

Volume 19 Number 1 (2025):106-122

<https://openjournals.utoledo.edu/index.php/infactispax>

ISSN 2578-6857

Solidarity in an Eco-Relational Paradigm for Peace and Justice

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Introduction

In the spring of 2024, a discussion among a small group of colleagues about a social justice concentration option available to undergraduate university students majoring in Justice Studies prompted reconsideration of key terms associated with the program of study. According to the department's website description, this social justice concentration in Justice Studies at a U.S. public university is designed to investigate what is fair, equitable, and just in society. It promotes sustainable and just solutions to social, political, and economic ills and an end to the exploitation of traditionally targeted populations. When the discussion concluded, "oppression," "liberation," "intersectionality," and "equity" remained key terms for the program's social justice concentration, and the group of colleagues agreed to add the word "solidarity" as a fifth. As with many conceptual terms, the addition of "solidarity" compelled further contemplations. What kind of solidarity is necessary for students to learn so they can contribute to making our world more just and peaceful? What

106

epistemological and paradigmatic shifts and resources does this type of solidarity require?

This conceptual essay emerged from my participation in that spring 2024 discussion. It explores mainstream understandings and expressions of solidarity and how public education strikes have demonstrated more expansive solidarity over the last ten years in their demands and actions. Then, what eco-relational solidarity encompasses and how and why it should appear in university classrooms are discussed. Next, Indigenous epistemologies and practices as resources and the dismantling of predominantly Western anthropocentric solidarity perspectives that include human exceptionalism, domination, and equivalent reciprocity are discussed. Ultimately, I suggest that constructing a broader scope of solidarity and with whom and what we pledge solidarity are crucial for addressing the current climate crisis and integral to an eco-relational paradigm striving for peace and justice.

Solidarity

Since its evolution, the term *solidarity* has inspired many definitions, levels, forms, interpretations, categorizations, and material enactments. Early meanings related to current mainstream understandings of solidarity have been described as conveying an anthropocentric horizontal cohesion among equals seeking civil and human rights, often with expectations of reciprocity (Metz, 1999; Tava, 2021). In general, traditional Western understandings of solidarity have emphasized the intersubjective relations that emerge during shared experiences of confronting interlocking systems of domination. This type of solidarity often occurs when people commit to acting for collective well-being, arises from necessity during times of crisis, and highlights human interdependence and responsibilities to one another (Nielsen, 2017). Labor union members across industries and professions have typically exemplified this traditional understanding of solidarity. Labor union solidarity between the 1930s and 1970s, for example, provided much of the political muscle behind the social democratic programs of the New Deal and Great Society,

which significantly decreased vast wealth disparities among some demographics that began during the Industrial Revolution in the United States (Casey, 2023).

Some have argued and noted that “solidarity has become a mere symbolic gesture, that contemporary expressions of solidarity are ironic articulations of individualist self-making that avoid political action and commitments in the interest of preserving a sense of personal moral high ground, and that the feminist movement continues to marginalize Black women despite the invocation of solidarity” (Gaztambide-Fernández, p. 252). Of course, groups such as fascists, religious zealots, or nations at war can also unite in solidarity to advance their agendas or mobilize solidarity for destructive purposes (Barbara Ehrenreich in Tolentino, 2020). Although these critiques of mainstream solidarity merit attention, this essay proceeds from conceptualizations of solidarity beyond often narrow, dominant Western expressions of solidarity that emphasize human dominion. Instead, it focuses on solidarity’s capacity for contributing to movements aiming to achieve peace and justice when solidarity is considered through an eco-relational paradigm. Instead of specific commonalities across identities spurring solidarity, eco-relational solidarity emphasizes the interconnectivities associated with existing on Earth from the level of the intimate to the unnoticeable or unimagined.

Solidarity in and as Education

Over the past ten years, K-12 public school teachers and support staff in different regions of the United States engaged in union-sanctioned and wildcat labor strikes with some impressive accomplishments, such as halting school privatization, lowering class sizes, and earning pay increases for teachers and support staff (Blanc, 2020). These strikes succeeded because they considered and proactively portrayed their struggles as fights for the common good. They communicated and collaborated with students, families, and the larger public. Educators expanded on traditional forms of solidarity. They fought for better pay and working conditions for themselves and support staff in addition to demanding more nurses and counselors, more school funding, and an end to racial profiling in schools (Blanc, 2019b).

Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute (2014) describe solidarity as pedagogical because it involves relationships, intentions, and ethical commitments and is driven by a desire to transform. The solidarity exhibited in public education strikes is particularly pertinent because teachers often consider their jobs a calling to develop students into the best versions of themselves and to engage in pedagogical practices that produce responsible, democratically engaged global citizens. One high school student who observed teachers striking stated, ““Our teachers are setting an example of bravery by standing up to ignorance and inaction... Our teachers have set a better example than our legislators have for the past decade”” (quoted in Blanc, 2019a, p. 4). Those at universities who educate future educators and students pursuing other studies are also in exponentially fertile environments to set examples, transform, and inspire capacious forms of solidarity that extend our understanding of what and who is included in the common good. We should honor and learn from the sacrifices and accomplishments of ongoing labor and social solidarity movements, such as the ones just mentioned, without foreclosing the possibility of forging more critical, expansive, and inclusive solidarity formations in the present and future.

Solidarity requires deliberate attention to relationships, intentional and critical engagements, and a desire to transform oppressive conditions. An embrace of solidarity as one of five keywords for a social justice concentration in a Justice Studies undergraduate program compels further critical contemplation regarding what and whom solidarity omits and on what premise and to assess how exclusions that perpetuate harm might be remedied. If a collective goal is for students to contribute to making the world more just and peaceful, then these critical considerations are essential to determining what kind of solidarity is required to meet these objectives and accomplish our goals. I suggest that solidarity in an eco-relational paradigm is a necessary component.

Eco and Relational for Constructing Eco-Relational

From an Earth systems perspective, “eco” (from the Greek οἶκος: house) reflects an entire house and all its inhabitants and contents. The prefix “eco” is attached to relational with a hyphen to conceptually position humans in relation to everything and everyone within ecosystems on Earth rather than at their center and surrounded by environments. Instead of specific commonalities across identities spurring solidarity, eco-relational solidarity emphasizes the interconnectivities associated with existing on Earth from the level of the intimate to the unnoticeable or unimagined. The term *more-than-human* indicates the entangled relationality among humans, multiple species, natural and artificial objects, and ecosystems. More-than-human is inherently relational and embeds connection into language, thought, and, potentially, action (Lambert, 2024). Neglecting the term *nonhuman* is an intentional choice to avoid reinforcing the dominant Western dualistic thinking that often creates oppositional binaries between humans and the more-than-human world. This dualism and a false binary between humans and animals contribute to the often-unquestioned daily violence and subjugation characteristic of the Anthropocene. Yet, admittedly, there is still room for unresolved critiques that using *more-than-human* problematically reifies the human as an eminent benchmark and for how language is implicated in manufacturing forms of classification and ontologies of separateness (Celermajer et al., 2021).

Western understandings and enactments of solidarity with an emphasis on subjectivity and the conscious individual's body and mind in interaction with another's body and mind have encouraged an unquestioning acceptance of the human as the most significant and perhaps only species or entity capable or worthy of solidarity efforts. This predominantly Western anthropocentric perspective of solidarity results in excluding many of Earth's inhabitants from the common good. Longstanding approaches outside Western paradigms explore human relationships with living beings and non-living objects, both natural and artificial (Puzio, 2024). These approaches typically contextually understand more-than-human interdependencies with a more-than-human awareness and Earth system perspective-taking. Critical attention to the relationships across differences that solidarity demands (Morgensen, 2015) means considering more-than-human relations and articulating the violence that endures when solidarity's scope is rigidly

narrow. A more comprehensive approach to solidarity anchors us in ecosystems thinking and helps us recognize the infinite interconnections we share beyond those with fellow humans.

