodily sovereignty, rather than what an external or outside source told me to do. I knew that in the midwifery model of care, my midwives would let me listen to my internal voice during my labor, just as they had done throughout my entire pregnancy. They were pro-agency. This was an altogether new experience for me, and there were so many moments where I exclaimed out loud, "This is so different than my experience with my OB!".

As my daughter's due date came and passed, I continued to practice what I had become comfortable with: relying on my midwives, doula, and spouse for care, encouragement and support. I remained open to what Britta Bushnell calls the "unbidden," or the mystery that is the

unique unfolding of every labor. I knew that no matter how my birth unfolded, even if I ended up needing to transfer to a hospital, I trusted I would be able to advocate for myself.

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As another contraction begins to build, I grab onto the outdoor table in front of me and sway. My panic is close to the surface. I am dysregulated, in fight or flight, and in order to get through this labor I know that I need to come back to my body, back to myself, quickly. I kick off my sandals and walk to the grass as the contraction fades. I close my eyes and try to imagine my feet growing roots into the soil. The grass under my toes is soft, prickly, and warm from the San Diego sun. A lawnmower hums in the background.

After a moment, I open my eyes and blink in the bright sun. Directly in front of me, hanging from a red pot, is a monarch chrysalis. I stare at the green and gold-dotted sphere, swaying gently in the breeze. Delight washes over me. That morning, while outside with my daughter Rosalie, we noticed this caterpillar hanging in a J shape on the pot. And now, just an hour or two later, the caterpillar was not a caterpillar anymore, but rather, a chrysalis. Metamorphosis right here in my backyard.

A gift, happened upon between contractions. Something I understand about grief, now that it is my constant companion, is that a griever looks for signs of their person everywhere. Anything to connect them with their loved one. For me, my dad has always come to me through nature, and specifically through winged creatures. Mary Oliver writes about wondering where those we have lost are now:

> The trees, anyway, are
>
> miraculous, full of
>
> angels (ideas); even

empty they are a

good place to look, to put

the heart at rest—all those

leaves breathing the air, so

peaceful and diligent, and certainly

ready to be

the resting place of

strange, winged creatures

that we, in this world, have loved. (58)

To me, my father rests in the outlines of egrets in the Sweetwater marsh when I drive by at dusk, in the hummingbirds that zip around my yard, drawing their territory lines amongst the orange jubilee branches. Every time I see a monarch butterfly, I whisper, “hi dad.” In those moments I feel not an ounce of foolishness, only a longing for connection.

That morning, the chrysalis was the small push I needed to surrender to my labor. From that point on, I was able to drop into my body. I approached the veil[4], and instead of backing away, I moved through it, into pain, into intensity, and into transformation. Pain is a path to metamorphosis. The chrysalis was the signpost I needed. It was a connection to my father. It was a tether to life.

After the chrysalis, I regrounded. My labor unfolded swiftly, and my daughter was born that evening in the privacy and safety of the birth center. She came fast and her entrance was intense, but I was supported and held the entire time. After she was born, it took me time to come

[4] See “The Holistic Stages of Labor” by midwife and educator Whapio Diane Bartlett for more on a birth giver’s journey through the “veil.”

back through the veil from the deep inner place I traveled to during her labor. I asked my midwives repeatedly, “Is she here? She’s really here? I’m done? I did that?” I have a video of both of them holding me as I hold my daughter Alina, seconds after her birth. I am sobbing, exclaiming, “We did it baby, I did it, we did it.” I am calling Alina in to the world, to joy, to life. I am calling myself back from behind the veil, back to life.

I have never been so “in my body” as my birth with Alina. Raw, uninterrupted, supported embodiment. I traveled to another world and back to bring Alina to us. All of the learning and unlearning I did before her birth allowed me to maintain a connection with my body despite the incredible waves of intensity. Even with the chrysalis moment of help from my father, I went deep down into myself, further than I’ve ever had access to. I could never have done that in a setting where my birth and body were being micromanaged. Embodiment becomes unsafe in systems of oppression. This is what happened with my first birth. I could not go into my body, where I needed to be, during Rosalie’s birth because I did not feel safe to do so. Bodies (i.e. nervous systems) cannot be in flow when they perceive a threat.

One of the ironic things about Alina’s birth is that like with Rosalie’s birth, I hemorrhaged immediately after, losing a significant amount of blood. It became evident in the hours after Alina’s birth that I needed additional help, as my body was unable to recover on its own from the amount of blood I had lost so quickly. I ended up transferring in an ambulance to a nearby hospital, where I received a necessary blood transfusion. My spouse rode in the ambulance with me, and my midwife drove Alina in her car behind us. Later, my midwife told me she sang to Alina the whole time, as she would if she was her own baby.

Despite being back in a hospital, I walked away from my care there untraumatized. I credit this to the ways in which my midwives practiced consent-forward care, confidence and

trust in my body, and encouraged me to take on an active role in my peri-natal care. When I arrived at the hospital, the ER doctor asked to examine my perineum. My midwives had stopped my hemorrhage immediately after my birth and I knew all I needed was bloodwork to confirm what they knew – that my hemoglobin had dropped dangerously low and I needed a blood transfusion. There was no medically necessary need for an exam of the very sensitive area where my baby had just emerged from. I told him, "You can look, but you can't touch me. I just need a blood transfusion." My midwife later told me that the doctor called her to get some additional details on my birth, and he mentioned to her that I would not let him examine me. She told me she internally cheered when she heard me advocating for consent-forward care in the very setting that I had experienced a lack of consent in two years previously. Metamorphosis.

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Birth is political. Birth is where systems of privilege and oppression play out every single day in life or death situations. The way we bring people into the world *matters*. Our embodied realities matter.

When I began my academic journey, I was searching for a way to synthesize my love of nature and literature. Now, almost 15 years later, I am still searching for synthesis. But instead of a disciplinary pairing, I am looking for ways to take my material experiences and translate them into discourse. Writing about my transition into parenthood and birth work has shown me that my transition to parenthood and birth work was indeed a liminal space, not unlike adolescence. When I apply my reimagined ecofeminist lens to my own developmental arc over the last few years, I can track the developing awareness of my embodiment in the systems of oppression at work in the world around me (including but not limited to my own cis/het/whiteness). This awareness led to my entry into birth work, as it allowed me to develop an empathy for other birth

givers and a determination to provide trauma-informed care for them as they move through the same systems of oppression I navigated, as is appropriate given my positionality and their desires.

Care in this way becomes radical, as it has the power to disrupt systems of oppression. In the next chapter, I explore how my reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to think more complexly about care through the interplay of embodiment, agency, and empathy, as I apply the lens to three adolescent texts.

# CHAPTER III: BLOOD, SWEAT, & TEARS: ANALYZING EMPATHY, CARE, & AGENCY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE THROUGH A REIMAGINED ECOFEMINISM

In this chapter, I will apply the reimagined ecofeminist lens to analyze the intersubjective and interactionist relationships between young female protagonists' embodiment and the environment in three young adult novels: Nnedi Okorafor's (previously Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu) *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* (2002), and Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997). More specifically, this lens allows me to think more intricately about the interplay of embodiment, relational agency, care, and empathy, ultimately showing these as radical notions with vast potential to disrupt oppressive systems.

I chose these novels for several reasons, the first being that each novel features a young woman protagonist during adolescence. At the start of the novels, Zahrah and Esperanza are 13, and Billie Jo is 14. In addition, thematically, all three works provide representations of embodiment, in particular, the physiologic changes of adolescence. They all feature the environment as a major part of the narrative, and more specifically, they show the protagonists' growing awareness of their relationship with the environment. Lastly, I choose these novels because I have included each of them in my syllabi of various children's literature courses, including the course I review in chapter four.

The following analyses highlight this reimagined ecofeminist literary theory as a valuable tool to help readers understand the relationship between discourse and embodiment. In part, this lens has potential to do so because it is flexible and can be used across a variety of genres, including fantasy and realism, but not limited to novels written in either prose or verse. I also hope to show the ways in which this lens has the capacity to guide readers' analysis of representations of young protagonists' embodiments. This reimagined ecofeminist lens provides

language to aid scholars in articulating how a protagonist's growing awareness of their embodiment is connected to growing empathy, agency, and care for themselves and entities around them (including the environment).

**Defining Empathy, Care, and Agency**

As I previously established, throughout this project, I use the term embodiment to mean *textual depictions of physical bodies and the ways those bodies interact with the environment*. This chapter will also include a discussion of notions of empathy, care, and agency. All three concepts are both highly theorized and contested across a multitude of disciplines, so a working definition of how each will be used in this paper is essential.

When I talk about empathy, I call upon Brené Brown's research on empathy to inform my definition. Brown emphasizes that empathy is a "tool of compassion" meant to connect people (121). Therefore, empathy, in this paper, means the ability to connect to another being's emotions and/or experience, which then fuels positive connection between individuals.

When I talk about care, I build upon the work of feminist ethicists to inform a reimagined ecofeminist definition of care that interrogates the relationship between interdependence and independence. A definition of care that is limited to an essentialist view of women as care-givers, as well as the idea that care is simply the act of giving self-sacrificially, is dangerously limited. Nel Noddings warns against such a definition: "Indeed, the most damaging feminist objection to care theory is that it seems to endorse the self sacrifice and subordination of women. It is, therefore, especially important for care theorists to deny this charge and to suggest a defensible view of autonomy" (7-8). But a pendulum swing to the Kantian autonomous self is also limited. Many feminist ethicists have rejected a neoliberal notion of the autonomous self and instead embrace the idea of relational autonomy, or "the morally justifiable span of control available to

us as members of various relations—as parents, spouses, teachers, citizens, friends. It is an autonomy characterized by reciprocity and mutuality" (Noddings 9). Relational autonomy, defined this way, has the potential to disrupt systematic oppression. Moreover, feminist care scholar Mary Jeanette Moran writes about how relational autonomy "manages to bring together two modes of existence that patriarchal ideologies have considered to be in conflict: self-determination and a sense of 'Balance Is the Trick' interdependence that entails ethical responsibility for the other" (262-63). Thus, in this paper, I define care as taking responsibility for others, paired with a sense of self-determination, or—as I explain next—a sense of *agency*.

In the reimagined ecofeminist lens, agency is central to care because without a discussion of the distribution of power, care becomes too easily essentialized as women's work. Care is more than just self-sacrifice for others; care must also include agency for the caretaker and the one cared for alike. As an oft used concept across disciplines, agency is a contested term, and in particular, has been a central dividing point in humanist vs post-humanist thought. A definition of humanistic agency "valorizes and centers itself on the individual agent" as the dominant source of agency (Leff 138). In a humanistic definition of agency, agency exists within us; we need only tap into it. With such a definition, we might talk about a protagonist's development toward becoming more agentic as something they alone have the power to bring out of themselves.

But this humanistic notion of agency is problematic because it denies the ways in which agency is unfairly distributed. Nothing exists in a vacuum. The idea that humans can tap into hidden power within us ignores the dynamic and complex systems of oppression at work against all individuals—and the particularities of inequities tied to places, spaces, and bodies in the U.S. In contrast, a post-human perspective provides a more nuanced way to view agency without

ignoring the "outside" forces that affect one's access to it. A post-human definition of agency acknowledges such power differentials by positing that agency is in fact "distributed through dynamic forces of which the human participates in but does not completely intend or control" (Kheeling and Lehman para. 1). Therefore, agency is not only distributed; it is also dynamic. It changes moment to moment with each interaction. In this project, I embrace a post-human definition of agency that I am calling *relational agency*. Relational agency, like care ethicists' term *relational autonomy*, balances individual power with the dynamic forces at work that affect a person's access to participating in power. Thus, when I talk about relational agency in this chapter, I am referring to a protagonist's relationship to power both individually and in context of the dynamic distribution of power by the institutions within which they exist.

In the following chapters, I will apply my reimagined ecofeminist lens to *Zahrah the Windseeker, Esperanza Rising*, and *Out of the Dust,* using the three tenets of *intersubjectivity*, *relationality*, and *repair* to track each protagonist's development of empathy, care, and agency. The lens will allow us to see each protagonist's developing awareness of their embodiment as they come against systems of oppression (*intersubjectivity*). The reimagined ecofeminist lens will provide a framework to track each protagonist's relationship to empathy towards themselves and towards those in their community (*relationality*). Lastly, the lens will aid in helping me analyze each protagonist's sense of relational agency and relationship to care as they are faced with a choice to return to their communities—or stay away—after a significant relational break (*repair*).