Human relationships with the more-than-human are intricately and intimately connected to what it means for humans to exist in the world. Heidegger (1927/1996) uses the concept of *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) to describe humans' inseparable entwinement or relationship with the world. Human relationships offer a broad starting point towards articulating conduct for a type of solidarity that begins with critically examining the impacts of the moments when humans fail to act and the effects human actions have on other living and non-living beings (and oneself). A relational approach is not a default to anthropocentrism, nor is this a starting point for constructing edicts. Instead, this perspective emanates from Indigenous epistemes and contributions that center on contextualized mutually beneficial interplace and interspecies relations. It compels practices of solidarity that encompass others beyond sentient animals-- such as micro-organisms, forests, rivers, oceans, icebergs, the air, and layers of earth, and a relationality of respect that rejects expectations for identical or parallel reciprocity and the belief that humans are the central or most important beings on the planet (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Deloria, 1992; Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000).

Dismantling Human Exceptionalism

A first step toward introducing more-than-human solidarity in classrooms is to dismantle human exceptionalism and dismiss the false binary between humans and animals. Rather than pushing for the "humanization" of anyone or anything as if engaging intra-human hierarchies that inform racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other oppression will provide a form of relief, we must confront and be honest with ourselves and students about the daily and often unquestioned violence of anthropocentrism, or the belief that human beings are the central or most important things on the planet. This deeply internalized belief in human exceptionalism or what others have referred to as speciesism, humanocentrism, or human supremacy, and violence against other animals and our planet has been so normalized across

time and space that it does not even occur to most people to question human entitlement to other animals' bodies or anything else produced by the Earth (Tschakert, 2020). Clark (2011) argues, "'speciesism' is so fundamental and all-pervasive that it is still hard to imagine what society would be like without it" (p. 190). However, we must imagine and act. Before an embrace of broad, more-than-human solidarity can manifest, a paradigm shift concerning humans must occur in classrooms.

Beyond merely rejecting the belief that humans alone merit ethical or political consideration, more-than-human solidarity requires a cease to cognitive dissonance about the harms excessive human consumption and extractive capitalism cause, some unlearning/unteaching of human hierarchies, and the rejection of three related ideas central to human exceptionalism described by Celermajer et al. (2021): "a) that humans are physically separate or separable from other species and non-human nature, b) that humans are unique from all other species because they possess minds (or consciousness) and agency and c) that humans are therefore more important than other species" (p. 3). Approaching solidarity with assumptions of multi-species agency rather than solely humans' agency in understanding solidarity assists with shifting anthropocentric knowledge traditions toward more-than-human perspectives and eco-relations (Lambert, 2024). Additionally, approaching classroom inquiry from a multi-species or more-than-human position can generate new perspectives and understandings of more-than-human embeddedness. It offers a way to practice taking more-than-human perspectives and to understand and re-situate eco-relational solidarity as an essential part of human responsibility and relationships with more-than-humans regardless of capacities for reciprocity.

Rethinking and expanding solidarity to confront individualism's deeply entrenched ideology and material consequences and the untenable acceptance of human exceptionalism can direct attention to the fragile ecological array of relationships that sustain life and the Earth. Often through engaging with Indigenous peoples, whose ontologies regarding the human and more-than-human represent not only different knowledge systems but various 'worlds' (Blaser and

Cadena, 2018; Omura et al., 2018; Wildcat & Voth, 2023), scholars across disciplines have confronted conceptualizations of Earth's inhabitants' complex co-existence, agency, and unequally dispersed suffering beyond a human-nature dichotomy. Yet, classroom paradigm shifts remain lacking when preparing students for confronting justice issues if they are not introduced to solidarity efforts immersed in more-than-human realms and predicated on the deep inter-relationality between humans and more-than-humans.

Existing instructional designs introducing and discussing issues of justice and solidarity can be adjusted so that the educational process includes activities that contribute to developing and expanding eco-relational solidarity. Reviewing instructional materials and practices already used to find authentic moments for inserting more-than-human relationality, decentering humans, and eliminating human exceptionalism can be foundations for developing and establishing an eco-relational solidarity paradigm. Importantly, eco-relational solidarity cannot be simply about redefining or acknowledging relationships, nor should it be a movement to focus on changing individual habits rather than transforming fundamental epistemologies and paradigms. It must be integrated in ways that guide students to the critical consciousness needed to engage and leverage a more comprehensive solidarity praxis while navigating politically contentious contexts.

Critical advances toward an eco-relational solidarity paradigm and episteme in university classrooms might be novel. However, conceptualizations of eco-relational solidarities unconstrained by Western dualisms and hierarchies have manifested for tens of thousands of years among Indigenous philosophies that have “posited the world, human and nonhuman alike, as animated, agential, knowing, feeling, and relational” (Celermajer et al., 2021, p. 11) and have been acknowledged in some contemporary educational contexts although with mostly unimpressive implementations (da Silva et al., 2023). In South Africa, educational policies such as the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy adopted by the Cabinet in 2004 highlight the need to incorporate indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge into education (Hay, 2025). In Peru, the federal ‘Bilingual Intercultural Indigenous Education’ program promotes environmental knowledge and agricultural traditions,

enabling science classes to respect local knowledge and convey to children that they can be subsistence farmers as well as indigenous scientists (da Silva et al., 2023). Hay (2025) suggests that an ecological-relational ontology rooted in indigenous and traditional knowledge systems offers a more relational and potentially more effective environmental pedagogy than common reductive environmental education instructional designs that prioritize economically driven sustainable development and a calamitous “unidimensional obsession with economic growth as a panacea for human betterment” (p. 18).

Dissolving Dominion for a Global More-Than-Human Solidarity in the Climate Crisis

Scientists have demonstrated irrefutably that humans are responsible for virtually all global heating over the last 200 years. In November, the World Meteorological Association issued its *State of the Climate 2024 Update*, issuing another Red Alert because of the pace of climate change in a single generation, which accelerates increases in greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere. Since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change and harm, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas, which cause greenhouse gases that are warming the Earth faster than at any time in at least the last two thousand years (World Meteorological Association, 2024). The warmest ten years on record were 2015-2024. Glacier ice loss, sea-level rise, and ocean heating increased while extreme weather caused by human-induced climate change decimated inhabitants and environments (World Meteorological Association, 2024). Humans (predominantly in the Global North) have subjugated and burdened the Earth’s resources, including land, soil, water, air, and living beings, including plants and microbes (Tschakert, 2020; van Wichelen, 2020). Of course, humans also have remarkable accomplishments to tout, but the ruins, devastation, and suffering caused by human dominion in the age of the Anthropocene demand serious scrutinization of the obligations and entanglements between humans and the more-than-human realm. While prevalent portrayals of certain animals and other charismatic creatures as vibrant, adorable, and innocent can prompt sympathy and draw attention to the climate emergency, this tactic conceals power, depoliticizes

climate change, and falls short of communicating the intricate causes, connections, and responsibilities that demand attention and action (Tschakert, 2024).

Developing an eco-relational solidarity paradigm and praxis that includes overcoming current beliefs about human exceptionalism provides a meaningful opportunity in classrooms to interrogate more inclusive modes of connecting across differences and to critically examine human responsibility and complacency in the climate crisis. This type of solidarity is described by Rock et al. as “more-than-human solidarity” (p. 790) and refers to human activity directed toward carrying costs and making tradeoffs of various kinds with the intent of assisting others, whenever cared-for others include non-human animals, plants, objects, or places. Approaching classroom instruction from a more-than-human solidarity perspective moves students away from the “fiction of individualist primacy, toward an ecological reality where humans actually exist: in a larger set of material relationships” (Celermajer et al., 2021, p. 15) to which they bear great responsibility. Many students already experience the aesthetic, affective, and embodied ways some humans connect with the more-than-human (Todd 2016). Solidarity with the more-than-human is achieved when conservation and preservation are not merely for human welfare or satisfaction but because the eco-relationship demands protection.

Instead of the traditional expectations of members in solidarity movements to reciprocally shoulder the burdens that pursuing common goals might entail (Tava, 2021), more-than-human solidarity emphasizes relationships and equity over equality. Given that some populations of humans have caused the climate crisis, those humans have more responsibility to end totalitarian practices and exploitative and extractive human domination of the Earth and all that exists on it. Similarly, countries with the most responsibility for global ecological harms, such as China and the United States (Paddison & Choi, 2024), need to acknowledge the burdens and violent deprivation and oppression they have inflicted on those with less power. Acknowledgments should be accompanied by clear, actionable steps to remedy harm and heal instead of expecting any form of reciprocity. Eco-relational solidarity epistemologies can “exhibit ways of becoming ‘other-than-the-human as we know