### *Zahrah the Windseeker*

In *Zahrah the Windseeker,* thirteen-year-old Zahrah Tsami and her best friend Dari live in Ooni, a kingdom that relies on nature for its survival. The Ooni people grow their computers

from seeds and are fearful of the nearby Forbidden Greeny Jungle, a mysterious place that only a few have braved (and most have never survived). Zahrah is a dada, a group rumored to be born with great powers, and when Zahrah starts floating in her sleep, she figures out that her power is flight. When Dari and Zahrah venture into the Greeny Jungle to practice her flying, Dari is bitten by a venomous war snake, and Zahrah must venture further into the Greeny Jungle in search of a deadly Elgort egg that will save him. Using a reimagined ecofeminist lens reveals that Zahrah's growing awareness of her intersubjective embodiment causes her to develop an ethics of care—a maturing tolerance for the "othered," including the environment (the Greeny Jungle) and other non-human entities (the jungle inhabitants), which then leads to the potential for relational repair with herself.

*Zahrah's Intersubjectivity*

Throughout the narrative, Zahrah develops a greater awareness of her own embodiment. At the beginning of the novel, however, Zahrah rejects her material traits. Zahrah is born dada, a person with the potential for magical powers, including the ability to fly. Zahrah's hair reflects her uniqueness—there are green vines that grow throughout her hair, instantly marking her as dada to others. Because of her hair, Zahrah is ostracized by her peers for her differences. Her classmates call her "vinehead," "snakelady," and "swamp witch" (3). Okorafor's nod to present U.S. society's preoccupation with and disapproval of Black hair deserves mention here. Zahrah is also shy, quiet, and incredibly fearful of heights, which is ironic because of her developing power of flight.

Zahrah gets her period for the first time at the start of the novel. In adolescent literature, representations of characters starting menstruation can often be problematic and send contradictory messages about women's embodiment. When authors describe menstruation as

something "natural," this can perpetuate the problematic notion of women's closeness with nature that "affinity" ecofeminists have insisted on. One YA novel that demonstrates these problematic representations of menstruation is Clare Dean's *Girlwood*, a YA novel similar in theme to *Zahrah*. In that novel, the main character Polly starts her period. Polly's grandmother, Baba, tells her, "You have a secret inside you now.... Something lush and wild that no one can take away. This is the start of great things, Polly. The start of everything" (144). Connecting Polly's period to nature as something "lush and wild" relies upon the ideology that menstrual periods, and by proxy, the idea of "being a woman," is a "natural" occurrence. Alice Curry writes that limiting ideologies, such as "naturalness," to women's embodiment evoke "a physiological connection between women and nature arising out of female reproductive processes (the menstrual cycle, birthing, nursing) and a woman's consequent propensity towards care, nourishment and nurturance. These 'female' qualities are perceived to invest women with a spiritual and embodied understanding of nature unshared by men" (*Environmental Crisis* 3). These ideologies perpetuate the notion that male domination is a "biological phenomenon," a "natural" occurrence (3). Naturalizing has the potential to lead to essentializing, as is evident in representations of menstruation (as in *Girlwood*) that equate getting one's period with "becoming a woman."

When applied to *Zahrah*, however, the reimagined ecofeminist lens highlights the ways in which Okorafor's illustrates a more material depiction of menstruation and in doing so, avoids essentialization. Instead, she normalizes the start of Zahrah's period. When I use the term "normalize," I mean representing not just the emotional but also the material reality of starting to menstruate. This includes depictions of emotional and physical care for the person starting their

period.[5] Okorafor does this well in her representation of Zahrah getting her period. When Zahrah discovers she is bleeding, Zahrah's mother and father begin to normalize the experience for her by explaining that she has started her period. Okorafor writes, "After my mother explained, I realized all was well and normal. Then I realized that because I had gotten my menses, my mother would prepare a delicious feast, and everything was fine" (12). Her father even runs to the market to get her a gift: "the latest installment of the Cosmic Chukwi Crusader Series" (12). Zahrah is ecstatic, saying "Thank you, Papa! I didn't even know it was out yet!" (13). Her parents normalize the experience by making the start of menstruation joyful and connecting.

When she goes to sleep that night, Zahrah has a slight bellyache, and thinks, "But I had too much to think about to really care. Plus my mother said that such a thing was normal" (13). Again, we see Zahrah's family normalizing the physicality of the experience for her. As she falls asleep, Zahrah thinks, "It was my first night of physically being a woman" (13). The emphasis is on the *physical*, rather than on an idealized "mystical womanhood" that comes with the start of menstruation. The narrative normalizes this experience as simply part of the material reality of being a human who gets a cycle. Zahrah's period doesn't connect her to nature any more than before she began menstruating. Her family's great care for her novel material reality allows her to accept the physical changes of menstruation without great distress.

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[5] More broadly, an ecofeminist normalization of menstruation might represent a protagonist's access to period products, food security, comprehensive reproductive health care (including birth control, legislative care and protection for birthing folks, abortion care, postpartum support and breast/chest feeding resources), access to hormone-regulating herbs and supplements, access to one's cultural practices and support surrounding menstruation, and therapeutic care for menstruating people to whom starting their period brings complicated emotions.

*Zahrah's Relationality*

Representations of Zahrah's developing embodiment aren't just limited to menstruation; much of the novel chronicles her growing awareness of her relationship to her body within the context of her growing relationship with the Greeny jungle.  Almost everyone in Zahrah's village fears the unknown jungle and its perceived deadly inhabitants. When Zahrah starts levitating in her sleep, her best friend Dari convinces her to practice flying in the outskirts of the jungle where she will not be seen. When Dari is bit by a war snake from the jungle as they are practicing, Zahrah must search the jungle for the only cure for her friend, a deadly elghort's egg.

As Zahrah journeys deeper into the jungle, she meets many inhabitants along the way. A reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to track Zahrah's developing relationality to the jungle's diversity of beings. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai writes about the development of care, "From an ecological feminist perspective …weblike networks of care and responsibility help the individual to establish a strong sense of self while maintaining connection with others through mutually beneficial patterns of exchange" (201). These weblike networks of relational autonomy and relational care develop as Zahrah learns more about herself and her gift of flight during her time in the jungle, and in doing so, she develops a deeper understanding of and empathy for its inhabitants.

When Zahrah embarks on her quest to save Dari, the only information she has about the inhabitants of the jungle is the Digibook that Dari has given her. The Digibook is a collection of entries on different inhabitants of the jungle, and the knowledge is anthropocentric, portraying the jungle inhabitants as deadly, terrifying creatures. Because Zahrah has not yet figured out how to fly yet, she relies upon the Digibook to guide her way and teach her about how to survive the forest. When Zahrah loses the Digibook, she must rely on her own embodied experience of the

forest and her interactions with the creatures there; her experience far surpasses the misinformation collected by the authors of the Digibook. She comes to realize that the jungle and its inhabitants have a knowledge of their own, which Zahrah learns to respect, rather than fear. She encounters a swarm of bees that offer her honey with healing powers to aid her after she is poisoned by a whip scorpion (176). When a Carnigourd (a meat-eating pumpkin) grabs her and intends to eat her, she sings it a lullaby and it releases her, soothed to sleep by her song (191).

After spending a few weeks in the jungle, Zahrah realizes, “I was no longer afraid of many things. I wasn’t afraid of the pink-skinned lizard I’d seen that second day in the jungle....They ate parasites that clung to the roots of the trees. This was good for the trees, since these underground plants tended to sap nutrients directly from the tree’s roots” (187). This symbiosis of lizard and trees mirrors Zahrah’s growing relationality to the jungle and its inhabitants.

One of the most poignant examples of Zahrah’s developing relationality with the jungle occurs when Zahrah, deep in the forest in search of the elgort nest, is wounded by a group of wild dogs. She is rescued by a tribe of gorillas who wear ornate jewelry. They recognize her as dada, and bring her back to be healed by Misty, an old gorilla healer. Donna Haraway, in her work *When Species Meet*, discusses the reciprocity of relationships between species. She writes about “response-ability” as “a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being” (71). Zahrah and the gorillas, and in particular, Misty, enact this notion of “response-ability” as they display care for one another. The intra-action between Zahrah and Misty centers on care for Zahrah’s physical body. Misty takes responsibility for Zahrah’s healing, performing an acupuncture-like treatment on her bruised hip and instructing

her to take a bath in a special oil that soothes her scrapes. Misty's care for Zahrah's material wellbeing honors and recognizes Zahrah's embodiment.

Even though Zahrah is surprised by the differences in healing remedies, she embraces them readily. As Haraway writes, "response cannot emerge within relationships of self-similarity;" there must be differences that demand a response (71). Zahrah recognizes this in her respect for the gorilla tribe's differences from her own species when she thinks, "It was a different culture, and I knew not to apply my own cultural norms to theirs" (Okorafor 220). When Zahrah leaves the village, healed and eager to continue her search for the elgort egg, the gorillas embrace her and express their sadness at her departure. The chief gorilla Obax tells Zahrah, "I still cannot believe that I am letting you leave, traveling girl" (238). Zahrah and the gorillas have developed a relationality, a "co-constituency" for one another's differences and embodiment (*When Species Meet* 71).

*Zahrah's Repair*

In the novel, the ecofeminist theme of repair happens within Zahrah first. Only after accepting herself is she able to repair with her community that she left behind when she ventured into the forest. Her changing views of the jungle (from forbidden, scary, and unpredictable to safe and connected) mirror her own personal development. Zahrah moves from seeing herself and her material differences (as dada) as scary and forbidden. She learns to embrace herself and her power of flight, and she returns to her community as a changed person, more accepting of herself and of others.

In the beginning of the book, Zahrah rejects her embodiment. She is ashamed of her identity as dada, and she sees herself through the lens of how others see her (different, shameful, othered). When the kids at school tease Zahrah about her hair, the village chief Papa Grip

consoles Zahrah. He encourages her to embrace her dada-ness, but Zahrah cannot. Papa Grip says, “It’s OK to care about what other people think, but you should give a little more weight to what you, yourself, think” (6). Through her embodied experiences in the jungle, everything changes. Zahrah stops seeing herself through the lens of an outside authority, and she grows to trust her inside authority. In this way, she experiences an internal repair in the form of self-acceptance.

We see this self-repair at the climax of her quest. When Zahrah finally finds an elgort egg, she is chased by the mother elgort through the jungle. As her legs begin to give out, Zahrah reflects upon her life. “I’d been shy, introverted, lived my life up to the last few weeks cowering from the world. When people made fun of me, I would go home and hide in my room. I was born with a strange ability, and once again, I cowered from it. *But look how I’ve survived in this place,* I thought” (260). Zahrah then takes to the sky, doing the impossible by escaping the deadly elgort. Zahrah’s developing acceptance of her embodiment is what allows her to finally harness her powers of flight.

As Zahrah flies back home with the egg, she is stopped by the wise Speculating Speckled Frog, who asks her what she has learned. She replies, “I’ve ... I’ve learned so much about myself, what I’m capable of, about the world ... you know, things. I’m stronger than I thought. Much stronger. I’m no longer afraid of heights” (264). When Zahrah returns home, she reflects, “I was no longer the Zahrah who was afraid of the world around her, who kept her head down, afraid of confrontation. I could almost see my old self coming out the door, my chin to my chest, ashamed of what I was, all too concerned with my clothes being civilized and making my hair less noticeable” (273). Zahrah’s self-acceptance and self-repair show when she says, “I looked at myself in the mirror, my dark brown skin, my dada hair, my scraped face, arms, and legs, the

scar from the whip scorpion on my arm. I looked into my own eyes and smiled when I saw the new glint in them" (277). The "new glint" in her eyes comes from her new self-trust.

As Zahrah's relationship with her own unique embodiment grows, so does her capacity to stay curious about the inhabitants of the jungle that she encounters. This allows her to develop a relationship with the gorillas, and in turn, an empathy for their experiences. After developing a relationality with the gorillas, she is finally able to find the elgort's egg and in a pivotal moment, harness her powers of flight to escape the mother elgort and fly back home save her dear friend Dari. Zahrah's new confidence and powers of flight signal a repair within herself of trust and relational agency. At the heart of this novel is the idea that relationality encourages agency, all of which occurs within weblike systems of radical care and acceptance for oneself and others.

### *Esperanza Rising*

*Esperanza Rising* (2000) by Pam Muñoz Ryan follows the story of Esperanza Ortega, a wealthy young girl growing up on El Rancho de las Rosas, her family's vineyard in Aguascalientes, Mexico, in the 1920s. When her Papa is killed by bandits, her greedy uncles try to take over the ranch and marry Mama. Esperanza and her mother flee to the United States with the help of Alfonso, Hortensia, and their son Miguel, who all previously worked for the Ortegas on the ranch. They travel to Central California to start work in the fruit and vegetable fields outside of Bakersfield. The narrative chronicles Esperanza's growth and development as she faces grief and hardship, both interpersonally and at a systemic, structural level. Reading *Esperanza Rising* through a reimagined ecofeminist lens highlights Esperanza's development of empathy in the face of injustice and racism, as well as the interplay of agency and care in her developing embodiment.

*Esperanza's Intersubjectivity*

At the start of the novel, Esperanza's embodiment is deeply connected to the land of El Rancho de las Rosas. When Papa and Esperanza lie quietly on their stomachs in the vineyard, Esperanza can hear the thud of the earth's heartbeat in her body, the "heart of the valley" (3). "She pressed herself closer to the ground, until her body was breathing with the earth's. And with Papa's. The three hearts beating together" (3). While Esperanza's embodiment at the ranch is connected with the land her family owns, it is also tied to her economic privilege. The Ortega family is very wealthy, and they are cared for by many house servants, including Hortensia, a Zapotec Indian woman from Oaxaca. Hortensia's son is Miguel, who also works on the ranch and is friends with Esperanza. As a young girl, Esperanza dreams of marrying Miguel. But as she grows older, she begins to understands their socioeconomic divide. "Miguel was the housekeeper's son and she was the ranch owner's daughter and between them ran a deep river. Esperanza stood on one side and Miguel stood on the other and the river could never be crossed. In a moment of self-importance, Esperanza had told all of this to Miguel" (18). Miguel begins calling Esperanza "mi reina," my queen, and the river between them grows.

When Papa dies and Esperanza and her mother travel to the United States with Miguel and his parents, Esperanza is introduced to the reality of her privilege as a wealthy, lighter-skinned Mexican. When she encounters an Indigenous woman begging at the train station, she asks Miguel why the woman cannot provide for herself. Miguel explains, "There is a Mexican saying: 'Full bellies and Spanish blood go hand in hand.… Have you never noticed? … Those with Spanish blood, who have the fairest complexions in the land, are the wealthiest'" (79). Esperanza reassures herself that this will not be true in the United States. But when she arrives in California, she tries to access the heartbeat of the valley.

> She stretched on her stomach and reached her arms to the side, hugging the earth. She let the stillness settle upon her and listened. She heard nothing.… She listened again, but the heartbeat was not there.… "I can't hear it!" She pounded the earth. "Let me hear it."
> Tears burst from her eyes as if someone had squeezed an overripe orange. Confusion and uncertainty spilled forth and became an *arroyo* of their own. (92)

Esperanza is out of touch with this new land, and she is out of touch with herself once her relationship to systems of power shifts and changes.

As she and Mama settle into life at the farm worker's camp, Esperanza continues to encounter hardship, as well as the reality of her loss of economic and social privilege. She must learn to sweep and wash clothes for the first time. When they arrive at the farm camp and have a chance to bathe, Esperanza expects Hortensia to give her a bath. Mama gently corrects her, saying, "I've been thinking that you are old enough to bathe yourself, don't you think?" (126). Esperanza is embarrassed that she assumes Hortensia is still a servant in the U.S., but Hortensia treats her with great kindness. "We are accustomed to doing things a certain way, aren't we Esperanza? But I guess I am not too old to change. We will help each other. I will unbutton the buttons you cannot reach and you will help Isabel, yes?" (126-7). As they bathe, Esperanza experiences joy at the women's together-ness. "Esperanza liked being with all of them in the tiny room, talking and laughing, and rinsing each other's hair" (127). As Esperanza realizes that she and Hortensia are now on the same side of the river, Esperanza's ability to connect to herself and others grows.

Despite the deep connections Esperanza begins to develop with Hortensia, Isabel, and others, Esperanza's embodiment is still tied to her life of privilege in Mexico. When Miguel's cousin Isabel asks Esperanza to tell her the details of her past life, Esperanza doesn't recognize

herself: “But now, sitting in this cabin, the story seemed as if it were about some other girl, someone Esperanza didn’t know anymore” (175). After days of working cutting potatoes for harvest, Esperanza tries to soothe her chapped hands. “That night, as she soaked her hands in warm water, she realized that she no longer recognized them as her own” (180). Esperanza has lost the ability to recognize herself in the transition from Mexico to the United States.

Esperanza begins to grow in awareness of her embodiment as she comes up against the racist reality of life as a Mexican farmworker in the United States. The racially charged politics of farm work, as well as blatant racism and colorism begin to change Esperanza. Miguel explains, “Esperanza, people here think that all Mexicans are alike. They think that we are all uneducated, dirty, poor, and unskilled” (187). Esperanza looks down at herself, noticing how her physical body and appearance have changed since arriving in the U.S. “She leaned up and looked in the mirror. Her face was tanned from the weeks in the fields, and she had taken to wearing her hair in a long braid like Hortensia’s because Mama had been right – it was more practical that way” (187). Miguel explains, “Americans see us as one big, brown group who are good for only manual labor” (187). As Esperanza learns about her own place in the system of deep prejudice in the California farmworker culture, as well as across the U.S., she must reckon with the systemic injustices at work against her embodiment.

*Esperanza’s Relationality*

Esperanza’s developing awareness of her embodiment is intrinsically linked to her relationships, both old and new. When Mama catches Valley Fever and is admitted to a local hospital for months, Esperanza relies upon Hortensia and the other women in the camp. One relationship in particular that is transformative for Esperanza is her friendship with Isabel. Isabel has never known life outside of migrant farm work, and she is in awe of Esperanza when she

first arrives in California. Esperanza at first belittles Isabel, thinking that Isabel is so happy about "such little things" (90). But as their relationship grows, Isabel shows deep care for Esperanza. When Mama must go to the hospital, Isabel notices Esperanza's tears. "'Esperanza, don't cry again. We will sleep with you, if you want.' We? She turned toward Isabel, who was holding the family of yarn dolls. Esperanza couldn't help but smile and lift the covers. Isabel slid in beside her, arranging the dolls between them" (176). Isabel's care for Esperanza begins to lessen the great divide between the two sides of the river they are on.

Esperanza develops a deep empathy for Isabel when Isabel prays to become Queen of the May at her school, a position given to the student with the highest grades. "'Has a Mexican girl ever been chosen Queen of the May?' [Esperanza] asked Josefina. Josefina's face took on a disappointed look and she silently shook her head no. 'I have asked. They always find a way to choose a blonde, blue-eyed queen'" (215-16). Esperanza's heart aches for Isabel, and when Isabel inevitably gets passed over for a white girl for Queen of the May, Esperanza gives Isabel her a coveted porcelain doll that was a gift from Papa. This is the same doll that, on the train to the United States, Esperanza would not let a little girl touch because she has deemed the girl to be too poor and dirty (70). As Esperanza witnesses the deep injustice done to Isabel, this fosters a growing empathy in her, which paves the way to closer relationships with those around her.

A major part of Esperanza's developing relationality with those around her in the United States comes from the economic and political dissension of many of the farm workers. Esperanza meets Marta, a young farm worker who is a strike organizer. Marta looks down on Esperanza for her previous wealth, and Esperanza cannot understand Marta's anger at the bosses who do not pair fair wages and the workers who will not fight back (134). Esperanza continues to wrestle with the politics of farm work. Here, agency (in the form of activism) and care seem to be at

odds. Esperanza knows she must keep working to pay for Mama's hospital wages, but she also begins to see why the strikers demand better pay and working conditions.

Her friend Irene explains to her, "So many Mexicans have the revolution still in their blood. I am sympathetic to those who are striking, and I am sympathetic to those of us who want to keep working. We all want the same things. To eat and feed our children" (146). When some of the workers strike, Esperanza watches as La Migra (Immigration) arrests the strikers to deport them, despite the fact that many of them are U.S. citizens who have never even lived in Mexico. When she finds Marta hiding from La Migra, Esperanza chooses to help Marta escape. After the immigration raid, Esperanza processes the ugly truth of the immigration politics of the U.S. "How was it that the United States could send people to Mexico who had never even lived there? … No one should have to be separated from her family" (211). She even asks Miguel to drive by Marta's camp so she can check on her later, only to find the entire camp empty, its other inhabitants on deportation buses to the border. Esperanza hopes that Marta has found her mother and escaped arrest. She realizes that she and Marta want the same things: to eat, and to feed their families. That they are, truly, on the same side of the river.

*Esperanza's Repair*

Esperanza's transformation and growing relationality continue to develop as Mama returns home and is reunited with Esperanza. However, when Miguel is fired from his job after his boss decides to hire migrants from Oklahoma at a lower wage, Esperanza is furious at Miguel for not standing up for himself. In an outburst of rage, Esperanza exclaims:

> Is this the better life that you left Mexico for? Is it? Nothing is right here! Isabel will certainly not be queen no matter how badly she wants it because she is Mexican. You cannot work on engines because you are Mexican. We have gone to work through angry

> crowds of our own people who threw rocks at us, and I'm afraid they might have been right! They send people back to Mexico even if they don't belong there, just for speaking up. We live in a horse stall. And none of this bothers you? Have you heard that they are building a new camp for Okies, with a swimming pool? The Mexicans can only swim in it on the afternoon before they clean it! Have you heard they will be given inside toilets and hot water? Why is that, Miguel? Is it because they are the fairest in the land? Tell me! Is this life really better than being a servant in Mexico? (221)

Esperanza cannot fathom the depths of injustice that contradict the promise of the American dream. She tells Miguel, "I don't want to hear your optimism about this land of possibility when I see no proof!" (224). Miguel and Esperanza, despite her growth, are still standing on opposite sides of the river, unable to see each other's perspectives.

However, repair comes when Miguel travels to Aguacalientes to bring Esperanza's Abuelita, who has been stuck in Mexico, to her and Mama. In this narrative, it is Miguel who leaves and returns, bringing the family back together again. Mama and Esperanza are overjoyed at the reunion, and shortly after, Miguel and Esperanza drive to the foothills before sunrise. As they lie on their stomachs, they begin to hear the *thump thump* of the valley's heartbeat. Esperanza begins to feel as if she is rising, and she imagines herself floating over the land, steady and in control. She imagines seeing her family, and the fields, and Marta and her mother walking hand in hand, reunited and safe. "And there, in the middle of the wilderness, was a girl in a blue silk dress and a boy with his hair slicked down … sitting on a grassy bank, on the same side of the river" (251). With her family together again, and with her new, nuanced understanding of the world and its valleys and mountains, Esperanza tells Isabel, "Do not ever be afraid to start over"

(253). As Esperanza experience repair with Miguel, and reunification with her family, she is able to begin to reconnect to the land.

But although Esperanza and Miguel repair, there is still much left unrepaired in the novel. We never learn of Marta's fate. The racial injustices and poor working conditions at the farms are not resolved. The incipient colorism and economic divides between citizens in both the U.S. and Mexico still exist. Esperanza has only begun to reckon with these things. It is this awareness of systemic injustice that informs her developing embodiment and relationships to those around her. As she develops empathy for people on both sides of the river, she is able to see that her previously limited view of the world does not serve her anymore.

***Out of the Dust***

Karen Hesse's verse novel *Out of the Dust* (1997) is set in the Great Plains in the 1930s, where severe drought and ignorance of dry-farming techniques compounded to create the Dust Bowl, a time and place of dust storms that uprooted crops and families alike. The Dust Bowl serves as an ideal setting for Hesse's novel, as the oppressive dust and the plight of the farmers parallels the trajectory of Hesse's protagonist, Billie Jo Kelby, as she navigates both her internal and external landscapes. The narrative comes in the form of Billie Jo's diary, written as a series of poems broken up by seasons of the year. Using the tenets of my reimagined ecofeminist lens, I will track Billie Jo's developing awareness of her materiality, which in turn helps her develop empathy and care for herself and her father, which leads to the potential for repair after the relational break caused by their trauma.