it' without collapsing differences and homogenizing responsibilities" (Tschakert, 2022, p. 278). Again, Indigenous epistemologies serve as a reference. Indigenous ethical systems are not extractive but are premised on relations between species and the land and are based on a reciprocity principle that nourishes mutual flourishing (Tomateo & Grabowski, 2024; Wildcat & Voth, 2023). Mutual flourishing among group members is often embedded in traditional understandings of solidarity. More-than-human solidarity in an eco-relational paradigm insists on the need to account for all components and other beings in ecosystems "with their own radically diverse life projects, capacities, phenomenologies, ways of being, functionings, forms of integrity, and relationalities" (Celermajer et al., 2021, p. 15).

This eco-relational solidarity creates possibilities for alternative ways of knowing and being, overcoming ontological human exceptionalism, and developing the collective praxes required to significantly address the climate crisis. Classrooms can be spaces that call for humans to enter into an eco-relational solidarity with the more-than-human and exchange human exceptionalism's violence and devastation for a praxis that aims for and moves toward universal healing and peace.

An Eco-Relational Solidarity is Not Trying to Do Too Much

Borderlands theorists and others have long understood the complicated process of developing solidarity across identity differences (Douthirt-Cohen et al., 2023). What sort of audacity is required to demand more expansive solidarities when humans have yet to overcome "the difficulties in working with and across particular identity-related differences, working across geographic separation and coerced segregation, and contending with structures of power that function to divide us both materially and ideologically" (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 250)? Others have argued that solidarity cannot "be realized if tethered to impossible expectations leaving us coming up forever short of an unexamined ideal" (Roediger, 2016, p. 225). Although these points are well reasoned, sacrificing moral clarity, capacious solidarity, justice, or potential peace for current constructions of reality or political expediency is unnecessary and perhaps counterproductive. Additionally, eco-

relational solidarity is grounded in relationships, not identities. Furthermore, ideas are a dialectical part of reality (and therefore shape reality), even if their broad conditions of possibility appear impenetrably constrained by the prevailing forms of cultural hegemony, oppression, and daily existence (Sanbonmatsu, 2024).

The best chance of prevailing on issues that require solidarity is “showing up and reaching out” (Roediger, 2016). Educators who start by showing up and including eco-relational solidarity in classroom instruction can create opportunities for students in education systems constructed on reductionist Western paradigms to consider the eco-relational harm humans unequally disperse and more informatively reach toward eco-relational solidarity on behalf of human, more-than-human, and ecological well-being. An urgent shift to an eco-relational solidarity paradigm and episteme is required to challenge the ecological crises that Earth and its inhabitants are experiencing as humans exacerbate the harm even though these attitudes and practices are self-destructive.

Conclusion

The history and traditions of solidarity are not definitive. The relational nature of solidarity means that its permeable contours hold possibilities and limitations that are ever-evolving and re-imaginable. New epistemologies and praxes of solidarity can emerge to induce necessary moves toward justice and peace and significantly address the human-caused climate emergency. When solidarity in an eco-relational paradigm is pursued in the context of concrete university classroom relationships (while attending to how power defines and shapes those relationships), solidarity can become an essential dimension of any educational project committed to peace, justice, and averting further climate catastrophe. Although the achievement of mass eco-relational solidarity is a large and long task, we can begin to introduce an eco-relational paradigm in university classrooms by being critical of constructed binaries between nature and humans and the false binary that humans are separate from animals. At the very least, students should know that humans are animals and belong to the biological kingdom Animalia and that humans are not separate from nature. Human exceptionalism and domination resulted in an ongoing climate

emergency and ecologically destructive relations. Paradigmatic and epistemological shifts that emphasize characteristics of eco-relational solidarity can dismantle human exceptionalism and domination and encourage practices for the mutual flourishing of all.

To create solidarity and make the public education strikes in West Virginia and Arizona a success, rank-and-file educators “were obliged to step up in dozens of ways” (Blanc, 2019a, p. 4) because of the particularly egregious conditions imposed upon them. Western ideas and practices characteristic of dominant groups during the Anthropocene have created extremely egregious conditions that burden fellow beings and the Earth’s resources. There are dozens of ways we need to step up. I propose solidarity in an eco-relational paradigm as one fertile opportunity.

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