This work is particularly interesting to analyze through a reimagined ecofeminist lens because it is written in verse. Krystal Howard argues that the verse novel is a hybrid genre that exists in the liminal space between genres, as it straddles poetry, prose, and drama (328). In her

Newbery Medal Acceptance speech for the novel, Hesse explains that “the frugality of the life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions during the Dust Bowl demanded an economy of words. Daddy and Ma and Billie Jo’s rawboned life translated into poetry” (426). This “economy of words'” is at the heart of Hesse’s poetic structure, and the poems, coupled with Hesse’s narrative, reveal both the harshness and beauty of the Oklahoma environment and of Billie Joe’s adolescent experience (Alexander 276).

When we examine Hesse’s verse novel through a reimagined ecofeminist lens, we see that Billie Joe’s embodiment is tied to relationality and repair. In particular, the poetic form allows us to see the interconnectedness of the three ecofeminist tenets in the work. This interconnectedness will become apparent in the following analysis of the interplay of embodiment, agency, care, and empathy in Billie Jo’s journey.

*Billie Jo’s Intersubjectivity*

At the start of the novel, Billie Jo’s embodiment is tied to external entities, in particular, her and her mother’s ability to play music for her community. When Ma and the baby die in a tragic fire that Billie Jo blames herself for, the physical and emotional pain of her trauma causes her to disconnect from her body as a survival mechanism. In particular, Billie Jo must disconnect from her hands when they are badly scarred in the accident, which effectively severs her relationship to playing the piano. Only once Billie Jo experiences relational repair is she safe enough to re-connect to her embodiment and begin to heal.

This section thus explores *disembodiment* as a protective part of the experience of embodiment. When I use the term disembodiment, I mean textual depictions of a character disassociating or distancing themself from their physical bodies as a survival mechanism from pain and trauma. Billie Jo’s arc then involves not just a growing awareness of her embodiment

(as with Zahrah and Esperanza), but it also includes the *return* to her body once she reconciles with herself, her father, and the Oklahoma environment. This re-embodiment is predicated upon her leaving and then returning home, which mirrors her journey from disembodiment to embodiment.

At the start of the verse novel, the reader's first sense of Billie Jo's embodiment is tied to her mother. Ma teaches Billie Jo to play the piano, but Ma resents her for having the time to play: "I know she doesn't like the kind / of music I play, / but sometimes I think she's / just plain jealous / when I'm at the piano / and she's not" (28). Ma is afraid of the music taking Billie Jo away from home. Despite their connection over music, Billie Jo craves affirmation from Ma. "I wish she'd give me a little more to hold on to … / Instead she makes me feel like she's just / taking me in like I was so much flannel dry on the line" (30). Billie Jo wants her mother to delight in her, but the hardships of survival in the dust bowl have hardened Ma.

Despite Ma's surface callousness, the woman still represents hope that the family might survive and even escape the oppressive dust that causes their economic hardships. For example, even during the drought, Ma nurses two apple trees in the front yard: they are "thick with blossoms," healthy and thriving despite their harsh surroundings (43). Billie Jo imagines that Ma has placed them in the ground, "that she and they might bring forth fruit / into our home, / together" (43). Ma also plays the piano, like Billie Jo, and

> she can pull Daddy into the parlor
>
> even after the last milking, when he's so beat
>
> he barely knows his own name …
>
> You've got to be something
>
> to get his notice that time of day,

but Ma can. (25)

Even though Ma herself is “long and skinny,” weathered and beaten down by the dust, she brings forth hope in the form of apples and music (24).

Like her Ma, Billie Jo uses the piano as an escape from the oppressive dust. Billie Jo narrates, “Here’s the way I figure it. / My place in the world is at the piano” (49). Billie Jo’s survival of life in the Dust Bowl is tied to her hands and their ability to play piano. When Billie Jo plays on stage at the Palace, “It’s the best / I’ve ever felt, / playing hot piano” (13). Music is Billie Jo’s ticket out of the dust: “Some day I’ll leave behind the wind, and the dust / and walk my way West / and make myself to home in that distant place / of green vines and promise” (59).

The next poem after Billie Jo dreams of escaping west is “The Accident.” When Ma accidentally pours kerosine on the stove, creating a fire, she runs out the door to call for Daddy’s help. In hopes of stopping the fire, Billie Jo throws the pail outside, unknowingly dousing Ma in flames. In attempt to extinguish the fire that has engulfed Ma, Billie Jo beats out the flames with her hands, which then become badly burned and disfigured. While Ma suffers from the burns, Daddy goes out one night drinking, using up all the emergency money and leaving Billie Jo to care for her suffering mother alone.

Ma dies days later from the burns while giving birth to Billie Jo’s baby brother, who also dies shortly after. With their deaths, the promise of hope dies as well. Billie Jo cannot play music anymore, and she retreats inside of herself, disconnecting from her embodiment—specifically, from her marred hands—and music to cope with the trauma of the accident and her anger at her father. In “Nightmare,” Billie Jo has a dream where she comes across a piano. However, when she tries to play, she cannot. Her hands are no longer hands, they are lumps that she cannot control: “I had swollen lumps for hands, / they dripped a sickly pus, / they swung

stupidly from my wrists, / the stung with pain" (65). When she wakes up, she realizes the part about her hands is true. In "Those Hands," we see Billie Jo's disconnection from her hands as a symbol of her and her father's guilt about the accident. "My father used to say, why not put those hands to / good use? / He doesn't say anything about 'those hands' / anymore" (89). In the poem, her hands are not hers, "those hands" are othered. Later, when Billie Jo's hands ache, she refers to her hands as "them" rather than "hers": "I should just let them rest, / let the dust rest, / let the world rest. / But I can't leave it rest, / on account of Ma, / haunting" (110). Here we see Ma again as a representation of hope, haunting Billie Jo but motivating her to fight against the dust and oppression. In order to reconnect to her hands, to her embodiment, Billie Jo must experience a relational repair with her father, the land, and ultimately, herself.

*Billie Jo's Relationality and Repair*

Because Billie Jo's repair and re-embodiment involves healing relationships, the ecofeminist tenets of relationality and repair are best utilized in this analysis together. As such, I will map out both in one section, rather than separating them into different sections as I have done with *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Esperanza Rising*. For Billie Jo, deciding to leave her home is the start of her healing journey. Only when she returns home and repairs her relationship with her father is she able to repair her relationship with herself.

Sometime after the accident, Billie Jo's smothering grief turns to rage. She explains in "Midnight Truth":

> I am so filled with bitterness,
>
> it comes from the dust, it comes
>
> from the silence of my father, it comes
>
> from the absence of Ma. (195)

Feeling that she can never belong in Oklahoma and in the harsh emotional environment of her broken family, Billie Jo decides to leave, hoping that she can grow in a terrain that isn't terrorized by dust storms and blighted by unavailable fathers.

With this realization, Billie Jo takes a train west and runs away, motivated by the bitter taste of the dust, the silence of her father, and the absence of Ma (195). When Billie Jo leaves, she rejects relationality and instead channels a sort of autonomous agency, setting out west to make her own destiny, like in so many narratives that perpetuate the "Go West, young man" trope. Her longing, or perhaps even desperation, for something different is apparent in the poem "Out of the Dust." Billie Jo explains that if she stays she'll die, "slowly, surely / smothering;" Billie Jo explains that she is leaving "her father's house" (197). Hesse creates a distance here with this phrasing; it is no longer Billie Jo's home, and she takes no ownership of it anymore. When the train she intends to board pulls into the station, Hesse describes its arrival as "the sound of sharp knives, / metal against metal" juxtaposed with the "calm night" (197). The earth trembles when the train pulls up, and Hesse personifies the earth as being afraid of the roaring boxcar. The earth quakes as if in response to Billie Jo's choice to leave. Her healing remains back at home, but Billie Jo doesn't know this yet.

On the train, Billie Jo meets a man running away from his wife and kids. The responsibility of their wellbeing is too much for him. He explains to Billie Jo:

> I couldn't feed them,
>
> couldn't stand the baby always crying.
>
> And my wife,
>
> always that dark look following me. (201)

In the climax of the narrative, Billie Jo realizes that unlike this man, her father has never left her. She realizes:

> My father
>
> stayed rooted, even with my tests and my temper,
>
> even with the double sorrow of
>
> his grief and my own,
>
> he had kept a home
>
> until I broke it. (202)

Billie Jo's father, despite his emotional unavailability, is still tied to the land. She realizes that by running away, she is actually uprooting herself and getting farther away from the hope of a new home. She explains:

> Getting away,
>
> it wasn't any better.
>
> Just different.
>
> And lonely…
>
> More silent than the dust
>
> piled in drifts between me
>
> and my
>
> father. (204)

Note the word drift. In one sense, a "drift" (used as a noun) is a large pile of dust, but in a more poetic sense, the shared grief and shame of Billie Jo and her father actually causes them to drift apart. Realizing she has actually left the community and healing that she is seeking behind her,

Billie Jo gets off the train in Arizona and calls her father to let him know she is coming home (203).

Billie Jo's return marks her realization of what "home" is, or, of what home could be with healing and emotional honesty. This is a pivotal deviation from many structures of novels written for adolescents. Adolescent literature narratives typically chronicle a young protagonist's growing awareness of their relationship to structures of social power. Trites explains, "They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality; gender; race; class; and cultural mores surrounding death" (*Disturbing* 3). Through this negotiation, Trites explains that they realize the duality of their individual empowerment within institutional repression (16). While narratives for child audiences often follow a circular journey that "allow[s] children to go out into the darkness and get them back home again safely" (Almond 112), the adolescent novel depicts the protagonist's discovery of the world's hierarchies and their growing awareness of their place within those hierarchies.

However, the reimagined ecofeminist lens shows that adolescent novels' trend of a protagonist leaving home to figure out their place in systems of power stems from neoliberal notions of independence that perpetuate harmful cycles. Returning home isn't something that *just* children do. In fact, categorizing returning home as "childlike" is an aetonormative assumption that perpetuates the return home as simply a "'I came back home and told me mam'" trope for child audiences (Almond 112).

Instead, the tenets of relationality and repair help readers reimagine a protagonist's return home as a radical act. I position an adolescent's return home to their land and family as

revolutionary in that it is anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-normative. Put simply, returning home can be incredible healing. Healing is an anecdote to systems of oppression.

Many Indigenous ways of knowing emphasize this truth. Anishinaabe activist Andrea Landry writes, “One of the cycles we can break in our children is the colonially created cycle and idea that ‘in order to be successful you must leave the rez.’ Nah, colonialism. Success comes from our homelands” (@AndreaLandry1). Landry speaks deep truth; to fight oppression, you must do the opposite of what the colonizer says. Colonizers (and adults) say go be *independent*, make your *own* way, make a living for *yourself*, go make your *own* family. Landry’s words show that this ideology is limiting; success comes from our homelands. Success comes when adolescents who leave find their way home and *heal*.

However, as evidenced in *Out of the Dust*, returning home isn’t always simple. There is often repair work to be done in the form of the breaking of generational cycles of trauma. Returning home to repair requires radical emotional honesty. Even then, sometimes it is not safe for young people to return home, if adults in their communities are stuck in harmful cycles. But when a young protagonist and her family all engage in healing, reparative work, there is incredible potential for her to grow in awareness of her embodiment and grow in relational, agentic potential.

In *Out of the Dust,* Billie Jo’s return home is successful because of her own willingness to engage in healing as well as Daddy’s radical willingness to transform and change. When Billie Jo returns home, she is radically honest with her father for the first time, as described in the poem “Met”:

I tell him about getting out of the dust

and how I can’t get out of something

that's inside me. I tell him he is like the sod,

and I am like the wheat,

and I can't grow everywhere,

but I can grow here,

with a little rain,

with a little care,

with a little luck. (205)

Hesse utilizes the literary device of polysyndeton in the repetition of "and," "but," and "with." Hope returns with the energy building-repetition of the conjunctions and prepositions. Her father is like the sod, Billie Jo is the wheat. Both cannot grow in the harsh environment of grief, loss, and shame, but they can grow in a field of radical honesty and repair.

In the same way that grief has distanced Billie Jo and her father, Daddy has been out of touch with the land from years of forcing it to grow wheat, a crop it is not meant to sustain. "Why should wheat grow for a stranger?" Billie Jo asks (226). But after Billie Jo's return home, her father begins to heal his relationship with the land as be begins to care for it. He digs a pond for water and begins to plant cotton, "admitting as how there might be something / to this notion of diversification folks were / talking about" (226). Together, Billie Jo and her father slowly learn the value "that you can stay / in one place / and still grow" (226). Billie Jo even calls him "Daddy for the first time since Ma died," and they walk home together, talking, breaking up the silence that, like dust, has drifted between them for so long (205).

In addition to showing Billie Jo's reconciliation with her father, Hesse uses the final poems to show the growing relationality and repair between Billie Jo and her community. Upon returning home, Billie Jo meets her father's new girlfriend, Louise, a school teacher. Even

though Billie Jo likes Louise, she does not know if there is room for Louise in her life (213). Hesse uses the titles of the successive poems in which Louise appears to show Billie Jo's growing trust of Louise. Billie Jo's initial suspicion is clear in the title of the poem where we meet Louise, and she is "The Other Woman." Billie Jo worries:

> I'll just have to watch how things go and hope
>
> she doesn't crowd me out of Daddy's life, not now,
>
> when I am just finding my way back into it. (214)

The next poem with Louise is titled "Not Everywhere," as Louise wants to go everywhere with Daddy, but Billie Jo doesn't feel comfortable, especially with bringing Louise to her mother's grave. In "Teamwork," the trust that has been growing between Louise and Billie Jo blossoms. Louise helps Billie Jo and Daddy keep the dust out of the home, and Louise knows "not to step on the toes" of Ma's ghost. The repair work between Billie Jo and her father begin to open up space for Louise, too.

In the final poems of the work, Hesse brings back music (specifically the piano) to illustrate Billie Jo's ultimate reconciliation with herself. When Louise comes to dinner for the tenth time, Billie Jo finally shows her the piano, covered in dust. She tells Louise:

> I could play right now,
>
> maybe,
>
> if I could get the dust out of the piano,
>
> if I wanted to get the dust out of the piano.
>
> But I don't. I'm not ready yet. (217)

Like Billie Jo's dream in "Nightmare," Hesse shows Billie Jo's hope locked up in the keys of her piano. However now Billie Jo has relational agency—she can choose to play or not, with the

support of Louise and her father. Hesse shows Billie Jo's reluctance to unlock the hope through the isolation of the word "maybe."

In "Music," Billie Jo's "maybe" turns into a confident "yes." She begins to play the piano, and Hesse personifies Billie Jo and the music as animalistic, illustrating her re-embodiment and connection to her physical form:

I'm getting to know the music again.

And it's getting to know me.

We sniff each other's armpits,

and inside each other's ears,

and behind each other's necks.

We are both confident, and a little sassy. (222)

As she heals, Billie Jo and her music come alive in their reconciliation.

In the same way that Billie Jo begins to reacquaint herself with her piano, she also begins to reconcile with her embodiment. She begins to forgive herself for the accident, and when she returns to her piano, the hope of escape is realized, even though it looks different than what she originally imagined. By returning to her piano, and to herself, Billie Jo unlocks the hope and the secret to getting out of the "dust," which is representative of her repair with herself. She writes:

And I know now that all the time I was trying to get

out of the dust,

the fact is,

what I am,

I am because of the dust.

And what I am is good enough.

Even for me. (222)

The simplicity of the verse mirrors the simplicity of the lesson—in order for Billie Jo to move beyond what she previously identified negatively as “dust,” she returns to it, embraces it, and engages with it to start her healing process with herself and her family.

By reuniting with her father, accepting herself, and embracing the Dust Bowl in all its terrible beauty, Billie Jo works against the neoliberal notions of the self that she saw in the man she met in the train abandoning his family. She comes to embody Landry’s truth that “success comes from our homelands.” Billie Jo is the pioneer who stays, the young woman who returns to her family and land, and most importantly herself, healing and connected.

When applied to the three texts, the reimagined ecofeminist lens allows us to track protagonists’ growing awareness of their embodiment and how it relates to systems around them. We see this in the novels in Zahrah’s changing view of her body as she grows stronger and more confident, Esperanza’s changing view of herself after her loss of privilege, and Billie Jo’s disembodiment and reembodiment to survive her trauma. The lens highlights how this growing awareness affects relationships with all beings, such as Zahrah’s relationship with the inhabitants of the forest, Esperanza’s relationships her family and friends as her economic status changes, and Bille Jo’s relationship with her father. Lastly, a reimagined ecofeminism provides a framework to analyze a protagonist’s choice to stay or leave their community. We see this as Zahrah finally accepts herself as she returns home, as Esperanza begins to repair her relationship with Miguel and the land, and as Billie Jo returns home and experiences repair with her father and her community.

# CHAPTER IV: GROWING STUDENT AGENCY VIA ECOFEMINISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRITICAL ECOFEMINIST PEDAGOGY

In this final chapter, I will explore the pedagogical implications of this project. In 2020, I designed a research course with the overarching goal to facilitate student literacies surrounding literary analysis in connection to representations of nature, gender, sexuality, race, and class in children's literature. My hope was that students would leave the course with an understanding of the basic tenets of ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism, and that they would be able to identify interconnections between the three. I also hoped students would be able to articulate how these three concepts/theories relate to children's literature specifically, and how the unique genres explored perpetuate certain ideologies including binaries such as nature/culture, male/female, adult/child, and more.

What *actually* happened in my Foundations of Children's Literature course was different than the goals I set out to fulfill in my project proposal. Before moving on, however, I must situate this course in its sociohistorical context—a long moment in both our nation's collective trauma, as well as my own. My course took place following the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, in which folks protested racially motivated acts of police brutality and violence against Black people. The course began in the middle of a global pandemic, completely online. I never met students in person and, as I did not require their cameras to be on in our Zoom meetings, I never saw many of their faces. Throughout the semester, twelve out of 30 of the students informed me that they tested positive for COVID-19. The students and I witnessed and participated in a charged presidential election and watched a divisive president attempt to contest the poll results. In the middle of this chaos, and of the semester, was when my father died in a

one-person car accident, just two days after he met his 4-month-old granddaughter (my daughter) for the first time.

Because of the surrounding socio-political situations of my course, the questions I set out to research concerning teaching ecofeminist theory evolved to include questions of what it looks like to not only teach ecofeminism, but also to *practice* it. The project evolved from a series of research questions that guided the scaffolding of my course to a project that addressed pedagogical and personal questions about rigor, fairness, and care for students and for myself. This chapter thus outlines and analyzes the research I conducted in this course through the syllabus, assignments, and excerpts of student writing. It will also track my own development as an instructor through the stories of the reciprocal relationships I developed with students that sustained me (and hopefully, them) in a time of collective and individual chaos and trauma.

Through my research, I found that scaffolding other concepts first (*e.g.,* ecocriticism and intersectionality) helped students understand ecofeminist theory in children's literature. I also found that studying theories such as ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism allowed students to talk about children's literature in a nuanced way as they gained language to describe problematic ideologies being represented. Lastly, I found that students had just as much to offer me as their instructor, as I did to teach them about destabilizing hierarchies in the classroom.

My experience teaching this class contributed greatly to my understanding and development of this dissertation's broader project—articulating a reimagined ecofeminist lens. The three ecofeminist tenets that I developed—intersubjectivity, relationality, and repair—were born in part out of this pedagogical experience. 2020 was a growing season in my own understanding of racism, oppression (more broadly), trauma, empathy, and care. Hindsight highlights how my own ecofeminist embodiment, or the living-out of my ecofeminist beliefs

through my teaching, was in its adolescence. The analysis portion of this chapter tracks my maturation in critical thinking and critical pedagogy, alongside students' maturation as literary scholars and nuanced critical thinkers.

**Course Development and Theoretical Rationale**

In my course proposal, I argued that Foundations of Children's Literature (ENG 170) is an ideal course to teach ecofeminist concepts because of ecofeminism's potential to expose the oppressive ways that both human and non-human bodies have historically been coded in children's literature. I proposed that ecofeminist literary theory can actively work against neoliberal notions of the individual self by identifying what Alice Curry describes as "interdependencies and connections rather than privileging autonomous binary categories" (*Environmental Crisis* 2). In this way, I designed my course to critically engage with such interdependencies and interconnections. The goals of the course were tri-fold: 1. We would work to explore the privileging of binaries in the course texts to signal systems of oppression at work; 2. We would explore what it means for texts to perpetuate ecofeminist values; and 3. We would use ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism in our understanding and practice of literary analysis.

*Nature/Culture*

One of the binaries that I hoped the course would interrogate is that of nature vs. culture. As previously discussed in chapter 1, ecofeminist scholars have historically argued that the nature/culture binary must be dismantled in order to shift society towards equality and fair treatment of all beings. I hoped that my course would, as Alice Curry writes, "speak to our current western understandings of human subjectivity and human embodiment, and in particular our relationship with the natural world, and find the culture-nature dichotomy – with its tell-tale

hyphen – lacking moral and spiritual resonance" ("Traitoressness" 39). To this end, students would be encouraged to identify and analyze ideologies that perpetuate a nature vs. culture binary in the texts they encounter.

*Ethics of Care*

I aimed for the course to encourage students to explore what it means for texts to perpetuate ecofeminist values, and specifically, an ethics of care. I hoped to explore Nel Nodding's definition of "ethics of care," as well as interrogating the ways that identities are developed relationally. I also wanted to explore the ways that authors might imagine new ways for characters to interact with non-human entities in their texts, which is "co-constitution," as Donna Haraway calls it (*When Species Meet* 71). Haraway writes about "response-ability" as "a relationship crafted in intra-action [of language, perception, and the material world] through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being" (71). She warns that "if this structure of material–semiotic relating breaks down or is not permitted to be born, then nothing but objectification and oppression remains" (71). Instead, she proposes understanding how actions are co-constituted and responsive on both sides of a relationship. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai describes a similar ecofeminist model of relating, where "weblike networks of care and responsibility help the individual to establish a strong sense of self while maintaining connection with others through mutually beneficial patterns of exchange" (201). Responsibility, care, and interdependence are all concepts that students explored as important to establishing the ecofeminist goal of new symbiotic patterns of exchange between beings and non-beings.

*Literary Analysis*

Finally, the course encouraged students to use their ecofeminist literacies to practice literary analysis. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy's 1998 *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism:*

*Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* connects ecofeminist thought and literary criticism, and Gretchen Legler's work positions ecofeminism as a helpful lens to use in literary analysis. She argues that an ecofeminist reading of texts "gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature and the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (227). She calls for literary critics to do the same revisioning work that King, Griffin, Starhawk, Plant and other foundational ecofeminists advocate for rethinking "human relationships [along] with the natural world by raising awareness about a whole range of alternative stories about landscape and the natural world that have heretofore been ignored as 'nature writing'" (Legler 229). One way that literary critics can do this work of reimagining is with the process of "embodying nature," which "involves writing nature out of a position as a passive mirror of culture into a position as actor or agent" (229). In calling attention to the ways authors do or do not portray nature as agentic, literary scholars can do restorative work in shifting their own cultures towards reciprocal relationships between humanity and nature. In this way, throughout my researched course, students were encouraged to write and speak about nature as agentic; that is, I encouraged students to recognize how authors represented nature, independent of and coincident with humanity. I also encouraged students to write and think about the ways in which representations of gender, sexuality, race, and class are, as Legler writes, linked to representations of nature.

**Pedagogical Commitments**

As students worked to develop and define the ways in which ecofeminism and children's literature interact, I was committed to doing work of practicing a pedagogy that was informed by the very ecofeminist principles we were studying, a pedagogy which I call a "critical ecofeminist

pedagogy." In teaching literary analysis through a critical ecofeminist pedagogical lens, I emphasize the following: the destabilization of hierarchies within and beyond the classroom; the careful selection of children's and middle grade texts that feature marginalized experiences; a focus on relationality in attempt to transform the classroom into a safe(r) space for students; and an awareness of the environmental (material) impact of my course and course materials.

*Destabilizing Hierarchies*

An essential part of developing my critical ecofeminist pedagogy involved working to destabilize hierarchies in my classroom. Greta Gaard offers insight into introducing ecofeminist principles into the classroom in her article "Ecofeminism and EcoComposition." While she specifically addresses the composition classroom, many of her suggestions for integrating feminisms (and specifically ecofeminisms) into the composition classroom are applicable to any course taught in the humanities, such as children's literature. Gaard argues that the democratization of knowledge and the decentering of authority (perhaps, in the rearrangement of chairs into a circle rather than rows) is at the heart of any critical ecofeminist pedagogy (165). While we weren't able to arrange our physical classroom space because the course was housed on Zoom, I attempted to destabilize hierarchies in the policies and the work students did on Zoom. I took a multi-faceted approach to this, beginning by implementing a day each week for students to lead and facilitate class discussion. While students were leading, I "muted" myself to allow students to have full control over the digital discussion space. My hope was that by encouraging students to lead each other in discussion of the texts, they would gain confidence in the digital space at the "front" of the classroom. My goal was to communicate to them that they were capable of making and soliciting meaning and knowledge, just as an instructor does.

To create a classroom culture that destabilizes hierarchies, instead of including my own Zoom "rules" in the syllabus, on the first day of class I asked students to collectively come up with a list of Zoom best practices. Students seemed comfortable contributing ideas and discussing the pros and cons of things like requiring video on, muting all, etc. Here is what we, as a discourse community, collectively came up with and agreed to:

ENG 170 Best Practices Guide

1. We will utilize Breakout sessions for group work activities and getting to know each other. Camera is not required to be on for these, but please do be active in groups.
2. For classes, camera doesn't have to be on, but please be active, whether that is in the chat or sharing in class.
3. Folks have agreed to keep audio off, unless talking. Folks can utilize the raise-hand feature or physically raise hand when they want to share.
4. In an effort to normalize that it's OKAY and NORMAL to have a physical body:
    1. Eating is totally fine, audio off please.
    2. You are welcome to get up and use the bathroom, stretch, etc.
    3. You are welcome to turn video on/off as needed.
    4. You are welcome to have pets join.

Gaard also suggests that instead of (or in addition to) grades, instructors might consider moving evaluation away from standardized testing to essays, performances, art pieces, or student-led discussions to avoid reinforcing the power hierarchy that grading perpetuates (165). In the course design, I attempted to move away from top-down grading by assigning project grades as completion grades (*i.e.*, if students do the work according to the guidelines outlined, they get full points).

*Text Selection*

Another ecofeminist teaching principle that I adopted was to think critically about my text selection. Gaard argues for selecting a diversity of texts to accompany a composition or literature course—but she warns that a diversity of authors is not enough. For text selection to "live out" ecofeminist values, Gaard advocates for selecting stories that focus on narratives that have been left out of history. She asks instructors to consider, "Where was the history and perspectives of Asian Americans or Chicanos in writing about 'nature' or the 'environment?' How do non-heterosexuals write about such topics as place and identity?" (168). Any ecofeminist approach must foreground previously marginalized perspectives, both in discussion and in text-selection. In selecting texts, I turned a critical eye to the specific narratives featured. I interrogated texts with questions such as the following: What children are being represented in these stories? How are these children shown as relating to the environment? Are the children in the books I select represented as agentic? Are age-based norms, referred to as *aetonormativity* by Maria Nikolajeva (8), critiqued or reinforced? What voices and cultural narratives are implicitly and explicitly privileged in the stories students read and analyze?

Children's literature publishing has historically avoided featuring protagonists from marginalized groups, as well as publishing own-voices texts. Rudine Sims Bishop writes that "when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (ix). Not only did I hope to combat these omissions by assigning texts that feature a multiplicity of voices (including ones that feature the environment), I also believe I have a responsibility as an ecofeminist to design my course with a

critical attention to this lack of diversity in the field. The texts that I selected aided me in this endeavor.

I also tried to choose texts that present a multiplicity of experiences, so as not to lead students to believe that one text is possible of representing an entire group's experience. Scott Beck, in his analysis of pictures books depicting problematic representations of Mexican American migrant experiences, proposes a way to respond to this dilemma: "That is, to read these books, even the best amongst them, in complementary pairs or groups wherein the weaknesses of one book can be complemented by the strengths of another" (125). In this way, I consciously paired texts that are limited in their nuances surrounding diversity alongside other texts that comment back and are in dialogue with the less nuanced text, such as teaching *Tomas and the Library Lady* alongside *Esperanza Rising* to provide a multiplicity of perspectives on Mexican American migrant experiences.

*Relationality*

At the center of a critical ecofeminist pedagogy must be relationality. This means that as an instructor, I am committed to honoring students as whole people. If a critical ecofeminist pedagogy is to promote relationality, previously defined as the development of mutualistic, interdependent relationships with all living beings, including nature, then the syllabus (one of the first genres through which a student "meets" me) seemed like a good place to start to create a solid foundation. I made conscious rhetorical decisions in my syllabus to let students know that I am interested in being in a mutualistic relationship with them, in the same way that we studied mutualistic relationships in our texts. I hoped the statements on the syllabus in this research course would communicate that I was interested (as I always am) in their development as whole people and that I was not unapproachable or unwilling to provide care for them (to break down

the "ivory tower" stigma). Besides letting students in my research class know that I wanted our classroom to be a safe(r) space for them, as well as letting them know I wanted them to approach me if they were struggling (both which I hoped would promote a mutualistic relationship between us), I also believe that it was important to provide them with resources outside of the university as an institution. While the university has many resources that I always make visible on my syllabus, I also know that the institution is not set up to serve all students equitably. Thus, in this syllabus, I included outside resources, such as a non-university reporting option for sexual assault, so that students who might not feel comfortable going through university channels could also get support.

*Awareness of Environmental Impact*

Another way that I have attempted to integrate a critical ecofeminist pedagogy has been by being conscious of the environmental impact of my course and course materials. Gaard writes that "ecopedagogy articulates a commitment to the coherence between theory and practice, along with a reluctance to pursue texts, scholarship, and activities that lead away from the goal of putting theory into action" ("Towards" 20). I have attempted to put ecofeminist theory into action by suggesting that students be conscious of the environmental impact of the course materials they choose to purchase or borrow. I have included the following statement in my syllabus: "To reduce waste, I highly recommend utilizing I-Share, Interlibrary Loan, Milner & the Normal/ Bloomington Public Libraries to obtain copies of books that you don't think you'll want in your collection. For purchasing books, I would recommend buying through used book distributors (Half.com, Amazon.com, Betterworldbooks.com, Powells.com/used)."[6] Because my

[6] In the future, to lean into my belief that any critical ecofeminist pedagogy must also be inherently anti-racist, I would change this to also encourage students to support BIPOC-owned bookshops: "For purchasing books, please consider purchasing online from Indigenous and

course was completely online, it was easy to run it as a paperless course, and students turned in all materials digitally.

**Methodology and Course Overview**

This course, "Growing Agency: Ecocriticism, Intersectionality, and Ecofeminism in Children's Literature" met synchronously on Zoom once a week (Mondays from 3:35-4:50 p.m.) for 75 minutes during the fall 2020 semester of Illinois State University. The course texts included four picture books (*The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein; *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss;[7] *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom*; Tomas & the Library Lady* by Pat Mora) and six middle-grade texts (*Esperanza Rising*, by Pam Muñoz Ryan; *Out of the Dust*, by Karen Hesse; *Song of the Trees*, by Mildred D. Taylor; *Lumberjanes*, Vol. 1, "Beware the Kitten Holy," by Noelle Stevenson, Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, and Brooklyn A. Allen; *Girlwood*, by Clare Dean; *Zahrah the Windseeker* by Nnedi Okorafor) I included texts from a variety of genres including picture books, chapter books, a verse novel, a comic book, and a novella. The protagonists featured represent a multiplicity of identities, including race, gender, sexual identity, and species. For secondary readings, students were assigned different articles, term definitions, and videos to guide their analyses. The course was divided into four units, including a pre-unit, and three main units. The first unit was devoted to the framework of the course and its

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Black-owned independent book sellers such as Semicolon Bookstore, Birchbark Books, Mahogany Books, & The Key Bookstore."

[7] I struggled internally assigning these texts because I have made a concerted effort in the rest of the course text list to feature texts by woman, BIPOC, and queer authors. Both Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss are white, cis gender males. However, I signaled this to students as we conversed about these texts, and I ultimately found it productive to start a conversation about ecocriticism with two authors that, in essence, present problematic representations of the environment.

requirements, and the following units highlighted the following theories: ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism.

The main assignments of the course were designed to help students analyze texts with an awareness of the interconnectedness of oppressive systems. The assignments included a class encyclopedia term entry, an analysis of representation of the environment in a children's text, four close reading analyses, a group discussion leading day, and one class blog entry in which they took notes during class and posted them. For their final project, students completed a You Are Here map in which they communicated a main concept or idea they learned through a visual artifact and an accompanying Artist's Statement. Students were also asked to take a survey three times throughout the semester. No points were assigned for completion, and students took the survey at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. The survey was designed to help me track their developing ability to think critically about children's texts, as well as their developing understanding of representations of the environment. The survey asked the same set of questions each time:

1. What do you think children's literature is/does in the world?
2. What does ecology/the environment have to do with children's literature?

For the encyclopedia entry project, students were assigned one of our course terms and asked to research a definition of that term. I then compiled their "pages" into a course encyclopedia that students were encouraged to reference in their reading responses and writing. In Unit 1, we explored ecocriticism and worked to parse out both implicit and explicit ideologies in the text. For the first part of their unit project, students chose a picture book (one outside of the course texts that featured some kind of representation of nature that they found to be problematic). My goal for this project was to prompt students to: 1. Identify an ideology concerning the

environment that they found to be concerning, or limited, or too narrow. 2. Re-write the story in an attempt to challenge that particular ideology and provide a different perspective of the environment than the one that the original author gave. Students were asked to do this by taking the picture book and either digitally or physically replacing the words and/or images to create a new version of the story. Students also turned in an Artist's Statement, which functioned as a way to tell the behind-the-scenes story of their project. I asked students to include an explanation of the kind of things they changed in the original story through the re-ideologizing process, as well as questions that asked them to reflect on their remediation process.

Students were also asked to complete four Reading Response[8] papers on their choice of course texts, in which they were asked to perform close reading and write a 1.5-2-page analysis for each. We spent a class period working through the genre of literary analysis. To aid students with a loose outline of what I was asking for, I created a template document (Figure 1) in hopes of helping them think complexly about the genre. My primary hope for this document was that it would show them the purpose of an introduction and conclusion (rather than just stating and restating a thesis).

I believe it is important to note that the unforeseen circumstances of my father's sudden death significantly impacted my ability to guide students through the literary analysis genre. I was unavailable via email for around two weeks during the first month of the semester, and I cancelled a full class session. Therefore, I was not available to them while they were writing their first and second Reading Responses, as well as while they were completing their Unit 1

[8] I titled their literary analysis papers "Reading Responses," which proved to be confusing. I was not asking them to perform a reading response; I was asking them to perform analysis. I'll want to change that assignment name in the future to Analysis Papers.

project. Because I did not want their grades to suffer in any way due to my lack of availability, I changed the grading criteria on the Reading Responses and Unit 1 project to a completion grade, meaning that if students completed the assignment and I could see they put in effort, they received the full point value. I had hoped to see how I could encourage students to use their ecofeminist literacies to practice literary analysis in these two assignment genres as data in this paper. However, because I wasn't able to work with the students to understand these genres as much as I had hoped, I will not be using their Reading Responses or Unit 1 projects as analysis data at this time.

**INTRODUCTION**: 2 sentences only

1. Thesis: What have you discovered about the text that you want to explore?
2. Organizational pattern In what order are you going to explore/talk about this?

For example:
Even though *Cinderilla* does feature many female characters, the text perpetuates some problematic ideologies about gender expectations and beauty. I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which the text perpetuates a singular, ideal image of feminine beauty, as well as the consequences of the male gaze.

**BODY**: Evidence, following the organization pattern that you laid out above. So you're going to show you reader that the text perpetuates:

1. A singular, ideal image of feminine beauty
2. The consequences of the male gaze

1. One scene is particularly problematic in perpetuating harmful female beauty standards, and in particular, the beauty ideal of thinness. When Cinderilla is helping her step sisters get ready for the ball, Perrault writes, "Anyone but Cinderilla would have dressed their heads awry, but she was very good, and dressed them perfectly well. They were almost two days without eating, so much they were transported with joy; they broke above a dozen of laces in trying to be laced up close, that they might have a fine slender shape, and they were continually at their looking-glass" (81). The stepsisters are preoccupied with their looks, and in order to obtain "beauty" for the prince, they go "almost two days without eating"... "so that they might have a fine slender shape" (81). This passage in particular reinforces a standard of female beauty that is contingent upon being "slender." The stepsisters starving themselves communicates that this beauty standard is important enough to overlook one's own health and wellness to achieve this standard, and thus attract the attention and gaze of the (male) prince).

2. We also see the perpetuation of the male gaze when Cinderilla eventually arrives at the ball. Here we see both the King and Prince direct their sole attention to Cinderilla—but not because of her wit or bravery, but rather because she ascribes to the single, feminine standard of beauty. The text reads, "The King himself, old as he was, could not help ogling her, and telling the Queen softly, 'that it was a long time since he had seen so beautiful and lovely a creature'" (84). The king literally ogles Cinderilla, meaning that he stares at her in a lustful manner. Later, the prince is described as eating "not a morsel, so intently was he busied in gazing on her" (84). The male gaze here is problematic; not only must women in the text manipulate their physical bodies to conform to a single standard of beauty (i.e. starving themselves), they must then be subjected to being "ogled" and objectified by the men in the story.

**CONCLUSION**: NOT simply restating your thesis. The conclusion tells us the "because" to your thesis, and it shows us the implications of what you have found evidence of in the text.
For example:

By failing to be critical of the objectification of women, the passages in the text reinforce the patriarchal view that women's bodies are simply commodities to be manipulated and gazed at.
So BECAUSE the text is uncritical of these themes, it is perpetuating it inexplicitly condones the behavior of the men in the story and makes it seem like that these things are "ok" and acceptable.

Fig. 1. Reading Response Template

Each Wednesday during our synchronous sessions, a group of students was responsible for leading the discussion of a set of questions they worked together to create. Students were given 30 minutes of class time to facilitate discussion surrounding the text and course concepts. This assignment not only worked to destabilize hierarchies by allowing students a time to lead the class (I intentionally stayed on mute for most of these discussions), but it also worked to create classroom community and encourage students to get to know each other outside of our sessions. This was an important opportunity for students because the limitations of our online format were not the most conducive to classroom culture building as we spent very little time together on Zoom (only an hour and fifteen minutes each week) and no time before/after class in a physical space, where much of relationship building occurs. We spent an entire class session early on preparing for the discussion leading groups. In a class brainstorming activity, I solicited responses from students of best practices for facilitating discussions. We explored the following questions:

- What sorts of things do you see your professors doing to get folks to talk?
- When someone shares, how have you seen professors respond? What seems to work vs. not work?
- What do you do if there's an awkward lull?
- What do you do if someone says something that is potentially offensive?

Our discussion worked not only to teach students strategies for leading discussion, but it also worked to invite students into the teaching process. We also spent time going over the difference between higher-level thinking questions and lower-level thinking questions, and I provided examples of both for them on the Group Discussion Leading assignment sheet. Groups turned

their questions in to me two days before our synchronous class, and I posted them online so that students could read over the questions and prepare for class discussion ahead of time.

**Analysis**

The student demographic of this general education course consisted of 29 students, including 1 first-year student, 18 sophomores, 8 juniors, and 3 seniors. 5 of the students identified as male, and 25 as female (based off their indicated pronouns). There were three students of color and 27 white students. The majority of students were early childhood education majors, and the minority of students were taking the class for general education credit (this group included majors such as agriculture, mathematics, and business, to name a few).

To assess the course and student engagement with my original research objectives, I focus my analysis primarily on the course survey that students took at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. I also used data from their final You Are Here Map projects to test my hypothesis that scaffolding the course in the way I did allowed students to understand ecofeminist themes better. As stated above, I am not including their Reading Responses and re-imagining ideologies project (from Unit 1) in this analysis.

Students completed the first course survey during the second week of classes. My hope was that the questions I posed to them at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester would help me track their growth and ability to speak with nuance about children's literature and the environment. Students' responses to the first survey were varied in that some seemed to already be starting to think complexly about the relationship between ecology and children's literature, while some didn't seem to understand what the question was asking. In response to the question

about what children's literature is, several students wrote that the purpose of children's literature is to teach children about the world, and to teach adults about children. Diane[9] wrote:

> One of them being a way of preparing children for real-world situations, and perhaps learn from the characters in each story, depending on what the situation of a particular story is. Another thing that I think children's literature does is help adults/parents learn more about a child and their mindset.

Here Diane reveals her initial thoughts that children's literature's main function is to teach children how to function successfully in society.

Brian also wrote about his belief in the didactic nature of children's literature: "Hopefully the books help raise awareness about certain problems within the world and help fix them before kids are into daily bad habits." As these responses reflect, many students came into the course with a class perspective about what children's literature is "supposed" to do, that is, fix young people and help them align with adult norms. Jasmine identified the ways that children's literature can do this in her response: "I feel these books also outline societal norms to try and keep people in check in a way."

In the second question, many students interpreted the word environment as another word for setting (rather than as ecological). Amy wrote, "Environment has a lot to do with children's literature as it creates a setting and understanding as to why a certain topic is being discussed in the story." Polly also interpreted environment to mean mood or setting, writing, "I also think it sets certain emotions when you are reading. For instance, if it is dark and gloomy in a relatively frightening area, people are going to be more on edge than engaged laughing or a pleasant feeling and vice versa." This was helpful information for me as an instructor as it signaled that I

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[9] I am using pseudonyms to keep student's identities confidential.

needed to start off by defining the word environment so that everyone was on the same page about it. This confirmed my initial hypothesis that in order to explore ecofeminist themes in children's literature, students needed to be familiar with the basic tenants of ecocriticism, in particular the definition of the word environment.

Not all students initially mistook the word environment for setting. Students who understood the word "environment" as relating to ecology began to try to articulate the connection between the environment and children's literature. Several wrote that children's books can foster empathy and responsibility for the environment. Briana wrote that children's literature "helps instill the idea of taking care of our planet into children's minds from a young age with the hopes of their generation creating a better planet than they found it." Janelle made a sophisticated connection between representation and understanding, writing, "However the environment is displayed in literature affects a child's understanding of their relationship to the environment. The environment can be displayed as disposable or unimportant and that idea can be imprinted perhaps unintentionally." Briana and Janelle were already starting to make connections between representation and activism in their first survey responses.

The midsemester surveys continued to confirm my scaffolding decisions. We discussed Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality and used it in our critique of representations of the environment and people groups, and the mid-semester survey responses reflect that this emphasis on intersectionality helped students to begin making connections surrounding the environment, gender, race, and aetonormativity.

For the first question's responses, I saw an overall greater awareness of some of the issues surrounding children's literature that we had discussed in the first half of the semester. Students wrote about agency, aetonormativity, and children's connection to ecology in a

complex and nuanced way than in the initial survey. For example, in response to the question of what children's literature does in the world, Amy wrote, "I think children's literature gives shielded (at times) lessons on societal and life issues we see on the daily. It also gives the adult in a child's life more power/control over which story they read to the child and how it will teach one perspective on a lesson while a book they didn't choose will teach a different perspective." Amy, in her response, touches on things we had talked about in class, including censorship (in their use of "shielded"), agency ("power/control"), and unconscious bias ("one perspective...while a book they didn't choose will teach a different perspective").

Students also began to talk about representation of marginalized groups, nodding to Rudine Sims Bishop's article "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors." River wrote, "[Children's literature] helps create windows for others in society but also mirrors." Sara wrote, "I think children's literature is important in setting up parameters and expectations for the world and how the world might interact with you. I guess I am really influenced by the 'Mirrors' article and how important representation is for that reason." And Janelle similarly wrote about children's literature: "It is a way for children to see themselves and they're life in the world as well as experience the world around them. It teaches children lessons and messages both explicitly and implicitly, influencing the way they behave and see the world around them."

For the ecology question, I was surprised (and pleased) to see Amy beginning to make connections between gender and the environment. For example, she picked up on gendered representations of the environment in her answer. She responded:

> In our society, we currently have the environment as a more feminine and motherly figure in stories. Having the environment featured in numerous children's books gives children the possible impression that they need to treat the environment with the same

respect that they would treat the motherly figure in their life. But, this needs to be changed by having nature be portrayed as a gender neutral element of a story to teach that we must treat the environment as we would any other person in our life, regardless of gender.

Diane also gestured towards our conversations about nature's agency in her survey response, writing, "Some children literature books teaches children about the environment or nature through stories. children's literature can give ecology/the environment a voice." Overall, the mid-semester survey results showed that students were starting to make sophisticated connections between aetonormativity, gender, and ecology in their thinking.

The final survey results revealed that many students were thinking about the intersections between children's literature and the environment, gender, and race with a different level of nuance than they were at the beginning and middle of the course, due to the intentional scaffolding of theories to build to ecofeminism. In response to the first question, Jasmine's end-of-semester survey response indicated that she grew in awareness of the ideologies present in texts, a skill necessary to critiquing and analyzing texts through an ecofeminist lens. She wrote, "I think children's literature is a story that is told by an adult with problematic ideologies, whether it is implicit or explicit. It changes the way young readers think in the world and helps them develop a viewpoint that could be either similar or different than the authors." She identifies here her awareness of authors' implicit biases in texts, an awareness that wasn't present in her first survey response to this question where she wrote, "I think children's literature is a set of stories that have themes for children to learn when they get older." Jasmine shifted from thinking about children's literature as solely didactic to being able to talk about it with

nuance, as seen when she identifies the presences of multiple ideologies and the effect of those ideologies on children.

Students' responses to the second question on the final survey also showed growth in that they were able to talk about power and agency with nuance. Two students stood out in particular because of the stark contrast between their thoughts on the connection between ecology and children's literature at the beginning of the semester and then at the end. Amy's response to this question at the beginning of the semester indicated that she was confused by the term "environment" as she mistook it to mean setting. She wrote, "Environment has a lot to do with children's literature as it creates a setting and understanding as to why a certain topic is being discussed in the story. With a sense of a certain environment, the story would simply be randomly placed in a children's mind with no true understanding as to why it was placed in their upbringing." In contrast, her response on the final survey illustrated a new understanding of the connections between the environment and gender. She wrote:

> It has a lot to do with children's literature as it sets the narrative and create either a positive or negative connotation to the occurring events in the book. The environment also presets gender ideals/norms as in the past, nature has automatically been given female pronouns when it truly has no gender which creates further issues in the understand of the gender spectrum.

What Amy seems to be gesturing toward is our class conversations surrounding the way authors can unconsciously gender the environment, perpetuating problematic binaries of male/female and nature/culture. Amy's statement that "nature has automatically been given female pronouns when it truly has no gender" indicates that she is starting to make sophisticated connections between the ways that authors gender the environment and the harm that this can cause.

Another student who showed growth in her understanding of ecofeminist principles throughout the survey responses was Sara. Initially, Sara wrote about the environment in children's literature from a didactic perspective, indicating that representations of the environment should teach children to care for the earth. She wrote in her first survey response:

> I feel there are a lot of children's books that set boundaries for how to respect and love nature. I think—as seen in *The Lorax* and *The Giving Tree*—it is easy to take advantage of and ruin. I kind of got into this in the question above, but by writing stories that children read that idolize and treat our world right we can teach them a lot. I know I was raised in a rather environmentally friendly household and due to that I take as many steps as I can to take care of this earth. By placing those themes of ecology and environment in children's literature we can prepare them to take small steps at a young age. I think it is almost a game when you are young and learn that a fictional character does x, y and z to help the environment. If a child loves that character they might begin to mimic those behaviors and in turn help the environment. I feel it helps children learn about ecology and environment while still maintaining childlike adoration and wonderment of the world.

Sara's understanding of representations of the environment existing to help kids love nature evolved throughout the semester, as evidenced in her final survey response. She identified the presence of ideologies and talked about sophisticated concepts like power, agency, and relationships between nature and humans. She wrote:

> Ecology and the environment often carry more implicit ideologies in children's books. The environment I feel like is often a tool for principles like respect, importance, power and more! The environment is something all humans interact with and children's books

> in a way set up what that relationship is like and could be. I am very passionate about taking care of nature (which is really hard considering so much damage has been done to it!!) and children's books can carry powerful messages to young minds about how to treat our world. One thing this class taught me was how connected Earth and people are (focusing more on women). The term mother nature creates this interesting binary between earth being feminine and womanly yet it's not very empowering when you think about how poorly women identified people can be treated.

Towards the end of her response, Sara begins to make connections between gender and environmental themes. She addresses the nature vs. female binary, showing a developing understanding of the ways in which gender and the environment have been problematically over-coupled.

Another assignment that showed student growth in their thinking about ecofeminist principles with nuance was the You Are Here map. There were two projects of note that illustrated shifts in students' thinking about children's literature and ecofeminism. The first was Brian's project. Brian was one of five male-identifying students in the course and was enrolled as an Agriculture major taking the course for general education credit. He contributed often to class discussion, and I was impressed with his open-mindedness in class discussions, despite being new to literary analysis work. In his final project, Brian wrote about the impact that *Esperanza Rising* had on him. He explored the themes of the book, describing the impact of the text on his thinking. His writing on Racism and Social Norms is worth analyzing (see Figure 2).

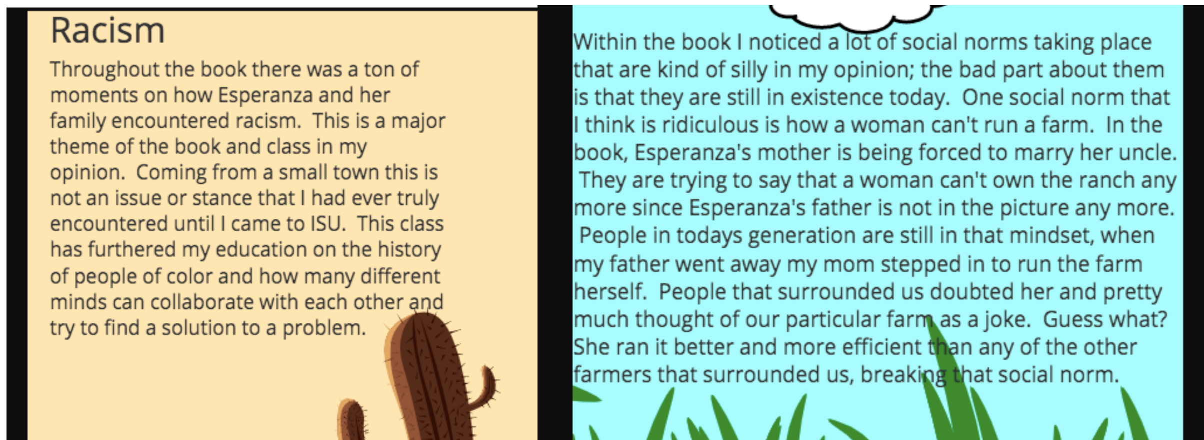


Fig. 2. Brian's You Are Here Map

Brian's project reveals that in reading children's literature through an ecofeminist lens, he was asked to think about experiences beyond his own (i.e., his statement that racism is an issue he hasn't had to deal with). Brian, as a white-passing male, was prompted to think about issues concerning race and gender, such as the societal norms represented in *Esperanza Rising* that a woman of color cannot run a farm. Brian was able to connect that to his own experience ("when my father went away my mom stepped in to run the farm herself"). Brian, in essence, saw himself and his family reflected in the text, which allowed him to engage with issues regarding gender and race that he hadn't encountered before coming to college.

Another You Are Here map that demonstrated growth was Bianca's presentation on her understanding of the key course theories of ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism. She wrote about ecofeminism:

> Relating to intersectionality and ecocriticism, ecofeminism is the concept of examining the connection between women and nature. Ecofeminism in children's literature is mainly about bringing attention to the unjust dominance that social norms draw over women and nature, and how its represented in children's books. This is another concept that I had never connected to children's books, but discussing it in class really taught me a lot about

how gender inequalities are still portrayed and in turn taught through popular children's literature.

Bianca is trying to make a connection between the injustices we discussed concerning the environment and women. She successfully discusses the ecofeminist principle of domination, but she does lean on affinity ecofeminism, or the ideology that perpetuates essentialist connections between the embodiment of women and nature. Affinity ecofeminism is not something that we talked about in class, and Bianca's response reveals the need to do so in future classes to combat relying on the idea that women and nature are somehow "closer" or "connected." Despite this omission of my own teaching of ecofeminist principles, Bianca's survey response illustrates how ecocriticism and intersectionality worked well as scaffolding pieces in the teaching of ecofeminism in a children's literature class.

Finally, I will end my analysis by including my own You Are Here map, which I wrote and presented to the students alongside theirs at the end of the semester. Candidly, I was unsure whether it was appropriate to share my project with them as it was more emotive than I had ever been in class. bell hooks offers some insight on the place of emotion in academia and the appropriateness of tears in the classroom. She encourages teachers to welcome "emotional awareness and the expression of emotions" in the classroom space, a departure from the way that students and instructors are typically encouraged to behave in the classroom (81). She does place a protective boundary around this suggestion, in that it is an instructor's responsibility to be mindful always of positionality. She cites an example where a white student in her predominantly Black classroom ran out crying after hearing of a Black student's experience with abuse. hooks did not go after the white student, cautioning teachers not to reinforce "the assumption...that white interpretation of black experience matters most" (81). At the heart of

hook's pedagogy is an encouragement of instructors to value and develop students' emotional intelligence to "upset the hierarchy" that the mind should have control over our body (83).

Laurel Krapivkin You Are Here Map

Any kind of "You Are Here" map in regards to our class for me has to include - you, students. I've never met a single one of you. I don't know what kind of shoes you wear, or how you actually look in real life; we meet each week on camera, and often I only know you as black squares on a grid.

I think this semester on Zoom has got me thinking about the sort of disconnect that happens between professors and students. There's a false hierarchy in academia - the instructor is supposed to know and the students are supposed to learn. The teacher gives the grades, the students do the work. The teacher is the one who can choose to care for their students or have compassion or they can get away with being a shit head about things like attendance and extensions and grammar mark downs. The teacher has the power. We've talked about aetonormativity in our class - adults have the power in the adult/child binary. In the same way, teachers have the power in the classroom dynamic.

Candidly, this semester, I have felt utterly powerless. This is in part due to the collective trauma we are all experiencing as we enter month 10 of a global pandemic. But, more personal to me, I feel powerless amidst the waves of grief I feel over my father's death. He lost control of his car and flew off a freeway while my husband, baby daughter, and I were visiting my parents in California. There are circumstances surrounding it that are painful, and complex, and my dad was really sick when he died. He shouldn't have been driving and he was impaired. I don't know if you've ever lost someone unexpectedly in a horrific way such as this, but it can leave you feeling powerless, like you have no control, like anything could happen next.

To some extent, I feel that this semester, after the accident, I didn't have the strength to wield the power over you that I was "supposed" to. I didn't take off points on reading responses for grammar, or usage. I knew that I was behind on my own work, so I granted every extension that you asked me for. I stopped making note of attendance. I thought, I can barely show up, so why should I penalize others for not being able to? In some ways, you could say that you all had more power over your grades in this class than normal. You do the work, you get the credit. You need more time, you got it.

But I've been thinking, what's so wrong about that power swap? What if granting extensions and grading upon completion isn't so much about giving up power, but about offering compassion? Perhaps it took a global pandemic and the death of my father to realize that there is nothing unprofessional or wrong with being a fucking human being and honoring the humanity in the students that have been entrusted to you. I'm sure there are questions to be explored here about rigor, and equity, but as I reflect upon my own commitments to ecofeminist and trauma-informed teaching, I hope that this semester makes a lasting impact upon the way I treat students in the future.

It's a kind of magic, is it not, to receive an email from your student saying "you have the support of your students behind you" after your dad dies. There is a beautiful kind of subversion in the professor getting help from her student. And so to you all, thank you, for your patience, for your engagement, for your willingness to listen to my rants about periods and vaginas, for being willing to pivot when my world crashed this semester. You have more power than you'll ever know, and hopefully, through the conversations we've had this semester and the children's books we interrogated, you're leaving with a greater knowledge of your power and worth.

And so thank you, for helping me develop as an instructor, and as a human being. In a strange way. You've all been a peripheral part of my grieving process. We had a class session on Sept 23, two days before my dad died. My dad came out to the couch in my parents' living room and listened to me teach. Well, actually, he listened to you all talk so intelligently and curiously about We Are Water Protectors. After we ended our Zoom call, he affirmed my teaching, saying he thought I was fun, and natural, and not pretentious. It was such a special moment for me, especially looking back now. In a way, my dad, who was a teacher, affirmed my choice to teach, affirmed "where I am." And so, I am here, a teacher, still learning. A human being, figuring out what it means to be a decent human being to others. Thank you, for your part in that this year.

Fig. 3. Laurel's You Are Here Map

With hooks' theory in my mind, for the You Are Here Map presentations, I wrote and read a piece of writing that expressed the gratitude I felt towards the students for their support of me and care for me over the course of the semester (see Figure 3). I wanted to try to connect the ecofeminist principles we had been working with of respect, mutuality, and radical notions of care to my experience as an instructor who had experienced an incredibly traumatic loss in the middle of our time together. This is where my research questions of "what does it look like to teach ecofeminism" evolved to include what it looks like to *practice* ecofeminism in the classroom space. I hoped that by practicing being vulnerable with the students, they would be reminded of my own humanity, their power as thinkers and students, and the profound effect they had on me during the hardest season of my life.

**Conclusions**

The data that I analyzed here is just a small representation of the many in-class discussions we had regarding ecocriticism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism in relation to our course texts. While the students and I grappled with how to analyze representations of gender, nature, race, and class in the texts we encountered, we also grew in our ability to discuss complex issues with one another with kindness, respect, and nuance.

In a revision of the course, I would change many things. Any ecofeminist work, whether literary analysis or pedagogical design, *must* inherently be anti-racist, which is something I certainly believed when I created my research course, but not something that I translated well enough in my course design. In future versions of this course, I would revise my course texts to include more primary works by Indigenous authors and authors of color,[10] as well as to include

[10] Some works that I would like to teach in future Foundations of Children's Literature courses include *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* by Joanna Ho, *Antiracist Baby* by Ibram X. Kendi

scholarship by Black ecofeminists.[11] Additionally, any discussion of ecofeminism would also need to include conversations about environmental racism in the United States. As I continue to do the essential work of decolonizing myself as a white, middle-class cis/het woman, I am admittingly still learning how to decolonize my syllabi and scholarship[12]. This course design process helped me see directions and areas of growth in this regard.

The socio-cultural moment and my personal circumstances surrounding this semester certainly affected the extent to which I was able to engage with students with the course concepts. I felt that they got half-a-professor, or rather, a grieving, post-partum, shell of a person leading them in Zoom discussions each week. While the survey and project data illustrate that students did, despite my own limitations, successfully engage with ecofeminism in children's literature, I am most proud of the fact that students left my course feeling that it was a safe (as could be) space and that I, as their instructor, cared about them deeply. In an anonymous exit survey that I asked students to voluntarily complete, one student wrote that the class "felt like a safe environment to discuss freely my opinions and be able to take constructive criticism because of you and just other peers being open and accepting." Another student expressed a similar feeling of safety, writing, "Laurel made me feel valid in my identity and ability to speak on issues we discussed in class!! She also made me feel protected and as though I can say whatever I want (as long as it doesn't hurt others obviously)." And finally, I believe that one of best things

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& Ashley Lukashevsky, *A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara, and *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga.

[11] This would include engaging with work by Dorceta E. Taylor, Dolores Williams, Shamara Shantu Riley, and other Black feminists engaging with issues of ecology.

[12] I would like to give mention and thanks to Dr. Nina Hanee Jang and Raven Preston for their review of my syllabus as part of an Antiracist Pedagogies Workshop at Illinois State University in December 2020.

I did in my course this semester was to approach students with equal respect and transparency. I took a risk in sharing my personal circumstances, as I wanted to be appropriately transparent with the class about why I changed some things regarding the course mid-semester to accommodate my own trauma and grief. I knew that students were also going through individual trauma, and I wanted them to know that I understood their struggles. I felt affirmed that I was successful in this in one student's exit survey feedback: "Thank you again. I appreciate your strength, understanding and transparency. This semester has been hell and to have an instructor with such compassion was much much needed. I always looked forward to Wednesday afternoons and if I could I would love to take more courses with Laurel."

In my journey towards becoming a nuanced, reimagined-ecofeminist instructor, I have work to do. My class was a guiding light that revealed to me areas I need to improve on, including integrating anti-racist pedagogies into my course. I am also eager to do research on trauma-informed pedagogies and to integrate those practices into future courses. The course was an invitation into greater transparency, honesty, and mutualistic relationship, both with students and with myself. As I move forward, as an ecofeminist instructor, my hope is that I will continue to take the invitation of growth with open hands when it is offered, to continue to offer radical care in the classroom, and to become a safe(r) instructor and person, for students, for my community, and for myself.

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